

# RELEVANCE THEORY AND COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING: A UNIFICATION FOR EFFICIENT COMMUNICATION IN THE CLASSROOM

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## Abstract

Relevance Theory (RT), a branch of pragmatics, provides a cognitive model of how speakers infer meaning through context in a process of ostensive communication. Formerly integrated with the Communicative Approach in language pedagogy, RT can be held to constitute sound theoretical grounds for the innovation and improvement of learners' pragmatic skills and communicative competence. Much like the Communicative Approach, which is more concerned with the actual use and functioning of language in real communication and thus closely related to RT in that the latter also emphasizes context-sensitive interpretation and maximal relevance. Where RT is incorporated with CA, instructors may design activities that develop students' ability to infer meaning, identify implicit information, and engage in unmarked communication. The movement beyond mere structural accuracy is attained, leading the students to handle complex interactions in a context-proper way. Tasks informed by RT, like working out implied meanings in dialogues or explanations of textual ambiguities, would serve to upgrade the students' critical thinking in language and further deepened their skills. Similarly, a focus on what the speaker wants and what the listener understands relates to how CA helps people communicate better. This study looks at how RT could make CA stronger by giving a mental model for seeing how communication works, showing useful methods for class use, and in the end, boosting skills in using language correctly by learners in many speaking situations. Joining RT and CA not just ties ideas to actions but also helps learners be skilled talkers in real-life settings.

**Keywords:** Relevance theory, communicative approach, classroom activities, cognitive derive, communication, language acquisition.

## Introduction

In the 1980s, Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson developed a cognitive pragmatic theory as an inferential approach to meaning and communication. This theory applies Pragmatic Maxim, which presumes the meaning of a concept is the consequence of its practical behaviours ( Pietarinen, 2005: 1768).

Essentially, relevance theory argues that humans maximize relevance with their cognitive systems (Kim, Sundar, 2012). To measure relevance, one must look at how much processing effort an input requires compared to the cognitive effects it is expected to have on an

individual's depiction of the world. A relevant input is one that has the highest cognitive effects and requires the least amount of processing effort (Sperber, Wilson, 2006: 610).

In the early 20th century, Peirce established a pragmatic theory of meaning that became the foundation of relevance theory (Pietarinen, 2005: 1767). Additionally, it relies on Grice's work on the cooperative principle and conversational implicature (Clark, 2013:46). Relevance theory offers a more comprehensive and systematic account of pragmatic interpretation than classical theory.

Semantics and pragmatics have developed relevance theory into one of the important fields of study over the past 20 years. A wide range of phenomena have been studied through this theory, including metaphor, irony, and indirect speech acts. The theory has also been functional to other fields, such as children's acquisition of language and the interpretation of visual stimuli (Irwin, Siddiqi, Hertzman, 2007:88).

### **Key principles of Relevance Theory**

Relevance principle suggests that “premises are informative with respect to conclusions, leading to the use of causal scenarios and property reinforcement strategies in inductive reasoning” (Medin et al., 2003: 519). Wilson and Sperber (2006: 603) suppose that the main principles of relevance theory are Communicative Principle (utterances create expectations of optimal relevance) and the Cognitive Principle which states that human cognition is geared to maximize relevance. In addition, Leinonen and Kerbel (1999: 380) state that relevance theory explains why utterances are problematic, delineating explicit and implicit meanings, and connecting cognitive and pragmatic dysfunctioning.

Besides, the Cognitive and Communicative Principles of relevance theory, Clark (2013: 320) adds the Ostensive inferential communication principle. It means that the ostensive-inferential principle explains successful communication by involving the speaker expressing meaning ostensively and the hearer inferring meaning. This principle explains the mental process and contextual effects of language communication. It involves the speaker expressing informative intention and the listener inferring the speaker's communicative purpose through cognitive context. This principle suggests that communicators should provide the most relevant information for the audience to comprehend and understand with minimal dispensation effort.

Ostensive –inferential principle shows the achievements of a fruitful and successful communication, since the speaker express meaning ostensively and the hearer infere meaning (Carston, 2002: 130).

Within the field of cognitive pragmatics, the Relevance Theory aims to explain interpersonal communication. Contextual influences and processing efforts determine the ideal relevance level. According to the Relevance Theory, a translator should guarantee that the target audience understands the original text's informational and communicative purposes. Therefore, determining the ideal level of similarity between the source and target languages is one step in the acquisition of these (Gallai, 2022: 202).

The theory encompasses an understanding of the interpretations of an utterance according to the notion that supposes that communication does not only include decoding messages or

encoding transfer, but it includes context and inference too. This theory is built upon Grice's assumption of human communication which assumes that the expression and the recognition of the intentions is a central feature of verbal and non-verbal communication (Ibid.).

Relevance theory is defined by many concepts and constructions, these concepts refer to two main notions; contextual aspect and inferential process. Carston (2002: 1) supposes that relevance theory is "a cognitive pragmatic theory of communication that aims to explain how utterances are understood in context". Similar to this definition, Sperber and Wilson claim that "it is a theory of human communication that attempts to explain how people communicate more or less successfully without encoding what they mean or how they mean it in the signals they emit" (2012: 69). From a cognitive linguistic view, Escandell- Vidal (2011:123) suggests that "relevance theory is a cognitive approach to pragmatics that takes as its starting point the idea that human cognition is geared towards the maximization of relevance, that is, the achievement of the greatest possible cognitive effects for the smallest possible processing effort".

Bach (2006) refers to relevance theory as a theory of communication, which explicates the ways a speaker, can communicate more than the literal meaning of the utterance by decoding the receiver's capacity to draw pragmatic implications depending on the contextual information.

Even though relevance theory is considered as a development and elaboration to Grice's conceptions of implicatures which states that the speaker is able to convey meaning beyond the literal meaning by violating one of the maxims of conversation and the cooperative principle, consequently the listener can infer the intended meaning of the speaker, there are some important differences in addition to the similarities between them. Both of theories suggest that communication is a process of inference rather than only decoding a linguistic unit. Communication, also, is a matter of expression and recognition of the intentions, that assume the listener or hearer depends on some expectations and presumptions which lead to an inferential process. Consequently, communication is a cooperative operation, because both of the speaker tries to make the utterance as relevant and informative as possible for the receiver, besides, the hearer finds the most relevant interpretations of the utterance.

However, the notions of informativity and cooperation are explained and defined differently by Grice and relevance theory. Grice suggests four maxims (Quantity Maxim, Quality Maxim, Manner Maxim, Relevance Maxim) and the Cooperative Principle, which enable the speaker to be cooperative. On the contrary, relevance theory replaced the Cooperative Principle and the maxims with one principle, that is relevance principle. Relevance principle supposes that any communicative act delivers an expectation of its own best relevance (Clark, 2013:43-88).

Furthermore, relevance theory and Grice differ in how they consider the various ways in which the speaker can communicate more than what is said, as explicating, modifying the literal meaning, and implicating the utterance. Besides, the notion of conventional implicatures is rejected as a pragmatic phenomenon in the construction of relevance theory, instead, it is considered as a semantic one. Moreover, relevance theory adds a discrepancy between implicatures and explicatures (Ibid.).

### **Maxims of Relevance**

Originally, the maxim of relevance is labelled as the 'maxim of relation' by Grice(1975). It is one of the conversational maxims that are proposed by Grice, which combined to compose the Cooperative Principle. Grice (1975) describes relevance maxim as "... a partner's contribution to be appropriate to immediate needs at each stage of the transaction"(47). Whereas Leech (1983:94) defines the notion of relevance as "an utterance U is relevant to a speech situation if U can be interpreted as contributing to the conversational goal(s) of speaker or hearer". He claims that the speaker attempts to gain a definite goal by clarifying his question and the receiver adopts the goal when answers. As he states, the relevance of an answer requires an interpretation depending on the information given in a certain context. For example:

A: Where are my drawing tools?

B: They are in the sitting room.

In comparison with

A: Where are my drawing tools?

B: The children were there this afternoon.

B's response in the first example accepts the maxim of relevance because the answer is appropriate and direct. Yet, B's answer in the second example gives the impression of irrelevance to the question at first sight. The answer in the second example still can be relevant to the question if the speaker supposes that the listener implies another meaning according to the cooperative principle, therefore the maxim of relevance is abides in the answer. The implicatures in the second example can be that the children may have been drawing with the tools, or they may know where the tools are because they were at the room.

### **Expression and Recognition of Intentions in Human Communication**

In relevance theory, the term cognition refers to "the mental process involved in the acquisition, storage retrieval, and use of information" (Sperber, Wilson, 2004: 7). Relevance theory states that human mind is directed to increase the maximization of relevance, this clarifies that the cognitive processes are programmed to choose and merge information relevant to the humans goals and benefits.

Relevance theory clarifies what expression and recognition of the intentions in communication, justifying that communication includes the creation and satisfaction of expectations of optimal relevance. In the communicative principle, according to the relevance theory, the speaker intends to form understandings and expectations of relevance in the listener by supporting evidence, which are necessary and sufficient for the listener to infer the intended meaning (Ibid.: 249).

However, the ability to produce and fulfil relevant expectations is considered a crucial factor of human communication. Human cognition is oriented toward the maximization of relevance following the Cognitive Principle of Relevance theory. This means that cognitive processes are made to choose and incorporate information that is pertinent to the objectives

and interests of the individual. This conception includes various significant implications for the way humans understand the relation between relevance and cognition (Ibid.)

Relevance theory has generated a great deal of discussion and controversy and has had a substantial influence on the discipline of pragmatics (Clark, 2013:44). The critics of the theory maintain that it ignores the social and interactional components of communication and is overly intellectually driven (Kim, Sunder, 2012) . Some have countered that pragmatic interpretation is influenced by a variety of circumstances, including social conventions and politeness, and that the theory is overly limited in its focus on relevance.

Relevance theory is nevertheless a popular and extensively researched method of pragmatics, even in spite of these objections.

### **The Cognitive Drive for Relevance in Communication**

The cognitive drive is a basic feature in human cognition which suggests that human is naturally motivated to search for information that are most relevant to the current goals and needs. This drive contributes a great deal to the process of communication because it motivates the interactants to understand and interpret the message in a way that maximizes the relevance to the cognitive state (Carston, Powell, 2008: 2).

There are some various aspects of the cognitive drive for the notion of relevance in communication, such as :

#### **1- Relevance as a trade-off**

Relevance is defined as a trade off between processing effort and cognitive effects. An input will be more relevant if its effects are higher than its effort. In other words, if information contributes to our cognition (e.g., new knowledge, confirmation of existing beliefs) with little effort, we are more likely to consider it relevant (Carston, Powell, 2008: 2).

#### **2- Presumption of Optimal Relevance**

Every utterance in communication is presumed to be of optimal relevance. Choosing the most relevant utterance is a function of a speaker's ability and preferences. In light of this assumption, a particular comprehension procedure is employed, where listeners prioritize interpretations that they believe are relevant (Ibid.)

#### **3- Relevance - Based Comprehension Procedure**

By using relevance-based comprehension, the hearer begins by accessing interpretations in the easiest way possible (often the literal meaning) and stops once they have reached an interpretation that meets their expectations of relevance. It is therefore more likely that less effortful interpretations will be accepted. The relevance-based comprehension procedure also takes into account the context in which the speaker is speaking. This means that the hearer will consider the interpretability of an utterance depending on the context. For instance, if a speaker is saying "I'm hungry," the hearer is likely to interpret this literally, but if the speaker is saying "I'm hungry, let's go get some food," the hearer is more likely to interpret this as an invitation (Ibid.).



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#### **4- Implication for Pragmatics**

It presumes that pragmatic practices like implicature and context-sensitivity are determined by the necessity to make a meaning as relevant to the listeners as possible. The cognitive drive for relevance has important effects for pragmatics, the investigating of meaning behind the literal meaning. It suggests that the changes of context can be effected by the pragmatic processes, for instance the people involved, the situation and the relationship between them, beside that pragmatic processes may be designed to fit the situation or audience. This provides insight into why pragmatic processes are often.

#### **5- Experimental Evidence:**

The cognitive motivation for relevance has received support from recent pragmatic empirical research. According to findings, it is under conditions where individuals are able to best fulfill their current goals that information is processed and comprehended, making it very essential to consider relevance as a principle that guides communication and understanding. Relevance theory and the communicative approach are two main paradigms in the field of pragmatics which try to capture communication in its fullness as it dynamically happens between interlocutors. As Sperber and Wilson (1986) propose, relevance is the central force behind which every individual surges to make their act of communication relevant to the interlocutor. It is a theory that puts emphasis on the role of cognitive processes in communication assuming that people are constantly in search of the most relevant information in a particular context (Kirmayer et al., 1994).

The other approach is the communicative approach, which focuses on the social and interactive aspects of communication. This was developed by Hymes and Canale, and sets context adaptive value and significance of participants in communication. From this matrix, effective communication results when linguistic forms are used with appropriate knowledge and familiarity with the cultural and social facts involved in the interaction (GuechiK, Bouba, 2021).

Despite the disparities between relevance theory and the communicative approach, the two share some common grounds. Both frameworks describe the significance of context in the use and understanding of language and also admit the role of inferential processes in the interpretation of meaning. The stress that relevance theory puts on the cognitive effect balances that of the communicative approach on the social and interactive aspects of communication, such that both cognitive and social considerations bear equally in the attainment of successful communication (Maxime, 2014).

For the most part, this connection between relevance theory and the communicative approach speaks to the multi-part nature of communication and the many facets that play a role in how meaning is taken and brought across. In terms of both cognitive and social sides of communication, academics can get a better grasp of how people share thoughts successfully in different settings (Kaufman et. al., 2017).

Communication is very important for successful language acquisition, and it greatly affects the learners' interactions with peers and teachers. This paper discusses the communicative approach, which relies on real conversation and practical language use instead of

mechanically remembering grammar rules. This approach argues that the process of language learning should not be limited to academic exercises but rather prepared to provide the learners with the ability for real conversation that helps them get around different social situations. Using actual resources and situational role-plays, the setting allows the educator to create a setting where students can be actively involved in the language and receive immediate feedback. The development of communicative competence highlights the role of authentic contact in developing both linguistic skills and the advancement of the student's intercultural awareness, placing it as a core methodology in contemporary language teaching. The transformation into a more lively, pertinent, and stimulating process for students is attained through this approach.

The way of communication is basically based on giving priority to important interaction as the main way of learning a language. This educational system highlights the use of language for actual communication instead of just focusing on grammar accuracy or memorizing vocabulary. The communicative approach enhances language skills as well as social and cultural knowledge by engaging students in real conversations, all of which are crucial for effective communication. According to L. Gorodnycha et al. (2029), emotional harmony between teachers and students is crucial for bettering communication since successful class contacts rely on the ability of the teacher to build an environment that supports real discussion. Moreover, the approach aligns with the principles set forth in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) concerning the development of interlanguage skills and cultural awareness as part of language acquisition (Caroline Wappel, 2020). The approach helps learners become capable and confident users of language in real communication situations.

### **Interconnection**

The relationship between the two theories can be defined in many ways, for instance, in the Focus on Meaning; both highlight the importance of meaning in communication. Whereas the communicative approach intends to create situations where there is meaningful involvement of learners, relevance theory addresses how learners derive meaning from utterances based on their perceived relevance. Another point that shows how the communicative approach encourages active involvement is through the relatability of the content to the learners' experiences and knowledge in that relevance theory posits that learners will be more interested to participate in what they think is more relevant to them. The communicative approach and relevance theory integrate to foster learners' understanding and retention of material through meaningful, situationalized communication.

Both in these frameworks, the teacher changes from a mere conveyor of knowledge to a facilitator who helps learners in the process of navigation and finding significance in the material provided.

The relationship between the communicative approach in education and relevance theory is based on the fact that both of them put emphases together on successful communication and comprehension within the learning system. The communicative method especially in language teaching is about importance of effective interaction for appropriate language

learning. This method gives preference to common usage and practicality in language rather than grammatical correctness. The basic ideas are:

1. **Learner-Centeredness:** The approach prioritises the learner's requirements while encouraging active engagement and communication.
2. **Meaningful Communication:** Activities are meant to encourage real communication by giving students assignments that are similar to things that happen in everyday life.
3. **Integration of Skills:** From the start, it combines listening, speaking, reading, and writing, because it knows that communication requires many skills to work together ( Suemith, 2011 :4)

Relevance Theory augments the efficacy of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) methodology by offering a framework for comprehending how learners extract meaning from speech. This synergy can be examined through various fundamental feature for instance; emphasis on meaningful Communication where relevance Theory says that communication works best when it gives people information that is related to what they already know and what they expect. This fits with CLT's focus on meaningful interactions, where the main goal is to give kids real-life opportunities to use language. By putting language learning in real-life situations, CLT pushes students to have conversations that are relevant to their interests and experiences. This makes the process of communicating more useful and effective (Alsubaie, 2015:94).

Moreover, facilitating Inferencing Skills is another feature of collaborated framework since relevance theory shows how important implicit communication is and how important it is for students to figure out what words mean even when they don't say them directly. CLT encourages tasks that require students to negotiate meaning and solve problems while interacting with others. This practice not only improves students' fluency, but it also helps them get better at inferring, which lets them understand and respond to complex conversation. Being able to draw conclusions from what others say improves their general language skills and ability to adapt to different communication situations (Ibid.).

CLT and relevance theory both work on enhancing engagement and motivation. Learners are more likely to be interested and driven when they think communication is useful. According to Relevance Theory, people who want to learn look for information that fits their needs and hobbies. By focussing on student-centered learning and real communication, CLT makes a space where students feel like their efforts matter. As a result, students are more likely to take an involved role in their learning, which makes language acquisition more effective (Suemith, 2011: 5).

Relevance Theory says that communication works best when it gets "optimal relevance," which means that the information given is useful to the audience with little effort. This concept tells language learners to focus on the most important parts of language use, which can help them become more fluent and accurate. Learners can improve their fluency and accuracy at the same time by putting important information first during exchanges. This helps them become better at choosing the right language forms based on the situation (Besbes, 2013: 73).



The theory stresses how important context is for understanding what something means. This means that people who are learning a language are urged to use communication skills that are useful in real life. This method based on context lets students try out different ways of using language, which improves their fluency as they talk naturally. At the same time, it makes students more careful about their correctness because they have to think about whether or not their language choices are right for certain situations (Besbes, 2013: 73).

Relevance Theory says that feedback in language learning should be useful and suitable for the situation. In real life, this means that teachers can give corrective feedback during communicative tasks. This helps students see their mistakes and fix them without getting in the way of the conversation. This method helps with fluency by letting students have important conversations. It also helps with accuracy by correcting mistakes at the right time (Krstinić, 2020: 192).

### **Balancing Activities**

According to Relevance Theory, there should be a mix in the classroom between activities that focus on speed and activities that focus on accuracy. Teachers can make a complete learning setting by combining activities that encourage natural communication (which improves fluency) with structured exercises that stress correct grammar (which improves accuracy). This balanced method makes sure that students learn a wide range of skills that allow them to communicate clearly in different situations (Qasserras, 2023: 19).

### **Applying Relevance Theory in the Classroom**

Relevance Theory can be used to plan many tasks for language classrooms. It used to contextualized role-playing. Which Include games that are based on real events that are important to the students' lives. For example, students can act out a restaurant situation where they need to talk to a waitress and order food. This gives students a chance to practise speaking quickly in a real-life setting, while also forcing them to focus on using language correctly, including using the right words and grammar (Nižegorodcew, 2011: 111). Also, focused feedback sessions, and these are used in line with Relevance Theory's focus on the most relevant information. Give specific feedback that is important to the situation after communicative activities. For instance, if a student makes a typical mistake in a talk, the teacher can point it out and ask the student to say it again with the right form. Not only does this improve accuracy, it also keeps the conversation going, which keeps the focus on communication (Ibid.).

In addition, inferencing activities, that make tasks where students have to draw conclusions from what they know about the situation. For instance, give students a short story that is missing some parts and ask them to guess what will happen next based on what they know so far. Not only does this help them get better at inferring, but it also makes them think more deeply about how they use words, making sure that their answers are clear and accurate (Nižegorodcew, 2004: 143). Another classroom activity that links both relevance theory and communicative approach is interactive discussions. It encourages talks where students can share their thoughts on a range of issues. If you let students pick talk topics that are important

to them, they are more likely to fully participate, which improves their fluency. Teachers can lead the talk and make sure that students also pay attention to correct language use, correcting mistakes in a helpful way as they happen (Ibid.).

By using these activities that are based on Relevance Theory in language classrooms, teachers can make a place to learn that encourages both fluency and accuracy while also making sure that the language used is important to the students.

All in all, relevance theory improves the balance between speed and accuracy in language learning by encouraging the best relevance, putting an emphasis on knowing the context, incorporating useful feedback systems, and supporting an even distribution of teaching activities. This framework helps students speak clearly while also improving their language skills, which leads to better overall language use.

### **Conclusion**

Integrating Relevance Theory (RT) into Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) creates an innovative framework through which to perceive and enhance the process of language acquisition. RT, spotlighting context, inference, and optimal relevance, resonates effectively with the basic principle of CLT which is to encourage meaningful use of language. The following review illuminates various salient issues brought up by this synthesis. First, RT provides a cognitive basis for explaining how learners develop competence so that teachers can create activities that target pragmatic skills. Second, the current version of RT, which puts emphasis on contextual relevance, supports the type of reliable real-world communication inherent in CLT motivating learners to engage with language in real behaviors. The principle of optimal relevance in RT highlights explicitness as well as implicitness in language use, thereby supporting the teacher to set activities that would help the students distinguish indirect meanings. This integration shows the importance of cultural and situational setting in the process of acquiring language because relevance is something that goes hand in hand with the learner's background and experiences. RT can be mixed with CLT to create a more dynamic, learner-centered approach that would help in the development of linguistic competence as well as critical thinking and communicative competence of the learners for use in real communication. This study stresses how RT can be used to improve CLT: it offers a vehicle for more effective and interesting language teaching.

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