

# Social Effects: a Relevance Theory Perspective

Manuel Padilla Cruz

*Universidad de Sevilla*

## Abstract

Many linguists have claimed that interlocutors transmit social information about their identities or relationships when interacting (e.g. Lakoff, 1973; Laver, 1974, 1975; Brown and Levinson, 1978, 1987; Scollon and Scollon, 1995; Coupland, 2000). However, they have not explained how this information is transmitted and recovered. Based on relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson, 1986, 1995; Wilson and Sperber, 2002), this paper argues that speakers transmit such social information implicitly and that hearers can recover it as a consequence of their expectations of relevance. The stylistic choices made by speakers can lead hearers to recover *implicatures* that they can use to obtain a specific type of *cognitive effect* referring to different aspects of the speakers' personality or their relationship.

## 1. Introduction

Grice's (1975) and the Speech Act theory's models of communication overlooked the fact that utterances do not always exclusively transmit important and new information. As Coupland comments, this might have been due to a pervading ideology in Linguistics in which "Real talk is talk that 'gets the stuff done', where 'stuff' does not include 'relational stuff'. Within this ideology sociality is marginalised as a 'small' concern, and language for transacting business and other commercial or institutional instrumentalities is foregrounded" (2000: 7-8).<sup>1</sup> However, as Lakoff correctly claimed, "[...]

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<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, as Mills also claims, "[...] there are many things happening in conversation other than relating to others and giving information: achieving long-term and short-term goals, working out those goals, trying to understand ourselves and others, enjoying ourselves, and so on" (2003: 38).

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in most informal conversations, actual communication of important ideas is secondary to merely reaffirming and strengthening relationships”, so that “[...] very seldom indeed is a speech act designed purely to impart factual information [...]” (1973: 298). In fact, as Scollon and Scollon pointed out, “[...] when we communicate with others we simultaneously communicate some amount of information and indicate our current expectations about the relationship between or among participants” (1995: 138).

Today, nobody would probably deny that utterances reveal aspects of our social identity and relationships. In his work on phatic communion, Laver (1974, 1975) related the usage of two types of phatic utterances to the interlocutors’ social relationship, and concluded that these utterances are very important linguistic devices for social interaction because of the *indexical* information that they transmit about the interlocutors’ social relation and roles. Laver’s (1974, 1975) work fully flourished in Brown and Levinson’s (1978, 1987) face-saving approach to politeness.<sup>2</sup> These authors proposed that individuals assess three sociological variables –their relative power, their social distance and the rank of imposition of their acts– in order to determine if an act involves some damage to their face. As a result of that assessment, interlocutors select the best linguistic strategy that allows them to communicate their messages in the most effective way and protect their face. Therefore, a particular linguistic strategy selected may also convey information about the interlocutors’ social roles, attributes and identities.

However, even if these authors have suggested that particular types of utterances transmit information about the interlocutors’ social relationships, roles and identities, linguists have not satisfactorily explained how interlocutors can communicate this information.<sup>3</sup> This paper argues that interlocutors transmit such information implicitly. Based on relevance theory and its approach to style (Sperber and Wilson, 1986, 1995; Wilson and Sperber, 2002), it argues that, guided

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<sup>2</sup> This approach rests on the assumptions that individuals normally abide by the *Cooperative Principle* (Grice, 1975) when communicating, and that they are interested in preserving their *face* from the potential aggressions deriving from particular acts in social interaction.

<sup>3</sup> See Padilla Cruz (2007) for a relevance-theoretic account of the transmission of information about politeness systems.

by their expectations of relevance, hearers can exploit the stylistic choices made by speakers when formulating their utterances so as to recover a specific type of *implicatures* that they can use to obtain a particular type of cognitive effects.

## 2. Relevance theory and style

Relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson, 1986, 1995; Wilson and Sperber, 2002) explains why hearers select a specific interpretation out of the many possible interpretations that an utterance can have. It is based on *relevance*, a property of utterances defined in terms of *cognitive effects* and *cognitive effort*. Cognitive effects are *strengthening* or *contradiction* of previous information, and *contextual implications*, i.e. information that can only be derived from the interaction of the information communicated by utterances with the information that the hearer possesses. Cognitive effort results from the effort of memory to construct a suitable *context* for interpreting utterances or from their psychological complexity (Wilson, 1993).

For the hearer to recover the interpretation of an utterance that the speaker intended to communicate, he has to *contextualise* it by relating the explicit and implicit information he obtains to a subset of the information he has already stored, which constitutes his *context* for interpretation (Sperber and Wilson, 1995: 108).<sup>4</sup> The hearer will choose a particular interpretation of an utterance if its processing yields a satisfactory amount of cognitive effects that offset the cognitive effort invested, i.e. if he finds that interpretation *relevant*. But the hearer will only process an utterance if he has some *expectations of relevance* and thinks that he will indeed obtain those effects. Hearers are always interested in achieving the *optimal* relevance of the information that they receive, so utterances must communicate a *presumption* of their own optimal relevance: their production must be accompanied by a guarantee that their processing will produce cognitive effects that compensate the hearer's effort, and they must be the most relevant ostensive stimuli that the speaker can think of, depending on her abilities and preferences (Sperber and Wilson, 1986, 1995: 157, 270;

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<sup>4</sup> Sperber and Wilson (1986, 1995) distinguish two types of implicatures: *implicated premises* and *implicated conclusions*.

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Wilson and Sperber, 2002: 251, 256-257).

When communicating, the speaker has an *informative intention* – i.e. the set of assumptions that she wants to communicate (Sperber and Wilson, 1995: 58) – which she can make more or less *manifest* to the hearer.<sup>5</sup> The more manifest she makes her informative intention, the stronger communication is, for the hearer is more certain about the assumptions that the speaker communicates. However, the speaker can leave implicit as many assumptions as she thinks that the hearer can retrieve in exchange for an acceptable level of cognitive effort, which must be compensated by a satisfactory amount of cognitive effects.

The style of utterances arises as a consequence of the speaker's desire to be optimally relevant (Sperber and Wilson, 1995: 219). Hence, their stylistic features and peculiarities must be understood as little or great obstacles that may render more difficult the recovery of cognitive effects, as they may increase the hearer's cognitive effort. The cognitive effects that a hearer can obtain as a result of the style of an utterance are *poetic effects* (Sperber and Wilson, 1995: 222). In some cases, poetic effects are not based on the transmission of completely new assumptions, but on an increase in the manifestness of assumptions that are weakly manifest in the hearer's cognitive environment, i.e. *weak implicatures*. In other cases, poetic effects arise because utterances contain concepts with rather rich or complex encyclopaedic entries towards which the speaker draws the hearer's attention (Pilkington, 1989, 1991, 1992, 2000).<sup>6</sup>

Accordingly, the repetition of a term in the next utterances increases their psychological complexity and the hearer's cognitive effort. Assuming that the speaker is aiming at optimal relevance, the hearer will think that the increase in his effort must be compensated by cognitive effects that he would not obtain from a different formulation of those utterances (Trotter, 1992: 11):

- (1) I shall never, never smoke again.
- (2) My childhood days are gone, gone. (Sperber and Wilson, 1995:

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<sup>5</sup> The notion of *manifestness* refers to the possibility of having a mental representation of a particular assumption (Sperber and Wilson, 1995: 58).

<sup>6</sup> Since the access to those concepts requires the activation of the assumptions stored under their encyclopaedic entries, the time employed by the hearer to process them influences the recovery of poetic effects.

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When processing (1), the hearer may conclude that the speaker is expressing a high degree of compromise with the resolution that she has just made, maybe because she feels that the hearer could be sceptical about it. On the other hand, when processing (2) the hearer will have to expand his context for interpretation and resort to additional *implicated premises* (3), which will allow him to recover a number of *implicated conclusions* (4). Obviously, the degree of manifestness of some of those assumptions can be very high or low – i.e. they can be strong or weak implicatures– and the hearer may even resort to other assumptions on his own responsibility:

- (3) a. Childhood days are happy.  
b. Childhood days are innocent.
- (4) a. The speaker's days of happiness are gone.  
b. The speaker's days of innocence are gone. (Sperber and Wilson, 1995: 219)

The expectations of relevance that utterances generate may lead the hearer to recover implicatures that he can use in his inferential processes in order to obtain cognitive effects that offset his effort. As has been seen, in some cases a special type of cognitive effect arises as a consequence of the style of utterances. Similarly, guided by his expectations of relevance, the hearer can recover a wide array of implicatures about the speaker's identity, role, personality, character, mood, etc. from the linguistic evidence that she provides. Such implicatures may lead him to obtain another specific type of cognitive effects, as the next section shows.

### 3. Social effects

Imagine a *solidarity politeness system* (Scollon and Scollon, 1995)<sup>7</sup> in which an individual asks another to close the window by means of an utterance such as (5) instead of another shorter possible formulation,

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<sup>7</sup> A solidarity politeness system is characterised by the fact that both interlocutors have the same power and socially close.

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such as (6):

- (5) Come on, John, shut the window, please!
- (6) Shut the window!

(5) could apparently seem more difficult to process than the direct imperative in (6). However, given the appropriate tone of voice and paralinguistic expressions, it can make the hearer obtain cognitive effects regarding the speaker's polite attitude when addressing him, which he would not probably obtain from (6). Additionally, by uttering (5) the speaker can make more strongly or weakly manifest to the hearer assumptions such as those in (7):

- (7) a. The speaker uses this utterance because she feels that we are socially close.
- b. The speaker uses this utterance because she does not have more power than me.
- c. The speaker uses this utterance because she feels affect towards me.
- d. The speaker is treating me as a friend.
- e. The speaker knows that she can ask me to close the window.

Consider now the case of phatic utterances, which are apparently irrelevant because the assumptions that they make manifest are already manifest in the hearer's cognitive environment (e.g. Žegarac, 1998).<sup>8</sup> Even if interlocutors frequently resort to these utterances in different conversations, they make some stylistic changes. In some conversations, speakers repeat their orientation –*personal*, if the utterances refer to the interlocutors, or *neutral*, if they refer to the conversational setting (Laver, 1974, 1975)– but their propositional content can vary, for speakers can deal with different topics. By doing so, speakers can also make strongly or weakly manifest to hearers an infinite number of assumptions by means of the linguistic evidence provided by the utterances themselves, i.e. their propositional content.

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<sup>8</sup> As shown elsewhere, the usage of phatic utterances can generate expectations of relevance which lead hearers to recover strong or weak implicatures that yield cognitive effects about the politeness system established with the speaker (Padilla Cruz, 2004a, 2004b, 2007).

Some of those assumptions will only be rather manifest in very specific contexts (Pilkington, 2000: 94). Therefore, the speakers' informative intention might be very indeterminate and their hearers might not be able to determine if those assumptions are indeed part of their informative intention. The more evidence hearers have to think that their speakers intended to communicate them, the more strongly those assumptions are communicated. On the contrary, the less evidence they have, the more weakly those assumptions are communicated.

Accordingly, in addition to assumptions referring to the speaker's power or social distance, a neutral phatic utterance such as (8) may make manifest to the hearer assumptions like those in (9), while a personal phatic utterance such as (10) may make manifest to him assumptions like those in (11):

- (8) Nice weather!
  - a. The speaker is the sort of person who likes speaking about the weather.
  - b. The speaker does not like dealing with personal topics.
  - c. The speaker is showing her respect for my intimacy.
  - d. The speaker has the same concept of nice weather as I do.
  - e. The speaker takes nice weather to be sun and a temperature of 25°C.
  - f. The speaker likes nice weather.
- (10) Beautiful sweater!
- (11)
  - a. The speaker likes speaking about clothes.
  - b. The speaker is the sort of person who notices her hearer's appearance.
  - c. The speaker is the sort of person who cannot avoid personal topics.
  - d. The speaker has the same tastes in clothes as I do.
  - e. The speaker is showing her concern about me.
  - f. The speaker likes signalling involvement.

Guided by his expectations of relevance, the hearer may use those assumptions as strong or weak implicatures –depending on the way the speaker communicates them– and relate them to others that he has already stored. Thus, he can obtain further cognitive effects that make those utterances optimally relevant. As a result of such effects, he

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can increase or enhance his knowledge of his interlocutor, his personality, character, behaviour, habits, etc. Furthermore, the hearer can store the assumptions resulting from those effects in his encyclopaedic memory as part of his frames or schemata about his interlocutor, so that he can access them afterwards. The way in which he stores them will directly influence the ease with which he will subsequently access them. This will in turn condition his use of such assumptions to process further information (Pilkington, 2000: 112).

In an analogous way to Pilkington (1989, 1991, 1992, 2000) and Sperber and Wilson (1986, 1995), I would like to call *social effects* the different cognitive effects regarding diverse aspects of his social relationship with his interlocutor, the sociological variables intervening in social interaction, the speaker's personality, status, role, mood, character, habits, etc. that a hearer can obtain from the processing of utterances. Like poetic effects, social effects arise as a consequence of the manifestness to the hearer of a wide array of strong or weak implicatures of a rather varied content that he can subsequently use. Following Jary (1998), those strong or weak implicatures can be considered *beneficial* because they contribute to a more complete and accurate knowledge of the social reality in which the hearer is interacting. Social effects are an immediate consequence of the expectations of relevance that utterances generate, and result in a better knowledge of the other interlocutor and the social relationship that the hearer maintains with her. Consequently, social effects are essential for understanding the social reality in which individuals interact. They are a natural consequence of the human cognitive tendency to achieve an optimal level of relevance of the stimuli processed, i.e. to obtain enough cognitive effects that offset the cognitive effort invested to process utterances.

Social effects are based on the transmission and recovery of a set of strong or weak implicatures. The weaker those implicatures, the more likely the hearer will derive conclusions about his interlocutor or their social relationship on his own responsibility. Therefore, for the hearer to get a correct appraisal of the social reality in which he is interacting or his interlocutor's identity, among the assumptions constituting the speaker's informative intention must be those implicatures. Moreover, the speaker must communicate them to the hearer in an overt way if she really wants to prevent him from coming

to wrong conclusions about her identity or their social relationship (Escandell Vidal, 1998).

#### 4. Conclusion

By means of stylistic characteristics of utterances such as their content, the speaker can make more or less manifest a wide array of assumptions about her identity, role, character, mood, personality, habits, etc. Guided by his expectations of relevance, the hearer can exploit them to obtain further cognitive effects. The degree of manifestness of those assumptions varies depending on the way the speaker communicates them, so the hearer may use some of them on his own responsibility and come to undesired or wrong conclusions. This paper has proposed to term such cognitive effects *social effects* because they allude to features of the speaker's identity, social role or attributes, or to the interlocutors' social relationship. It has shown that social effects are based on the transmission and recovery of strong or weak implicatures, they arise as a direct consequence of the continuous human search for the optimal relevance of the stimuli processed, they may make some apparently irrelevant utterances become relevant, and they contribute to a better knowledge of the social reality in which individuals interact. Thus, this paper has tried to account for the way in which information about the interlocutors' identities, social roles, attributes and relationship is transmitted and recovered.

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