

The “content” of ‘content’ – applying the lexical pragmatics of Relevance Theory

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Abstract

This paper uses Cappelen and Lepore's (2007) critique of Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson 1995) as a starting point for an investigation into the adequacy of RT in analysing different forms of linguistic communication. The lexical pragmatics of RT is applied in an empirical study of bureaucratic language, poetic language and slang. I ask if there is any significant difference in lexical content between the three genres and look at what contextual assumptions are available to readers/hearers in interpreting my examples. I show how the RT notion of ad hoc concepts make for a powerful tool in accounting for sharing of communicative content, as well as providing an explanation of when communication is less successful. I argue that the conceptions of 'content' and 'context' Cappelen and Lepore evoke in their critique are not comparable to the terms used by Relevance Theory, and question the contention that duplication of thoughts is the only way to guarantee linguistic comprehension.

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Introduction and outline

‘Content’ and ‘context’ are among the most ubiquitous words in the study of linguistics and philosophy. Different theorists use them in a variety of manners, but seldom are they defined or discussed explicitly. A universal and common denomination – a fixed “content” to ‘content’ so to speak – is mostly taken for granted and presupposed by language theorists, something that can be seen as problematic, especially when the topic of discussion is the context-sensitivity of language.

In this paper I will address a current debate in the philosophy of language and show how such a terminological confusion is at the base of polemics between two central and important theoretical stands, Semantic Minimalism and Radical Contextualism. The main focus will be Cappelen and Lepore’s minimalist critique (as exemplified in their 2005a, 2005b and 2007) of the model of communication known as Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson 1995, 2004, Carston 2002, 2004). I will attempt to highlight a fundamental discrepancy between two different understandings of the “big C’s”, and elucidate aspects of Relevance Theory blurred by C&L. I argue that the ‘content’ Cappelen and Lepore evoke in attacking their opponents is not comparable to what relevance theorists understand by their use of the term, and that C&L’s view of ‘context’ bears limited relation to the well-defined, technical notion of ‘context’ proposed in Relevance Theory.

I aim to use C&L’s critique as a starting point for applying the tools made available by Relevance Theory for analyzing communication, so the paper will consist of one theoretical and one empirical part. Part 1 is an outline of the general philosophical debate and an overview of Cappelen and Lepore’s objections to RT. Part 2 of my paper will be devoted to explaining some of the central conceptions behind RT, addressing what I see as inaccuracies in the minimalist critique contra the RT vocabulary. Part 3 will be the constructive side of the story, where I test the RT heuristics on a range of attested, natural language data.

My data consists of one extract from an academic text, one example of bureaucratic language, one poem and a few examples of slang. I will ask why certain forms of communication can be harder to understand than others, and discuss whether Relevance Theory makes the right predictions about when ‘content’ is shared and when it is not. I will look at the role that RT’s ‘context’ plays in extracting the right

kind of linguistic content, and whether the content of poetry differs significantly from my other examples. I am here looking to confirm the hypothesis that understanding language use is not always so much about understanding what is linguistically encoded, as it is about drawing on the right out of a vast range of potentially relevant assumptions. My main contention will be the following: understanding and misunderstanding often boils down to a question of how to use contextual clues in the right manner, and the question of content-sharing can in many cases be reduced to a question of context delimitation.

I have opted for a defensive approach to Cappelen and Lepore's critique, and therefore chosen to leave aside their alternative story about communication (what they label *Speech Act Pluralism*). I also choose to avoid a "counter-attack" on the grounds that C&L's account is not fully developed and is still "in need of considerable additional refinement" (Cappelen and Lepore, 2007: 135). For the ongoing debate I refer to Carston (2006), Recanati (2004, 2005), the references cited herein, and the multiple reviews of *Insensitive Semantics in Mind and Language* and *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (see Bezuidenhout 2006, Gross 2006, Recanati 2006, Stainton 2006 for contextualist critique and C&L's (2006a, 2006b) for minimalist replies). Wedgwood (forthcoming) is an extensive evaluation of the RT/Minimalist debate where he identifies an interesting similarity in outlook between the two theories. Seeing that C&L and RT start out from completely opposite angles in their accounts of language, Wedgwood's observations are rather surprising, and this will undoubtedly be an important point of reference in future research. It is, though, unfortunately one I won't pursue here as it falls outside the scope of my paper. I will instead start out with a brief overview of the debate as it stands today.

1. The debate and the critique

Linguistic *Contextualism* is a view of language that holds that most or all linguistically coded aspects of communication are sensitive to, and only truth-evaluable relative to, a particular situation of use. Very few (if any) natural language sentences encode complete propositions, claim the contextualist¹, and sentences can not be judged as 'true' or 'false' without various "slots" or "values" having been

¹ There is of course disagreement on the finer points of the arguments, and one can find radically different approaches within what I have here simplified as two opposing camps. See Recanati (2004, 2005) and Cappelen and Lepore (2005a) for a fuller account of the debate and its contending parties.

pragmatically filled in. This is known as the *linguistic underdeterminacy view* of language, where the proposition expressed by uttering a sentence is seen as linguistically underspecified in a variety of ways, the most obvious being that of reference assignment. The assignation of values to indexicals and other elements whose linguistic meaning involves free variables (e.g. pronouns, demonstratives etc.) is known as *saturation*, and is a linguistically controlled pragmatic process (Recanati, 2005: 175).

This contrasts with the process known as *free enrichment*, “where conceptual material is wholly pragmatically inferred” (Carston, 2004: 819). It is ‘free’ in that it is not triggered by linguistic factors alone (though it is guided by pragmatic considerations) and gives rise to the recovery of *unarticulated constituents*, which relate, among other things, to temporal sequence and may be based on information derived from non-linguistic input systems. The following are representative examples (taken from Carston, 2004: 831):

- 1) Sue got a PhD and [then] became a lecturer.
- 2) Great haircut! [uttered upon encountering a friend one hasn’t seen for a while]

Another form of free enrichment is what Relevance Theory, the particular contextualist approach which is the subject of my paper, calls *ad hoc concept construction*. In a situation of utterance, a word may be used to convey something other than its encoded meaning, where a concept is created in working memory for the purpose of the specific linguistic exchange. This concept may be *broader*, as in the hyperbolic 3), or *narrower*, as in 4), than the encoded meanings STARVE and TIRED:

- 3) What’s for dinner? I’m *starving*.
- 4) I’m not coming out tonight. I’m *tired*.

The result of applying saturation and free enrichment to a particular utterance is what Relevance Theory calls an *explicature*, the explicit part of the speaker-intended, communicated content. The treatment of individual word meanings as modified in use is known as *lexical pragmatics* (Wilson 2003).

At the heart of the contextualist account of communication is the observation that any sentence may be used to express an open-ended number of propositions. This is a contention *minimalists* don’t disagree with, and Cappelen and Lepore, the main proponents of semantic minimalism, have no problem in conceding that

“communicated content is deeply context-sensitive” (2007: 132). They refuse, though, to accept that this is attributable to the form of the sentences themselves or the actual semantics of the words. By contrast, a theorist who holds that the semantics of natural language is “unstable” and requires fleshing out to express a complete proposition will fail to account for how ‘content’ is shared across ‘contexts’, Cappelen and Lepore contend.

They insist that there is only a handful of context-sensitive expressions in English, which include indexicals, demonstratives, some adverbs and a couple of adjectives (see their 2005: 144 for a complete list). These are all words that pass one or more of their tests for context-sensitivity (2005a: chapter 7) and are the only ones whose contextually-determined value is seen as affecting the proposition expressed. Such *minimal semantics* is the central component of their account, which they maintain is the key ingredient in human communication. It is what “the speaker can expect the audience to grasp (...) even if they have mistaken or incomplete communication-relevant information” and as such is the “minimal defense against confusion/misunderstanding/indifference and [what] guarantees communication across contexts of utterance” (2005b: 214).

If every aspect of language is open to different interpretations, and the semantics of an uttered sentence is sensitive to all sorts of contextual variables, reason C&L, there is no limit to the factors that can be drawn upon in utterance comprehension – and therefore no way of predicting how an utterance could be understood. This is such an obvious point to them that they use no more than five pages of their very comprehensive (2005a) attack on contextualism to justify it. Chapter Eight in their *Insensitive Semantics* simply states that “if [Radical Contextualism] were true, it would be miraculous if people ever succeeded in communicating across diverse contexts of utterance” (2004: 123).

In their (2007) C&L elaborate on their stance, specifically address the relevance theoretic version of contextualism and object to what is rather disdainfully referred to as giving up on “that old fashioned Fregean idea that in successful communication we share thoughts” (2007: 118, see also 2005a: 152-153). This, they conclude, inevitably entails dismissing “content-sharing”, committing RT to the non-shared content principle (2007: 117), which posits that what a speaker wants to communicate with an utterance and what is understood by it will never strictly coincide. Although this is a serious and significant objection, I will in what follows

argue that the rejection of content-sharing that C&L attribute to Relevance Theory is unwarranted. Using empirical evidence and the analysis of concrete examples, I will aim to show that even though less weight is given to a “stable” semantics on a contextualist account, there is no need to appeal to miracles. Contrary to C&L’s assertions, the RT notion of “explicature” does the job just fine.

2. The Relevance outlook

2.1 The RT Heuristics and propositional content

C&L’s claim that the non-shared content principle “is a direct implication of central tenets of RT” (2007: 128) is in part based on a quotation from Sperber and Wilson (1995: 193), where they say that communication is “a matter of enlarging mutual cognitive environments, not of duplicating thoughts”. But the link C&L here see between the rejection of thought-duplication as a necessary requirement on communication and the impossibility of “content-sharing” strikes me as somewhat illusory, since Sperber and Wilson’s conception of ‘thought’ is clearly “finer than that of ‘proposition expressed’ or Fregean thought” (Carston, 2002: 33). Sperber and Wilson are concerned with ‘thought’ as an “individualist psychological notion” (*ibid*) and make a distinction between the personal and mind-internal representation of a state of affairs (which may contain purely subjective, unshareable elements), and the external state of affairs itself (which may be the common content of several different subjective thoughts). Thus, on the one hand, they claim that the linguistically encoded semantic representation of sentences are “at best fragmentary representations of thoughts”, since in many cases it is not possible to encode subjective elements such as references to space and time, which are often fixed “in terms of a private logbook and an ego-centred map” (1995: 192). And on the other hand, they suggest that different subjective thoughts may have the same propositional content, since they may represent identical states of affairs.

Thoughts involving private references based on encounters with other people are also impossible to pin down by linguistic encoding alone, as Carston (2002: 34) shows with her example: “My mental representation of the woman that is my mother is doubtless a private one, probably not even shared with my siblings. This can be extended step by step to all of the people I have encountered in my life, and to all the activities and events I have taken part in or observed”. As all humans rely on particular knowledge in acquiring theoretical understanding, the natural conclusion of

Sperber and Wilson and Carston's reasoning seems to be that our mental representations of all objects in the world (and their linguistic representations) are dependent on our subjective relation to them, and therefore cannot be linguistically encoded. My mental representations of the categories named "coffee", "pesticide" and "silver" are derived from my encounters with the objects themselves or through learning about them via other individuals. Since no other people have shared all my encounters with coffee (or its representations) it is reasonable to say that my own impression of the drink differs from that of any other individual, just as my impression of my mother differs from that of any other person that has ever met her.

Holding that the understanding of a linguistic sign "coffee" is based on an individual and egocentric impression of the object *coffee* might be seen as solipsistic. However, as noted above, the objective propositional content of two private subjective thoughts may be the same (i.e. they may have the same truth conditions and represent the same external states of affairs), and two people may thus share propositional content even if they cannot fully share thoughts. Cappelen and Lepore's critique seems to be based on the assumption that absolute predictability of the cognitive states of others is a prerequisite for successful communication to take place. However, Sperber and Wilson do not accept this assumption. They reject the mutual knowledge hypotheses (MKH), which is designed to guarantee that humans can confidently assume they strictly share a precise piece of information with another individual as "a philosopher's construct with no close counterpart in reality" (1995: 38). An absolute requirement of mutual knowledge of the thoughts of others not only leaves no room for "ego-centred maps" or private references, but also leads to an infinite regress. Not only do two speakers need to share exact information in order to communicate successfully according to the MKH, they also need to know that they share this information, that both know that they know that they share this information and so on *ad infinitum*.

Making infallible predictions about other individuals' cognitive states cannot be done, conclude Sperber and Wilson, even when "two people can see each other looking at the same thing" or "some information has been verbally given in their joint presence" (1995: 18). Though these are cases where some visual or linguistic input is strongly evident, appearances do deceive, as "people may look at the same object and yet identify it differently; they may impose different interpretations on information that they are jointly given" (*ibid*). Sperber and Wilson offer instead the notion of a

cognitive environment, a set of facts or assumptions that are manifest to an individual. A cognitive environment which several people have access to is *shared*, and “any shared cognitive environment in which it is manifest which people share it” is referred to as a *mutual cognitive environment* (1995: 41).

The rejection of the mutual knowledge hypothesis paves the way for a communicative model where an individualist notion of thought plays a role. Cappelen and Lepore are not clear on whether they, like Sperber and Wilson, want to scrap the MKH, but they are plainly worried about what they call “contextual isolationism” (2005a: 153), and the consequences of bringing individual “psychological states” into utterance interpretation. Echoing Frege, they claim that “it would really be idle to dispute about truth” (*ibid*) if everybody were entitled to have their own view of what individual words “mean” in that particular context. But claiming that different individuals have diverse ideas about the world and no way of looking inside each others heads to check what knowledge they share, does not entail that everyone has the right to construct an arbitrary idea of what “truth” (or even “coffee”) means linguistically to them. It seems to be a common philosophical deed to equate linguistic contextualism and truth and/or moral relativism (like for instance Conee (2005: 50) does uncritically, and Cappelen and Lepore 2005a: 26-29, 2007: 121 more subtly), but the RT version of contextualism is far from being equivalent to the view that everything is justifiable if it can be warranted by *some* context.

As has been emphasized above, there is a clear distinction in Relevance Theory between a *subjective* mind-internal content and the *objective* propositional content, and Sperber and Wilson’s framework makes clear predictions in terms of when something forms part of the former but not the latter. It also predicts very clearly when some utterance interpretations are sanctioned while others are not, something that will hopefully be evident from what follows, and my outline of the RT notion of ‘context’. It is important to acknowledge the fact that even though Sperber and Wilson get rid of “mutual knowledge”, they never claim that information (in the sense of propositional content) can’t be shared, or that some fact or assumption can’t be strongly manifest enough to two individuals for it to be virtually certain that both will notice and mentally represent it. To return to the old coffee-example; assumptions about the substance’s particular colour and aroma and the way it is used for drinking are probably shared by all informed linguistic interlocutors and very salient in most cases where the word is applied. Such information might be plenty for

communication to succeed, and Relevance Theory would not deny that this content can be shared.

Then how is the gap between subjective and propositional content bridged? RT argues that a word like “coffee” encodes a mind-internal concept COFFEE that potentially encompasses three types of information; lexical, logical and encyclopaedic. A particular instance of coffee gives access to the “natural-language counterpart of the concept”, “a set of deductive rules which apply to logical forms of which that concept is a constituent” and “information about the extension and/or denotation of the concept: that is, about the objects, events and/or properties which instantiate it” (Sperber and Wilson, 1995: 86). Presumably, COFFEE would have an orthographic and phonological representation (coffee – /kofi/) filed under its lexical entry, while the logical entry would consist of an elimination rule such as the following:

Input: (X – coffee – Y)

Output: (X – drinkable substance of a certain kind – Y)

Whatever is filed under the encyclopaedic entry is subjective and entirely collateral, but as I’ve mentioned, most people would have access to information about the aroma, colour and texture, provided they have encountered denotations of COFFEE before. This entry is open-ended and new bits of information can be added all the time, but not everything that has been ever stored is activated upon encountering a cup of coffee or the linguistic token ‘macchiato’. All accessible assumptions about coffee *are* a part of an individual’s cognitive environment though, and can be drawn upon in the pragmatic process of utterance production and comprehension. As already shown, there are degrees of manifestness and the fact that “coffee is used as an ingredient in tiramisu” is going to be less salient than the more evident “coffee keeps one awake” in most contexts. But what determines how some information is activated while other is not?

Relevance Theory distinguishes between what they label linguistically encoded meaning (LEM, also referred to as logical form) and propositions expressed or communicated. LEM is a point of departure for reaching the goal that is utterance comprehension, and typically gives access to a range of mind-internal concepts such as the ones described. Showing how this process is constrained (so that you don’t end up with ideas about tiramisu when someone asks if you want a double espresso) is the

central aim of RT. Wilson and Sperber propose that the answer to the how-question lies in the notion of *relevance* and hold that

“an input (a sight, a sound, an utterance, a memory) is relevant to an individual when it connects with background information he has available to yield conclusions that matter to him: say, by answering a question he had in mind, improving his knowledge on a certain topic, settling a doubt, confirming a suspicion, or correcting a mistaken impression (2004: 608).

They suggest that something is relevant if it has what is labelled a *positive cognitive effect*, making “a worthwhile difference to the individual’s representation of the world” (*ibid*). Because of an evolutionary process that has selected for efficiency, claim Wilson and Sperber, “human cognition tends to be geared to the maximisation of relevance” (2004: 610). This is their *Cognitive Principle of Relevance*.

Communication, the use of ostensive stimuli to attract and direct someone’s attention, raises certain expectations of relevance, and Wilson and Sperber spell this out in *the Communicative Principle of Relevance*; “Every ostensive stimulus conveys a presumption of its own optimal relevance” (2004: 612).

Communication, they observe, involves a constant balance between effort and effect. A hearer is entitled to follow “a path of least effort in computing cognitive effects” to a point where they have enough effects to satisfy the expectations of relevance raised by the utterance. This is the *relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure* (2004: 613, what C&L label “the least effort strategy”) that instructs an interlocutor to a) test interpretive hypotheses (disambiguations, reference resolutions, implicatures, etc.) in order of accessibility and b) stop when expectations of relevance are satisfied (or abandoned).

What happens then, if I stand in a café and utter the following directed at a friend?

5) I’ll buy you a cup of coffee

First of all, my friend will presume that this utterance is optimally relevant to him. It achieves relevance by connecting with the background assumption that we are in a place where they sell coffee, that I am standing at the counter with a ten pound note in my hand and that he earlier said that he wanted something to drink but had no money. It yields positive cognitive effect, because it has what Wilson and Sperber call *contextual implication*, “a conclusion deducible from input and context together, but

from neither input nor context alone” (2004: 608). In this case a highly accessible contextual implication is that my friend will get a coffee for free, something he didn’t know before I said it and had the chance to connect my utterance to the background. This will lead on to further implications and other cognitive effects.

Even though an utterance such as the one in 5) is colloquial and clear in the context, there are a numerous elements that could be interpreted distinctly had the circumstances of evaluation been different. This is most obvious in looking at the pronouns ‘I’ and ‘you’, which denote different individuals depending on addresser and addressee. ‘You’ is also ambiguous in that it can function as either a singular or plural second person pronoun. Unsurprisingly, the same goes for the tense aspect of ‘will’. *When* the action of buying is carried out is unspecified, so that it might happen at the very moment of speaking, or some distant point in time that may either be in five minutes or five years.

Somewhat more controversially, Relevance Theory would also uphold the context-sensitive status of the verb ‘buy’ and the noun compound ‘cup of coffee’. Depending on the composition and context, ‘buy’ can either mean ‘purchase’ or ‘accept the truth of’, it can denote actions where something is bought on behalf of an individual (‘buy for’), where the expense is taken by the buyer (‘buy you’) or the expense is shared (‘buy us’). ‘Cup of coffee’ can successfully be used to refer to a very small amount of concentrated coffee (espresso), a large amount of milk with just a shot of coffee (latte), filtered coffee with whisky (Irish coffee), a cupful of instant coffee powder, or any drink that will do when the main aim of the utterance is not to drink anything but to arrange a meeting or go on a date (see Soames 2002: 78 for a related example).

When a hearer, who on this particular occasion is my friend Alex, is faced with the utterance in 5), he uses the encoded meaning in 6) as his starting point.

6) X buy-tns1 Y a cup of coffee

Attached to the LEM is a set of what Relevance Theory labels *procedural constraints* (Wilson and Sperber 1993, Blakemore 1992) that guides the hearer in his search for relevant frames of reference. The constraints on 6) are given in 7):

7) X = speaker of utterance, Y = addressee(s) of utterance, tns1 = future

As I am looking at Alex in uttering the sentence and it is clear who the speaker is, the given referents for X and Y will be optimally relevant to the hearer. As we are standing in a café, I am first in line and have my money ready, the most relevant time reference for tns1 will be “about now”, thus the most available inference to make in this context.

6) and 7) serve as the basis for 8), the speaker-intended *explicature*:

8) GEORG_x BUY* ALEX_y A-CUP-OF-COFFEE* at T_i.

While the procedural constraints function as a help in the recovery of the appropriate referents, the concepts COFFEE and BUY give access to “a vast array of encyclopaedic assumptions” (Wilson and Sperber, 2004: 618) of the type above. Picking among these assumptions happens by a *lexical pragmatic* process constrained by the same relevance-guided comprehension procedure involved in reference assignment. The result is what Relevance Theory calls an *ad hoc concept* (Wilson 2003, Wilson and Sperber 2004, Wilson and Carston 2007, Carston 2002)². In the case of COFFEE the logical property “drinkable substance of a certain kind” will be activated in addition to assumptions about Alex’s preferred coffee drink, how coffee normally is served in the café and so on. Of all the activated encyclopaedic information COFFEE potentially triggers, the hearer *narrows* down the choice to include only a particular kind of coffee expressed in the ad hoc concept A-CUP-OF-COFFEE*, denoting something like a medium-sized white Americano (since this is how Alex normally likes it, and he expects me to be aware of this). Similarly, BUY triggers different ‘buying’ activities, combines with the contextual assumption that Alex doesn’t have any money and other elements of the linguistic string, leading to the narrower ad hoc concept BUY*, referring to me taking the whole cost of the transaction.

An explicature, the truth-conditional content of the utterance, is “a development of a logical form encoded by [an utterance] U” (Sperber and Wilson, 1995: 182) while an *implicature* refers to an utterance’s implicit imports (1995: 196). The explicature can be determined on basis of both linguistic and contextual factors and is a matter of degree: “The smaller the relative contribution of the contextual features, the more explicit the explicature will be, and inversely” (1995: 182).

² I will follow the convention of indicating ad hoc concepts with small capitals and an asterisk. The term ad hoc is originally attributed to Barsalou (1987).

Similarly, implicatures “may vary in strength” (1995: 199) but are, unlike the explicature, derived entirely inferentially. Several assumptions about what a speaker intended is made available by an utterance and hypotheses about explicit and implicit content influence each other in a process of *mutual parallel adjustment* (Sperber and Wilson 1998: 196-197). This allows for much greater communicative efficiency, and also gives a hearer the possibility to backtrack and draw on a number of different sources in extracting the speaker-intended content.

2.2 The context: subsets of an environment

As the theoretical foundation I have outlined is central to all of the RT literature, there should be nowhere in this body of work where claims that commit its proponents to the fact that content cannot be shared from speaker to speaker can be found. In his (forthcoming) paper, Wedgwood shows how “C&L’s characterisation of RT (...) embodies claims that are stronger than anything claimed in RT” and it is indeed hard to see how Cappelen and Lepore end up equating Sperber and Wilson’s “thought-duplication” with “reproduction of *any content at all*”. As the coffee example shows, observing that a speaker doesn’t make blueprints of her ego-centred map when conveying meaning does not entail giving up on the possibility of communicating efficiently.

In parallel to this, one can look at cases of what RT calls *interpretive resemblance*, the reproduction of a thought or an utterance with a degree of faithfulness appropriate to the circumstance. In the fewest of cases, for instance, are phonetic features, hesitations, mispronunciations and repairs considered relevant and included in a speech report (Wilson, 2000: 426). In an example such as “Jason said that naked mole rats are blind” (from Cappelen and Lepore, 2007: 123), Jason could very well have uttered:

- 9) Naked mole rats are uh um blind

Even if a speech report isn’t verbatim, it could still be correct, provided the context was not one of conversation analysis or a phonetics class. Cappelen and Lepore would probably agree, as they observe that speaking in full grammatical sentences is really an exception, and that “very few well-formed English sentences ever get uttered” (2005a: 192). It is fortunate then, that in accepting this they are no more committed to

giving up on speech reporting than Relevance Theory is on giving up the sharing of content.

In accounting for how people manage to report on each others communicated content, Relevance Theory provides the same heuristics as it does for considerations of context which lead one to omit or include formal features such as hesitations and mispronunciations. In a simple analysis of a sentence such as 5), these heuristics prove to be relatively able, and make clear predictions about both comprehension and the development of logical form. But such “simple cases” are not what Cappelen and Lepore are most concerned about, and their worries seem to be rooted in what happens in contexts where addresser and addressee are not as familiar as me and my friend. They use their own text as an example and observe rightly that

“The sentences of this chapter have certain logical forms. The readers of this chapter will develop these until they satisfy the Principle of Optimal Relevance. Which development satisfies that principle for a particular reader R will depend on the contextual effects these logical forms have on R” (2007: 130).

They take a wrong turn though, when they claim that there is “no way to predict in advance which development of these logical forms various readers will end up with. There are infinitely many such developments and common sense dictates that readers will all end up in different places” (2007: 130-131).

As Wedgwood (forthcoming) points out, criticising Relevance Theory on the grounds that it provides no way of explaining how communicated content is determined comes across as slightly odd (since it is in fact the theory’s “raison d’être”), but I choose here to interpret C&L’s critique as more of an attack on what they think is the weak heuristics of Relevance, rather than committing themselves to the absurd claim that RT hasn’t got a heuristics at all. The main source of their concerns I believe stems from their view of “context”. It seems clear, in reading their attacks on Radical Contextualism in general, and RT in particular, that they have a very specific idea of what context has to be to a relevance theorist. In their (2007) they remark that “Often, people in different contexts are asked to do the same thing, e.g. pay taxes. They receive the same instructions, are bound by the same rules, the same laws and conventions” (2007: 122). Another extract reads “When people over a period of time, across a variety of contexts, try to find out whether something is so, they typically assume content stability across those contexts” (*ibid*).

Context seems to be reducible to a series of temporal events and geographical localities in C&L's outline, something which gives rise to particular concerns when communicated content forms part of a written text:

Sometimes the audience of an utterance doesn't share a context with the speaker. This can happen in any of several ways, the most salient of which being the reproduction of a speech act, as in published articles. Writers often have no idea who their reader is; they know next to nothing about her beliefs; or about her perceptual environment; all they know is that it is not shared (2005b: 213)

"We know that much about RC is written in places other than New York and New Jersey, lots of it is being written and discussed all over Europe, some of it in the Midwest, some in California; most of it by people whose background assumptions, lifestyles, audiences, and perceptual inputs are radically different from our own and from each other. So [on the RC account] it would be [...] miraculous if we've understood any of all these RC writings we've been reading lately (and it would be a miracle if they understood anything of what we're saying in response)" (2005a: 126-127).

Cappelen and Lepore have spent a lot of time in the Eastern part of the United States when reading and writing about contextualism, where they have a different lifestyle and perceptual input from people in Europe. But how much of one's lifestyle and the impressions of one's surroundings does Relevance Theory claim is being put into the interpretation of academic texts? The answer seems given, and I feel pretty confident in contending that anyone who looks will be hard pressed to come up with something that imperatively links physical environment and utterance interpretation on RT.

On the contrary, the RT heuristics are quite explicit in that they don't require for readers to look beyond the immediate context if this is enough to yield effects. And when reading a book, the immediate context has nothing to do with where one is sitting. This isn't usually part of the mutual cognitive environment at all, as the location of the reader isn't a mutually manifest fact – unless, of course, you're on a treasure hunt and dig up a secret map. When I read Cappelen and Lepore's academic texts, there is no need for me to look for contextual clues relating to space and geography on the RT account as I am aware that this bears no relation to what they are trying to communicate. I need not draw on information about Cappelen's nationality or place of residence; neither is it any use to me to know where Lepore is employed or what his hair colour is. This information, though it might form part of the authors' *cognitive context*, bears no relation to the sort of thing I know they are

trying to communicate, and will therefore not be judged as relevant in interpreting their texts. It is not manifest, thus not part of the mutual cognitive environment, and therefore – despite what C&L claim – not part of the *communicative context*.

Sperber and Wilson define context as “a psychological construct, a subset of the hearer’s assumptions about the world” (1995: 15). The word Cappelen and Lepore seem to have missed out on here is “subset”. And even though Sperber and Wilson claim that “many different sets of assumptions from diverse sources (long-term memory, short-term memory, perception) might be selected as context” when an individual is faced with an item of new information, “this is not to say that any arbitrary subset of the total set of assumptions available to the organism might become a context” (1995: 138). They propose that “the selection of a particular context is determined by the search for relevance” (1995: 141) and explicitly reject the idea of there at any given time existing a fixed, predetermined contextual construct which is readily drawn upon in processing information. Just as the retrieval of implicit and explicit content is a matter of negotiation between interlocutors, context has to be established through the same kind of process. The fact that a human mind can rely on a parallel relevance-driven content and context retrieval is part of what makes it such an efficient cognitive system, claim Sperber and Wilson.

3. The data

3.1 The beauty of tax demands

In RT, potential contexts are seen as sets of background assumptions, partly ordered by inclusion relations. “The initial, minimal context is immediately given; contexts which include only the initial context as a sub-part can be accessed in one step and are therefore the most accessible” (1995: 142). The further one gets from the starting point, the more steps one has to take, and the bigger the processing effort will be. Going back to the example of a written text, and Cappelen and Lepore’s book in particular, the immediate given context will be the most recently processed parts of the very book that C&L have written and I am reading. To pick a representative example, a sentence in chapter 2 reads:

- 10) Our view is that sentences are context sensitive just in case they contain an expression from what we call the Basic Set of Context Sensitive Expressions (2005a: 17).

The immediate context always comes for free, and the beauty of academic writing is how a reader is not expected to wander off in pursuit of other, more distant frames of reference. I can choose to draw on background information, assumptions about the time of writing, knowledge of genre if this is warranted by elements in the text, but most scholarly texts are written with the aim of being precise and accurate, without leaving much room for personal interpretation and searching between the lines. If a vague or highly abstract term is used, one can normally rely on there being an illuminating definition somewhere else in the text.

Being aware of this fact allows me, upon reading 10), to determine the first available relevant-enough referent for the possessive ‘our’ and the pronoun ‘we’, namely THE AUTHORS, and the anaphoric ‘they’; SENTENCES. SENTENCES I interpret as ANY-OLD-SENTENCES-IN-A-NATURAL-LANGUAGE (a narrowing down to SENTENCES* according to RT) and ‘context sensitive’ as CONTEXT-SENSITIVE*, a technical term³ that denotes words they earlier included in their ‘Basic Set’. Words such as ‘view’ and ‘just in case’ don’t cause me any difficulties either, even though their meanings are both underspecified. ‘View’ can mean either the ability to see something (getting a better view), a sight or prospect of a scenery (the view of the ocean) or an attitude or opinion (a political view), while ‘just in case’ is ambiguous and potentially means different things depending on where one has learned English.

As only one sense of ‘view’ yields cognitive effects, it alone is relevant, and is unique in getting activated in my reading of the text. A speaker of British English would probably understand ‘just in case’ as meaning “precaution” (we’ll bring the umbrella just in case it rains) but will have to backtrack and work out the American “restricted” significance (only if it is true that...) when the first doesn’t make sense. Here he could bring in presumptions about the biography of the authors, as this will contribute to the relevance of the expression, but there is a long way from doing this to anticipating what the perceptual environment of C&L was when they wrote this brief passage. In short, the whole pragmatic process that takes place in reading the extract above is highly predictable on the RT account, and postulating a discrepancy between the general concept VIEW and what is communicated in this case (VIEW*) doesn’t strip Relevance Theory of any explanatory potential.

³ If one reads other works on the semantics/pragmatics distinction (e.g. Relevance) and encounter the same word, it is more likely that the looser concept CONTEXT-SENSITIVE** will be constructed.

Consider what happens in the case which Cappelen and Lepore find worrying, tax paying and obedience to the law. I recently got a “Council Tax demand notice” sent to my flat in London. The text read:

- 11) Council Tax demand notice, 2007/2008. The property above has been placed in band D. For properties in this band within the City of Westminster (not including the Montpelier Square area) the amounts set for the financial year 2007 to 2008 are as follows: 681.68.

This is my first year in the UK, and I think it is fair to say that my encyclopaedic knowledge associated with the concept TAX differs significantly from that of an Englishman, and particularly from those who sent me the letter and are probably experts in the field. Indeed, I didn’t even have the concept COUNCIL TAX before I moved here, and am utterly unsure on what it is supposed to mean even now. Does this equate to not sharing content? Relevance Theory would say no, as I, through a process of inference, using only the language of the letter⁴, still managed to do what the tax authorities wanted me to.

Prior to receiving the notice, I was in possession of the concept TAX. Among the assumptions filed under this concept’s encyclopaedic entry were “involves paying money”, “has to be paid annually”, “has to be paid by everyone with an income”, “covers the expenses of local and state authorities”, “benefits all of society”, “differs from country to country”, “is a big, black hole where too much of my hard-earned cash go” and so on. Upon reading 11) I access some of these assumptions, the assumptions that are made available through the concept COUNCIL, the reference to ‘property’, my name and address on the top of the letter and construct the ad hoc concept COUNCIL TAX*. By this I understand something like ‘money that needs to be paid annually to the local authorities, and is due to living in a UK apartment’. As can be seen, my vague notion of COUNCIL TAX* should differ significantly from the very specific, well-defined COUNCIL TAX** concept held by the legislators and bureaucrats, but they are sufficiently “similar” for me to have the appropriate cognitive effects. *Similarity*, in RT terms, is nothing less than sharing of logical and contextual implications (see e.g. Wilson 1995: 208), a point that seemingly gets lost in Cappelen and Lepore’s critique.

⁴ I choose to ignore C&L’s claims about paying taxes being a “non-linguistic practice” (2007: 122), as I see language as the central means in enforcing all such rules and regulations.

COUNCIL TAX* AND COUNCIL TAX**, even though they incontrovertibly are non-identical concepts, share a few essential logical and contextual implications, which make them a more than good enough basis for cooperation between an individual such as myself and the local authorities. Most linguistically competent UK residents have the concepts TAX and COUNCIL readily available, and with them come certain salient assumptions concerning how the state is run and funded. A relevant subset of these is activated by the arrival of a demand notice, and combines with the very clear instructions that accompany the letter to yield a series of cognitive effects. As long as these include the implications crucial to allowing me to behave in the way expected by the tax authorities, communication will have been successful, despite the differences in our conceptual and encyclopaedic knowledge.

For, like with academic writing, the beauty of a good tax authority instruction letter is that it doesn't leave much room for interpretation. It aims to use accurate, foolproof language and a reader can always count on definitions where needed.⁵ An example would be 12):

- 12) Exempt properties (where you do not have to pay Council Tax) fall into various 'classes' which are listed below. If you are claiming an exemption, please write the class in the box provided.

Further down the page I find:

- 13) Class N – The property is lived in only by students

If the term 'exemption' is unclear or ambiguous, the ambiguity is immediately resolved with the definition provided. And even though there are a number of terms here that can be interpreted loosely or denote a number of different objects or activities ('claim', 'write', 'box'), the context never warrants any additional inferences to be made, as sufficient cognitive effects are almost guaranteed to be generated by the first available interpretations.

13) activates the concept STUDENT in my mind, of which I construct the ad hoc concept STUDENT*. STUDENT* denotes a class of full-time university students and excludes people who do a single unit course in continental philosophy while working as insurance brokers, people who are not enrolled in a university but have a "studenty" way of life (sleeping late, eating unhealthy and drinking lots of beer) and

⁵ A seal in the top right corner of the letter which boasts "Plain language commission: Clear English Standard Winning Document" should underscore my contention here.

so on. In another context (like on an invitation to a student party), a looser concept STUDENT** could be communicated, resulting in the inclusion of one or more of these categories. In yet another context, STUDENT*** will be communicated, denoting only those who are enrolled in a university and actually do some serious work there.

It is neither by coincidence nor chance that I construct STUDENT* where this is part of the intended interpretation. It is a combination of the (very predictable) beliefs I hold about what is needed to qualify for student status, mutually manifest assumptions about the role of the writer of the letter and precise language that leads the path of least effort to where me and the tax authorities share enough contextual and logical implications to enable us to coordinate our activities. In this case, the fact that I myself belong to the STUDENT* set combines with the information from 12) and gives me a very positive cognitive effect – I don't have to pay any council tax after all.

3.2 Poetic language: in search of a theme

Even though I have tried to show how Relevance Theory makes for a highly effective tool in accounting for content-sharing, Cappelen and Lepore are not entirely wrong in claiming that the path of least effort sometimes offers limited predictability. In many cases, readers may (within certain constraints) wander off in any direction they like looking for cognitive effects, and this is part of what the communicator wanted. Most notably, this might happen when reading literary fiction and, in particular, poetry.

I will in what follows try to test the Relevance Theoretic comprehension heuristics and apply the RT lexical pragmatic tool on some examples of “vague” language. I will try to find out what separates the language of some poems from the examples I have already looked at, while determining whether the same process of lexical modulation might be said to take place in reading these texts as well. I will also look at examples of what the sociolinguistic literature labels “in-group” speak, or slang, in order to highlight the important function contextual cues serve in comprehension.

To start with the poetry, consider the first stanza from *Words* by Sylvia Plath (2002: 76):

- 14) Axes / After whose stroke the wood rings, / And the echoes! /
Echoes traveling / Off from the center like horses

There are a couple of things that immediately strikes one upon reading these lines, the extensive use of ellipsis being perhaps the most immediate one. The first line consists of a single word, ‘Axes’, while the second line is cut short by an interjection. Noticing the staccato way in which the sentences are composed and the alliteration of the letter ‘A’ follows from this observation, while the figurativeness of the wood that rings and echoes that travel might also be said to be prominent.

Relevance Theory treats figurative language as contributing to the truth-conditional content of the utterance, and proposes that the inferential mechanism of ad hoc concept construction can account for how this content is arrived at. Wilson and Carston (2007: 246-249) suggest that lexical *broadening*, where the meaning conveyed is looser, more general than what is encoded, is complimentary to the lexical narrowing outlined above. The “ringing” in 14) can be said to pick out a concept RING_v which activates assumptions about objects that emits a sonorous or resonant sound⁶, but is broadened to denote the particular thump of the axe on wood being described here. TRAVEL_v activates assumptions about the movements of physical objects, but has to be understood more broadly if it is to pick out the inanimate, invisible echoes.

Wilson and Carston suggest that all of approximation, hyperbole and metaphor are the product of this same process (2007: 249) and typically understood without requiring extra effort from a hearer. But the figures that can be found in a well-written poem are not really comparable to the conventional cases they discuss (“Sally is an angel”, “the water is boiling”) in the way that communicated content is not always so easily determined in more poetic language. Reading a poem such as *Words* for the first time can leave one without a concrete impression of what the author wanted to communicate, and no single one out of the many encyclopaedic assumptions being activated by each of the concepts AXES, WOOD, ECHOES, TRAVEL, HORSES stands out as an immediate candidate for being part of the explicit content. Sperber and Wilson refer to an effect achieved in this way as a *poetic effect*, which they define as “the peculiar effect of an utterance which achieves most of its relevance through a wide array of weak implicatures” (1995: 222). They suggest that poetic language stands out

⁶ I here rely on a combination of intuitions and OED dictionary entries in accounting for what is linguistically encoded, which can be seen as a problematic. Different speakers are bound to have different ideas about encoded meaning, and a word that picks out a single underspecified concept for some individuals may convey two distinct concepts for others. See Lossius Falkum (forthcoming) and Sperber and Wilson (2006) for discussion.

from more colloquial use because it doesn't add entirely new assumptions to a mutual cognitive environment. Rather it yields cognitive effects by "marginally increas[ing] the manifestness of a great many weakly manifest assumptions" (1995: 224).

The 'axes' striking the 'wood' evoke concrete ideas about the chopping down of a tree, but the *simile* (an explicit comparison of two objects) in the stanza's third and fourth lines ("echoes traveling like horses") encourages an exploration of denotations outside the physical domain, and serves as a pointer to what is to come. I am here tempted to reproduce Sylvia Plath's poem in its entity:

Words

Axes / After whose stroke the wood rings, / And the echoes! / Echoes
traveling / Off from the center like horses

The sap / Wells like tears, like the / Water striving / To re-establish its
mirror / Over the rock

That drops and turns, / A white skull, / Eaten by weedy greens. /
Years later I / Encounter them on the road -

Words dry and riderless, / The indefatigable hoof-taps. / While / From
the bottom of the pool, fixed stars / Govern a life.

The tree's 'sap' is presented in the second stanza, and is followed by two more similes. It "wells like tears", which introduces the domain of human emotions, and is "like the water striving to re-establish its mirror over the rock". The concept TEARS carries the connotations of crying, sadness, despair and sentimentality (which can be found in propositional form in the concept's encyclopaedic entry) and gives personal qualities to the life-less tree. Literary theorists refer to this as *personification*, the attribution of human qualities to inanimate objects (Cuddon, 1998: 661), and it carries over to the 'water' where a conscious effort and perhaps vanity is implied by the verb 'striving'. The treatment of natural phenomena as animate occurs continuously throughout the poem and the stone that 'turns', the greens that 'eat' and in particular; the stars that 'govern a life' suggest there is meaning to be found beyond the physical appearances of the objects described.

In literature classes students are often asked to supply a *subject* and a *theme* when reading a poem. These are by no means unequivocal concepts, but habitually serve as a starting point in doing traditional poetic analysis, where the subject of a poem is what the poet physically describes, and theme the poem's "central idea"

(Cuddon, 1998: 913). The forest scene and the working of the woods are likely candidates for the subject of *Words* and equals what Relevance Theory would refer to as the poem's explicit content. Finding the theme behind the poem typically requires a wider exploration of context and a reader "has to bring together relatively unrelated encyclopaedic entries and construct non-stereotypical assumptions" (Sperber and Wilson, 1995: 223) in order for relevance to be achieved. In the case of *Words* the animation of the wood and the water encourages an exploration of a further parallel between the natural objects and a human life, resulting perhaps in the allegoric conception of the author herself as the lone trunk in the forest.

The first-person pronoun in the third stanza seems to support a reading in which the life of the author is drawn into the poem, and will inevitably lead to an intertwining of assumptions about Sylvia Plath herself into the search for the theme. Knowledge of when the poem was written (1963), the fact that this was shortly before the time of the author's death, and that the death was probably "willed, inadvertent, or both" (Axelrod, 2006: 87) combines with the words of the poems and influence an interpretation. Axelrod reads *Words* as mediating "on the fate of poetry after the excitement of composition has terminated" (*ibid*), where WORDS* denote something like 'poetry', or more specifically 'the words of old poems'. His observation colours the interpretation of 'dry' and 'indefatigable': "When the poet later re-reads her poem, it seems 'dry', faded, foreign. Ironically though, it is the 'indefatigable' poem that lives, not the welling life that produced it" (*ibid*). The poet's disappointment in Art and Poetry here becomes an indirect reason for her demise, and can lead to an understanding of the 'mirror' and the 'pool' as the poem's self-image (as in Gill 2006b's reading) and 'hoof-taps' as indicating the rhythmic traces, while 'riderless' indicates language as "ultimately escaping the speaker's control" (Britzolakis, 2006: 112).

Axelrod, Gill and Britzolakis's interpretations all emphasize different qualities in the poem, attributing slightly nuanced meanings to different words. But note that they all seem to read the poem against the same background (that of it being ultimately an act of self-commentary), which is not a mere matter of course. In other eyes, different aspects of the author's background may combine with the reader's own preconceptions and give rise to new interpretations. Background assumptions about the poet's troubled mental history and the impact her failed marriage had on her life may also contribute to the contextual implications and how one makes the choice of

interpretation. Crucially, how one understands the title's denotation may alter the whole reading of the poem. Narrowing 'words' down to something like "promises", for instance, opens up for seeing the poem not so much as the author's disappointment over old works as it becomes an end-note on a life and love that did not live up to an initial expectation. On this alternative reading, DRY-AND-RIDERLESS* denotes the empty words separated from their utterer, HOOF-TAPS* carries the meaning of a menacing memory while WATER-MIRROR* denotes the façade of the writer, disturbed by the ripples caused by the ROCK*, perhaps signifying the manifestation of disappointment or the author's depression.

Choosing how to specify the title word of Sylvia Plath's poem may be done on the basis of something as trivial as taste, such as whether one prefers poems to be about Life and Love, or meta-commentaries upon the acts of writing and the role of the Poet⁷. Notice that in *Words*, then, the "content" (in Cappelen and Lepore's sense) is not necessarily shared between readers. If I were to discuss this poem with someone who has opted for the meta-reading and who constructs his own ad hoc concepts DRY-AND-RIDERLESS** (denoting the language of the poem) and WATER-MIRROR** (denoting the poem's self-image), we would most likely disagree wildly over what the poem "really means" or "conveys".

Although I argued that they were unfounded earlier, Cappelen and Lepore's worries about how people in completely different environment can communicate on a contextualist account seem much more justified when it comes to poetry. The way a poem opens itself up to several possible readings (though they might not be equally coherent, some being more in line with the author's intentions than others) is a result of a greater leeway given to the reader in terms of making the choice of context. This is something that is unique to short prose and poetry, and is not reducible to a question of lexical content. As I showed with the colloquial, bureaucratic and academic examples above, they too make use of often highly underspecified words, but diverge from poetry in the way they depend on a greater number of mutually manifest assumptions and need not rely on a reader's ability to explore a wider context.

I believe the task of reference assignment highlights my point here, and the relative ease with which it is conducted in a reading of Cappelen and Lepore's text (as

⁷ For some reason or another, most literary critics seem to have a bias towards the meta-readings when faced with a choice such as this.

in extract 10) above) can be contrasted with Sylvia Plath's use of 'them' in the third stanza of *Words*. This pronoun's most salient referent is found in the immediately preceding discourse with the 'weedy greens', but the cognitive effects derived from such a resolution would be very limited. A more likely candidate is what follows in the fifth stanza – 'words'. The increase in processing effort demanded by such a backtracking serves an important function in the poem. It signals a rupture with a steady rhythm and forces a reader to reflect on a central question; what are the words the narrator encounters, and how are they found on a road?

The function of ambivalent referential expressions and highly figurative language is an important one in poetry, and they can, along with rhetorical devices and verse features, be used to encourage a more extensive exploration of context (Pilkington, 2000: 118). As poetry leaves readers with fewer contextual clues to latch onto in interpretation than what is the case in academic texts, anyone is invited to draw on their personal experiences, subjective taste and even "lifestyles and perceptual inputs" if that may contribute to the overall cognitive effect. What determines these effects is a result of the reader's subjectivity, background assumptions he has, hypotheses he makes about the intentions of the author and encyclopaedic properties that are evoked by the individual concepts.

3.3 Slang: Dadaist colloquialisms

Even though the cognitive effects poetry has on a reader are not as predictable as those generated by the interpretation of a tax demand, the process is, as I have tried to show, still guided by expectations of relevance. In fact, it may even be that the aesthetic sense as whole "is crucially tied to intuitions about relevance" and reflects "a sensitivity to the cost and benefits of processing" (Pilkington 2000: 187). A poem where the lexical content is so indeterminate and the contextual cues all but absent may lead a reader to dismiss it as non-literature (the expectations of relevance are abandoned) or encourage him to look elsewhere for cognitive effects. Such would be the case in the reading of a poem like *Le Géant blanc lépreux du paysage* by Tristan Tzara (1918: 6-10, the last three lines read: "hozondrac trac / nfoùnda nhabàba nfoùnda tata / nhabàba"), where the meaning of the poetry has as much to do with where and when it was published first, and the orthographic form (see e.g. Forcer 2006), as it has with the lexical content.

Slang might not be on a par with Dadaist poetry in terms of inaccessibility, but I will in what follows argue that it can be symptomatic of the same linguistic phenomenon. What is often referred to as the “generation gap”, a difference in mentality between age groups, gives rise to the same kind of problems an inexperienced reader of poetry might face when coming across surrealist literature. Slang can be regarded as an “in-group” linguistic device, normally used by young people to strengthen “the bonds within their own peer group” and “violate social taboos” (Stenström *et al*, 2002: 67-68). Slang is also seen as having an important stylistic function, with the *Oxford Dictionary of Modern Slang* defining it as colourful, alternative and informal, suggesting that “the slang of English is English with its sleeves rolled up, its shirt-tails dangling, and its shoes covered in mud” (Ayto and Simpson, 1992: v).

The term “in-group” and the fact that slang is intrinsically connected with sub-cultures imply a certain dependence on familiarity and close acquaintance within a crowd of individual speakers. A group of people who share interests, activities and outlook on life is bound to rely on roughly analogous frames of reference, what Relevance Theory would label a large amount of mutually manifest assumptions. People who like the same music and frequent the same places (or have the same profession) have access to many contextual assumptions that are not available to people outside these circles. The users of slang (and other forms of specialised vocabulary) can therefore rely on an interlocutor’s particular knowledge in applying neologisms or loan words in conversation.

Consequently, when one looks at a corpus of slang data or listen to young people talk among their friends, the unfamiliarity of some words used is a striking aspect. Words such as ‘tonk’ (very large), ‘nang’ (stylish), ‘cotch’ (to relax) or ‘vamoose’ (to go away, all definitions taken from Green: 2005) are all unlikely to activate many encyclopaedic assumptions in the mind of the average English speaker. Perhaps more surprising though, is a class of words at the opposite end of the continuum; expressions that are so common and frequent that one wouldn’t think outsiders have any problem understanding them. ‘Tight’ (very close, intimate), ‘standard’ (normal), ‘random’ (unexpected), ‘quality’ (good, excellent) all have denotations that don’t deviate much from their canonical uses, but still appeared in a

recent “slang glossary” titled “Crack their code: the words kids don’t want you to know” printed in the newspaper the Guardian⁸.

Both types of cases are equally interesting illustrations of lexical pragmatic and semantic processes, but I am not here so much concerned with how new vocabulary is acquired or adopted into English, as I am with the slight modulation of already familiar terms. How come parents need a glossary to understand (and so share content with) the younger generation, when the words in question are already familiar? I believe these examples can help illustrate a point I made earlier in reference to poetic language. As the whole reading of *Words* depends on the narrowing of the title, what denotations one assigns to the slang terms ‘tight’ and ‘random’ are attributable to the degree of availability of contextual clues to an interpreter.

Take ‘tight’, which can be used as slang to describe a thriving friendship. The OED defines ‘tight’ to mean “fixed or fastened firmly; hard to move, undo, or open” which I suppose this is information that is entered into the encyclopaedic entry of the concept TIGHT for most English speaking individuals. Along with this information, assumptions such as “TIGHT is close fitting”, “very firm”, “tense” and “strictly imposed” can probably also be found across the linguistic community. What happens when a certain sub-group starts to employ the concept in a way that describes interpersonal relations, is that TIGHT is narrowed down to include only objects with properties such as “is hard to unfix” and “is close”, and broadened to include the domain of friendship, resulting in the ad hoc slang concept TIGHT*. As was seen earlier, narrowing and broadening combine into a unitary and parallel process of lexical modulation, but it is important to highlight how the right sort of encyclopaedic assumption has to be drawn upon for broadening to happen successfully.

‘Tight’ is a relatively “vague” lexical unit, and can potentially characterize a whole range of objects and properties, like clothes, shoes, fabrics, surfaces, body parts, an angle, or a game (OED). Someone not already familiar with the “friendship” sense might then struggle to interpret the following utterance if not in possession of the right contextual assumptions:

15) Me and my girlfriend are tight

⁸ Published 20th March, 2007, downloadable at <http://education.guardian.co.uk/students/story/0,,2037714,00.html>

A friend of the utterer, on the other hand, might be trusted to access more precise information about the two individuals in question, how much time they spend together and all prior mentions of how they get along and so on. If this were a novel use of the word and one an in-group member hadn't encountered before, the speaker could still rely on his interlocutor's ability to draw on these mutually manifest contextual cues and narrow down correctly, thus constructing an ad hoc concept with the same logical and contextual implications as the ones intended. The same point can be made of the two following utterances:

- 16) Emma came to my house, it was so random
- 17) Goldie Lookin' Chain are jokes.

Who Emma is, what relationship she holds to the speaker, information about how "tight" they are, last time they spoke etc., are all important contextual assumptions in deriving the proposition expressed in 16). Holding these enables a hearer to combine prosodic or non-linguistic information (such as tone of voice and facial expression) with the encyclopaedic information to yield the right kind of cognitive effects. In 17) knowledge about the rap collective GLC, their ironic lyrics, and the speaker's musical preferences play an important part in knowing how to narrow down JOKE (funny, comical, ridiculous, stupid are all potential encyclopaedic assumptions) and for it to be broadened and applied to the non-canonical adjectival sense.

In literature the right balance between utter inaccessibility and right-out conspicuity has to be struck in order for a certain kind of poetic effects to be achieved. Slang also balances on this line, but, unlike poetry, crucially counts on a number of external factors for the right kind of linguistic content to be activated. While poetic effects can be achieved without a reader knowing anything about the writer or her motivations, having a set of contextual assumptions readily available is a prerequisite for understanding slang. The more contextual information shared by a particular group, the more general the material used in ad hoc concept construction may be, and the more one can trust a hearer to know which bits of encyclopaedic information to extract. This in turn allows for a proportionally more efficient communication and more stylistic effects for in-group members, at the expense of those not sharing the same contextual assumptions – be it parents, teachers or other outsiders.

3.4 Historical lexicology and the science of misunderstanding

There is, of course, a difference in using ‘jokes’ or ‘random’ to mean “fun” and “unexpected” and Sylvia Plath’s highly creative image of travelling echoes and riderless words⁹. But both the use of slang and poetic imagery show how understanding and elaboration of linguistic content are highly dependent on the appropriate use of contextual assumptions in deriving the proposition expressed and the expected cognitive effects. One can disagree with how Relevance Theory arrives at this content, but what seems clear is that the lexical pragmatic tool made available through the principles of relevance and the idea of linguistic indeterminacy opens up the way to seeing aspects of language formerly regarded as completely separate in the same, new light.

The notion of ad hoc concept construction as it has been employed in Relevance Theory is relatively new, and therefore not fully developed as a formal, descriptive instrument. But I would still hold that its versatility, as shown in Sperber and Wilson (2006) Wilson and Carston (2007) and Vega Moreno’s (2007) treatments of metaphor, approximation, hyperbole, neologisms, category extensions and idioms as products of a unitary process, embeds a potential beyond what can be found in other semantic and pragmatic theories. It still remains to be seen whether other lexical processes (for instance some cases of metonymy, see Wilson and Carston 2007) can be handled with the ad hoc concept tool, but I suggest, in line with Sperber and Wilson (2006: 181 n4) and Carston (2002: 354), that in at least historical lexicology the consequences could be widely felt.

Sticking to the same topic, the difficulties scholars have in defining “slang” (Stenstrom *et al*, 2002: 65- 68) suggests that no clear-cut boundary between conventional and informal speech exists. Some words that used to be slang are now readily taken into the canonical English vocabulary (e.g. ‘gay’), some are (luckily) lost (‘fopdoodle’, ‘twiddlepoop’), others remain slang even after several hundred years (‘grub’), others are now slang despite their former status as accepted (‘arse’), while still others co-exist as slang and canonical vocabulary. Consider the typification of a border-line slang term, ‘cool’, which is listed with three separate entries in the OED, 1: “at a fairly low temperature”, 2: “showing no friendliness”, 3: “fashionably attractive or impressive”, but also used informally to “express acceptance of or

⁹ But note that slang is sometimes referred to as “poor man’s poetry” (Green, 2005: vii).

agreement with something”. The *Cassell’s dictionary of slang* (Green 2005: 269) records 10 different uses of the word, two nouns, four adjectives, one adverb and four verbs, that have popped up from the 16th century and onward, and most of which are in use today. The different senses can express such dissimilar content as sophistication, comfort, unfriendliness and death, rendering it one of the more eclectic terms in English.

But even though what is encoded by the word seems quite diverse, all the different senses of ‘cool’ relate to a historical concept of COLD in some way or another. A Relevance Theoretic story could go something the following: at some point in history the concept COOL was introduced to pick up part of the denotation of the concept COLD, applying to all things that had a low temperature relative to some standard. Now taken into the vocabulary, the narrower COOL was broadened to apply to other instances of coldness, in order to describe personality traits (a cool character) or sensations on the palate (a cool drink of water). Later, these metaphorical extensions came to be more or less conventionalized, at least enough for them to be extended further and applied to yet another areas. In the 1950s, COOL was narrowed to fit with a musical sound pattern of jazz, describing a certain style of playing (Green, 2003: 88). As this particular jazz genre became more and more mainstream and popular, the concept COOL (which had been lexicalized as a specialist term) was again *broadened* into the ad hoc category COOL*, where people would use it for anything well-liked. COOL* has now been lexicalized as a highly abstract item of the vocabulary, with a range of possible denotations – as the OED entries show.

When combined, the linguistic underdeterminacy thesis, the Relevance Theory heuristics and model of conceptual representation and lexical pragmatics, prove to be a powerful explanatory tool applicable to cases on both ends of the vague-specific language continuum. As I have shown, Relevance Theory provides an explanation for cases where misunderstandings are less likely to occur (discourse between friends, academic texts, tax demands) as well as giving a more nuanced perspective on cases where wildly different interpretations are possible (such as poetry).

The use of slang is unique in that it embeds both eventualities, and while the right interpretation comes cheaply for members of a particular group, people on the other side of the generation gap will struggle to arrive at the speaker-intending meaning, even if it doesn’t depart much from the regular use of the particular word. On the RT account this is due to the absence of a mutual cognitive environment,

which I have argued results in a problem of context-selection. In many cases, the amount of encyclopaedic properties activated by a word is so large that one is compelled to share a great set of mutually manifest assumptions to achieve positive cognitive effects. In-group members can speculate in this, using abstract but familiar terminology to highlight their common (sub-cultural, professional, etc.) ground, as well as communicating more cost-efficiently.

If I am right in my claims, the lexical pragmatic, and more generally communicative and cognitive, tools made available through Relevance Theory might cast new light on other cases of misunderstanding as well. Certainly, what in the literature is often treated as “pragmatic ambiguity” (see for instance Tzanne, 2000: 62-64) might be more precisely explained as mis-narrowings and deviations in the logical and contextual implications derived. Other cases might include what some theories put down to discursive power, footing, code-switching and turn-taking. To take an example, Tzanne (2000: 80) interprets the following misunderstanding (taken from *Artist Descending a Staircase*, by Tom Stoppard) as due to “the hearer’s failure to interpret correctly a turn as part of a certain adjacency pair”, adjacency pair being turns of a conversation that belong together, in this case the offer and acceptance of an apology:

- B: Oh. I’m sorry.
S: Please don’t mention it.
B: I will not, of course.
S: Oh, mention it as much as you like.

B, in this exchange, is blind, something S doesn’t believe at first before he goes on to apologize for his mistake. Why Tzanne here chooses to regard the misunderstanding as reducible to turn-taking is unclear, because there obviously seems to be a problem with reference resolution as well. B assigns ‘it’ to ‘the fact that S is blind’, a highly salient thought to him, and lets this affect his interpretation of ‘mention’, which becomes ‘don’t speak about it’ or MENTION*. S, who I imagine is quite used to the situation and therefore doesn’t entertain thoughts about her blindness as strongly as B, uttered ‘don’t mention it’ to denote “don’t worry” (an idiomatic MENTION**) and corrects it by making manifest the discrepancy between the two ad hoc concepts.

So why does the distinction between MENTION* and MENTION** result in a misunderstanding when COUNCIL TAX* and COUNCIL TAX** (as outlined in section

3.1) are “sufficiently similar” to generate the right kind of cognitive effects? I believe answer lies in the way the right kind of contextual and logical implications are shared/not shared in the production and interpretation of the individual ad hoc concepts. Even though both MENTION-concepts might share some implications, the one S intended to communicate (that she doesn’t care about B’s mistake) never made it into B’s own interpretation, resulting in a humorous mix-up. And despite the fact that DRY-AND-RIDERLESS* and DRY-AND-RIDERLESS** (discussed in section 3.2) don’t deviate as much as MENTION* and MENTION** in what they implicate, the way they do not share a few central logical and contextual implications would probably lead to a disagreement of interpretation between two readers.

All this shows that content is not shared in a simple all-or-nothing manner. Rather it is a matter of degree, and just because Relevance Theory holds that people do not duplicate their thoughts when communicating does not render communication an inexplicable phenomenon. It is tempting to suggest that the way Cappelen and Lepore and Relevance Theory have different ideas about the “content” of ‘content’ and ‘context’ illustrates this very point best. For even though I am sure there are circumstances where C&L and RT share the right kind of logical and contextual implications in their using these terms, my claim would be that in the debate I have outlined, this is not what has happened.

4. Conclusion

My goal throughout this paper has been to draw attention to a discrepancy in understanding of two important terms by two important theoretical stands. Though I don’t wish to brush off the debate as the result of a mere terminological confusion, and I believe that a genuine disagreement in philosophical outlook is at the base of the polemics, I have aimed to challenge the assumption that Relevance Theory inevitably leads to a commitment to the non-shared content principle.

I have shown how RT makes a distinction between subjective, mind-internal representations and the objective, propositional content they represent, demonstrating that rejecting mutual knowledge and thought-duplication as the foundation of communication does not lead to giving up on the sharing of objective content. I stressed how RT regards context as flexible and determined by a search for relevance, contrasting this with C&L’s conception of context as stable and pre-determined. By looking at a range of attested data, I challenged Cappelen and Lepore’s contention

that Relevance Theory doesn't make clear predictions in terms of how individual interlocutors arrive at the speaker-intended meaning. I showed how the relevance theoretic notion of ad hoc concepts makes for a highly functional descriptive tool in analysing various genres of language use, arguing that the degree of mutual logical and contextual implications is what determines whether content is shared or not.

Though I disagree with Cappelen and Lepore's view that postulating a "stable" semantics is the only way to explain communication, I am sympathetic towards their concerns about what happens when almost all aspects of language is left open to pragmatic considerations. I also understand that it may seem discouraging to postulate context-sensitivity as an inherent component to natural language, since if it is not restricted at all, such a view would automatically entail a commitment to moral and truth relativism. C&L see their minimal semantics as the only way to avoid this kind of "contextual isolationism" (2005a: 153), but as I have been at pains to emphasize throughout this paper, Relevance Theory does not, by its very nature, open up for treating all aspects of language as interpretable according to taste. The cognitive and communicative principles of relevance, the relevance-theoretic comprehension strategy, and the way context is treated as a dynamic entity all work as a foolproof guarantee against relativistic views of language, making it very clear when some interpretations are warranted while others are not.

It is also worth noting that another strong point Cappelen and Lepore hold is unique to their theory, that of minimal semantics being the ultimate fallback and what "serves to guard against confusion and misunderstandings" (2005b: 215), is also a central component of Relevance Theory. As both Carston (2006) and Wedgwood (forthcoming) point out, the Linguistically Encoded Meaning of RT does exactly the same job as C&L's minimal proposition (though "somewhat more coherently", Wedgwood forthcoming), functioning as the template on which the speaker-intended meaning is constructed. Speakers do, then, have a safeguard against confusion and misunderstanding on the RT account as well, though this is, as my analysis of poetry and slang shows, not always enough to guarantee content-sharing.

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