

# The Pragmatic Construction of Word Meaning in Utterances<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*It is undeniable that words have “meanings” that go above and beyond the scope of linguistic research. This article proposes that the meanings of words a speaker intends in an utterance be pragmatically enriched by relevance-driven inferential mechanisms, which take what is linguistically encoded as a guide in inferring speaker’s meaning. In order to regulate the occurrence and the interpretation of the pragmatic meaning of words in utterances, based on Sperber and Wilson’s Relevance Theory, we hypothesize that both the idea that our minds are flexible enough to construct far many more concepts than our languages can linguistically encode and the idea that the relevance-driven inferential mechanisms are powerful enough to construct the concept intended on the basis of the encoded concept and the context in which it is processed; we can often communicate this concept by modifying a certain word for which we have a stable conceptual representation in memory. The depth, to which the encoded concepts are processed, in arriving at the pragmatic meaning the speaker intends as a component of the explicature of her utterance, and the effort invested are constrained at every stage by the search for an optimally relevant interpretation of utterance in communication.*

## Key words

*Pragmatic meaning of words, utterance interpretation, Relevance Theory*

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## 1. Introduction

*Utterers create meanings by using words in context.*

*Hearers create interpretations.*

Patrick Hanks, SPARKLE Workshop, Pissa, January 1999.

This quote from Patrick Hanks reflects very closely the theme of this article that tackles the relation between word meaning and pragmatics. This article just aims at pursuing the view that words are rich repositories of semantic information that people use to talk about the world in potentially infinite number of ways.

Communication is about intentions and inferences. Recognition of an intention may lead directly to its fulfillment: speaker's intentions to inform the hearer about something are fulfilled by being recognized by the hearer. Communication is successful not when the hearer recognizes the linguistic meaning of the utterance but when he or she infers the speaker's meaning from it. The pragmatically inferred temporary meanings of a word are just its pragmatic meanings in utterances.

Determining whether various meanings of a word in various contexts are properly represented lexically or pragmatically is not a simple task. Different researchers adopt different criteria in this respect, which, to some extent, is inevitable, given their different assumptions about the role of doubt that lexical semantics has to interact with pragmatics to explain various word meanings in utterances. Thus a new linguistic discipline, namely lexical pragmatics has emerged (Blutner, 1998). This approach combines a constrained-based semantics with a general mechanism of conversational implicature. The basic pragmatic mechanism rests on conditions of updating the common ground and allows giving a precise explication of notions as generalized conversational implicature and pragmatic anomaly. The fruitfulness of the basic account is established by its application to a variety of recalcitrant phenomena among which its precise treatment of Atlas & Levinson's (1987) Q- and I-principles and the formalization of the balance between informativeness and efficiency in natural language processing (Horn's (1984) division of pragmatic labor) deserve particular mention. The extended mechanism turned out to be capable of giving a principled account of lexical blocking, the pragmatics of adjectives, and systematic polysemy.

Although, explicitly or implicitly, current pragmatic approaches agree that the interpretation of words in utterance is dependent on the recognition of the speaker's intentions, very little has been said about the pragmatic processes that regulate the occurrence and interpretation of the pragmatic meaning of words in utterance. Through the combination of the idea of (radical) semantic under-specification in the lexicon with a

theory of pragmatic strengthening, based on the pragmatic framework of Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1986/1995; Wilson & Sperber, 2002a; b), this paper aims to fill this gap.

## 2. Relevance Theory

Relevance Theory, proposed by Sperber & Wilson (1986), is grounded on the idea that our cognitive systems have evolved in the direction of increasing efficiency and are now set up so that they tend automatically to maximize relevance. Our perceptual system tends to pick up sounds and sights that are potentially relevant to us (e.g. smoke in our house rather than in someone else's). Our memory retrieval mechanisms tend to activate the assumptions, which are potentially relevant in the context (e.g. assumptions about fighting fire rather than pollution from our knowledge of smoke). Our inferential systems tend to draw the greatest possible cognitive effects (e.g. plans to rescue the children) from the combination of the new information and context, and so on. New information derived from external stimuli (utterances, sounds, sights) or from internal representations (thoughts, memories) is relevant to an individual if it yields cognitive effects (e.g. by answering a question, confirming a hypothesis, correcting a mistaken assumption etc.) for no unnecessary processing effort. Contradicting and eliminating an existing assumption, by strengthening an existing assumption or by combining with existing assumptions to yield contextual implications, can achieve cognitive effects. The mental processes at work in deriving cognitive effects involve the expenditure of processing effort so that the more processing effort expended the less the relevance.

### *Relevance of an input to an individual*

- I. Other things being equal, the greater the cognitive effects (of an input to an individual who processes it) the greater the relevance (to that individual at that time).
- II. Other things being equal, the smaller the processing effort required to derive those effects, the greater the relevance (of the input to the individual at that time) (Sperber & Wilson, 1986/1995)

Sperber and Wilson claim that among all the potential stimuli in our environment, ostensive stimuli, such as utterances, have a special property, which is that they inevitably raise an expectation of relevance in an addressee (an expectation that non-ostensive stimuli do not activate). In return for the demand on our attention (hence our processing resources)

we are licensed to presume that an utterance will be optimally relevant, as defined below.

*Communicative Principle of Relevance*

Every utterance communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance.

**An utterance is optimally relevant if and only if**

- a. It is relevant enough to be worth the hearer's processing effort.
- b. It is the most relevant one compatible with the speaker's abilities and preferences. (Sperber & Wilson, 1986/1995)

On this approach, the search for relevance is a basic feature of human cognition, which is exploited, in ostensive-inferential communication. Speakers and hearers have powerful mind-reading abilities. In producing a certain utterance, the speaker tends to take for granted what background assumptions the hearer is likely to use, what inferences he is likely to draw, etc. Since she can predict to some extent the line of thought the hearer is likely to take in processing her utterance and so what information is likely to be relevant to him at that moment, she will produce, according to her own abilities and preferences, an utterance which will enable the hearer to derive the intended effects for the investment of as little processing effort as is compatible with the speaker's abilities and preferences. On the assumption that the speaker is aiming at optimal relevance, and is competent to achieve it, the hearer is entitled to follow a path of least effort in deriving cognitive effects and to take the first interpretation that satisfies his expectations of (optimal) relevance to be the one the speaker intended. This is captured by the relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure, which together with the notion of optimal relevance and the communicative principle of relevance, comprise the key components of Relevance Theory.

Relevance-theoretic Comprehension Procedure

- (1) Follow a path of least effort in computing cognitive effects: Test interpretive hypotheses (disambiguation, reference resolutions, enrichments, implicatures, etc.) in their order of accessibility.
- (2) Stop once your expectations of (optimal) relevance are satisfied. (Sperber & Wilson, 1986/1995)

In a word, Sperber & Wilson's pragmatic theory postulates a relevance-driven inferential mechanism (the relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure) dedicated to processing ostensive stimuli and thereby to recognizing the intentions underlying these stimuli. An utterance (as ostensive stimulus) triggers automatically in the mind of the hearer both a presumption of optimal relevance and the relevance-theoretic comprehension

procedure, which will guide the hearer to bridge the gap between what is linguistically encoded and what is communicated both, explicitly and implicitly.

According to the theoretical framework to be applied to the data examined in this article—Sperber and Wilson’s Relevance Theory (RT)(1986,1995)—pragmatic enrichment of encoded meaning takes place at all levels of utterance interpretation, and even includes ad hoc context-dependent conceptual enrichment of lexical meaning (Carston, 1996; Sperber and Wilson, 1998a); and in their papers on the mapping between the mental and the public lexicon. Sperber and Wilson (1998b) argue, convincingly, that most concepts do not map onto words, only a fraction of a language user’s conceptual repertoire is lexicalized, and the relevance-driven inferential mechanisms are powerful enough to construct the concept intended on the basis of the encoded concept and the context in which it is processed (Sperber & Wilson, 1998b); we can often communicate this concept by modifying a certain word for which we have a stable conceptual representation in memory. Take the Chinese word *xiaojie* ‘an address of young ladies’ for example, in ancient times, it referred to the daughter of a rich family. We can easily associate this Chinese word with the image of privileged, noble or respectable young ladies. In modern society, it is the address of all young females. Nowadays various kinds of *xiaojie* (address of all waitresses) are appearing, such as, *anmo xiaojie*, *meirong xiaojie*, *sanpei xiaojie*, who provide services in massage parlour, beauty parlour and hotel, thus, now the Chinese word *xiaojie* can easily arouse the association of eroticism. Whether the Chinese word *xiaojie* is a respectable address or an obscene address of a young female depends on context, above all, the speaker’s intention. The depth, to which the encoded concepts are processed, in arriving at the pragmatic meaning the speaker intends as a component of the explicature of her utterance, and the effort invested are constrained at every stage by the search for an optimally relevant interpretation of utterance in communication.

### 3. The Processes and Mechanisms of the Interpretation of Utterances

It is widely agreed among pragmatists that utterance comprehension involves two distinct types of cognitive processes: a process of linguistic decoding and a process of pragmatic inference. In Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1986/1995, 1998b; Wilson & Sperber, 2002a; b; Carston, 2002), the distinction corresponds to the distinction between (linguistic) semantics and pragmatics. Utterances are automatically decoded by the language module into a certain semantic representation or logical form (a structured set of encoded concepts), which serves as automatic input to a process of pragmatic inference. Guided by the relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure, the aim of the hearer is to develop this logical form at the explicit level and complement it at the implicit level so as to arrive at a

hypothesis about the set of communicated assumptions (explicatures and implicatures) that constitute speaker's meaning. In (1), the semantic representation obtained from decoding the teacher's utterance underdetermines both what is explicitly (2) and implicitly (3) communicated.

- (1) A: Xu jiaoshou, wo keyi qingjiao nin yige wenti ma ?  
 A: Xu professor I can ask you a question?  
 'A: Professor Xu, can I ask you a question?'  
 B: duibuqi, wo bixu zai yinhang guanmen yiqian pao qu qu xie qian.  
 B: sorry, I have to bank close before run to get some money.  
 'B: Sorry, I have to run to the bank and get some money before it closes.'
- (2) Implicature: Xu jiaoshou bixu nashi paodao yinhang, [ranhou] zai yinhang  
 guanmen yiqian qu xie qian  
 Xu Professor have to that time run to bank [then]  
 bank close before get some money  
 'Professor Xu has to run to the bank at that time and [then] get some money before the bank closes.'
- (3) Implicature: nashi Xu jiaoshou mei shjian huida xuesheng de wenti  
 At that time Xu professor no time answer student 's question.  
 'Professor Xu does not have time to answer student's question at that time.'

The output of decoding an utterance, such as (1) does not result then in its interpretation. Pragmatic processes operate to disambiguate ambiguous terms (e.g. 'bank'), assign reference to indexicals (e.g. 'I', 'it'), and even enrich the proposition expressed by adding extra conceptual material (AND [THEN]).

According to Relevance Theory, both explicatures and implicatures are derived in parallel by a process of mutual adjustment (Wilson & Sperber, 2002b). Following a path of least effort, the hearer starts considering hypotheses about explicit content and implicatures in their order of accessibility until he arrives at a combination that satisfies his expectations of relevance. In processing (1), for instance, the student considers a highly accessible assumption (e.g. Professor Xu is in a hurry) as a potential implicature of the utterance even

before a complete explicature is derived. By backward inference, he may enrich the explicit content to the point where it warrants this implicature. This may involve taking the concept RUN encoded by *pao* ‘run’ and processing it in a rather shallow manner, considering only the very general assumption that running involves speed to derive the implication that Professor Xu will move fast to get to the bank in time. As a result, the encoded concept is broadened (RUN\*) so that it refers not simply to cases of literal running but more generally, to cases in which one, being in a hurry, walks relatively fast. It is this concept PAO ‘RUN\*’, constructed pragmatic meaning, and not the concept linguistically encoded, that is taken to be a constituent of the speaker’s thoughts and of the proposition expressed by her utterance, as in (2). This example of a loosely used term illustrates the current relevance-theoretic argument that although concepts are linguistically decoded, the output of this decoding is not immediately accepted as the constituent of the thought intended by the speaker. Instead, the concept encoded by a word acts as a mere template or pointer to infer the concept expressed by the use of that word. In other words, taking the inferential account to communication seriously, it is claimed that the semantics/pragmatics distinction holds not only at sentence level but also at word level (Carston, 1996, 2002; Wilson & Sperber, 2002a, b). This hypothesis is grounded both in the idea that our minds are flexible enough to construct far many more concepts than our languages can linguistically encode and in the idea that our inferential mechanisms are powerful enough to construct the concept intended on the basis of the encoded concept and the context in which it is processed (Sperber & Wilson, 1998b). The concept expressed by the use of a familiar word may depart from the concept encoded by the use of that word in various ways. It may also be narrower, as in (4), broader, as in (5), or both narrower and broader, as in (6).

- (4) A: I cannot *open* the freezer because of the ice  
 B:(Dentist) *Open* your mouth
- (5) A. Mark passed everything with distinction. He is such a *genius*!  
 B. I have a *square* spot on my leg
- (6) With five older sisters, David has always been the *prince* of the house.

In understanding each of (4)-(6), the hearer, following a path of least effort, starts considering just the first (few) most accessible assumption(s) from the encyclopedic entry of the encoded concept and starts processing them in the wider context of the utterance together with other hypotheses about explicatures and implicatures. He continues deriving cognitive effects from their combination until he arrives at a combination of explicit content, context and implicatures that satisfies his expectations of relevance, at which point he stops.

Because he often arrives at an optimally relevant interpretation before processing the encoded concepts to any depth, the resulting concepts may be narrower than, or broader than, or simply overlap with, the original encoded concepts. Concept broadening and narrowing are not different processes, but rather different instantiations of a single process of conceptual adjustment, which takes place in deriving the proposition expressed by the speaker's utterance (Carston, 1996, 2002). The new (narrower or broader) concept constructed in this pragmatic meaning will be taken to be appropriately close to the one the speaker intended as a constituent of her thoughts and of the explicature of her utterance.

In (4), the encoded concept is automatically narrowed to denote only a subset of particular ways of opening. In (5), it is broadened to the point where it includes not only real geniuses, or geometrically perfect squares, but, more generally, very clever people, such as Mark, and square-like shapes, such as the spot on the speaker's leg. Finally, in (6), processing only some of our encyclopedic assumptions about princes (e.g. the knowledge that princes are well looked after, that they get everything they want or need, etc.) during utterance comprehension results in a simultaneous narrowing and broadening of the encoded concept. The resulting pragmatic meaning of 'prince' in (6) is narrower than the encoded concept in that it denotes only princes who are treated in a special way (excluding poor princes or those in exile) and broader in that it does not only denote members of a royal family but, more generally, ordinary people who receive very special treatment typical of princes.

A crucial point about examples (4)-(6) is that the same process of conceptual adjustment is at work in understanding literal (4), hyperbolic (5a), loose (5b) and metaphorical uses (6). Both literal and non-literal interpretations are context-dependent and pragmatically constructed on-line via relevance-driven inferential mechanisms, which take what is linguistically encoded (the logical form and its constituent concepts) as merely a guide in inferring speaker meaning. This process of pragmatically fine-tuning the encoded concepts takes place as a natural by-product of the search for an optimally relevant interpretation, which can be attributed as a speaker's meaning.

#### **4. The Interpretation of Words in Utterances**

##### **4.1 Basic (relevance-theoretic) hypotheses about words interpretation in utterances**

On some occasions, the speaker thinks the most efficient way of communicating her intended message – the way that would involve the least expenditure of processing effort to derive the intended effects – is through the using of words or phrases in utterances. She predicts the hearer will retrieve the conceptual representation it encodes and add some of its

accompanying information to the context to derive the set of implications she intended. It is because words and phrase have conventional meanings that denote ordinary situations that they provide convenient clues to the derivation of a wide range of implications for a relatively low processing effort. This part looks in detail at how the process of words in utterances interpreting works.

Decoding the utterance containing words and phrases triggers automatically in the hearer's mind both a presumption of optimal relevance and the relevance-theoretic interpreting procedure which will guide the hearer in bridging the gap between what is linguistically encoded and what is communicated both, explicitly and implicitly. We have seen that Relevance Theory argues that pragmatics does not only operate at sentence level but also at word level in deriving the proposition expressed by the speaker's utterance. Arriving at the meaning intended by the speaker of an utterance involves a simultaneous pragmatic adjustment of word, phrase meaning which takes place during the process of deriving explicit content, context and implicatures. This process continues until the hearer arrives at a combination that satisfies his expectations of relevance. It is the pragmatic meaning of a word resulting from the process of deriving an optimally relevant interpretation that will be taken to be the concept the speaker intended as a constituent of the explicature of her utterance. In this way, the meaning intended by literally, loosely, hyperbolically and metaphorically used words in utterances, as in (4)-(6) can be seen to involve just the same mechanisms as are employed in arriving at the meaning of an utterance.

#### **4.2 The Processes and Mechanisms of the Interpretation of Words in Utterances**

In understanding an utterance, the hearer takes the concepts encoded by the words and phrases in the utterance as clues to the explicatures and implicatures intended by the speaker. Using the relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure, he follows a path of least effort and starts considering a few highly activated assumptions from the encyclopedic entries of the encoded concepts to use as contextual assumptions in the search for implications. Processing the encoded concepts (initially) in this shallow manner often results in an adjustment of their denotation and hence in the construction of new pragmatic meaning on-line, as in (4) - (6). To illustrate how this account might apply to the narrowing of *tiwen* 'temperature' in (7), consider the following scenario in detail. Husband has just suggested that he and his wife pay a visit to his aunt in hospital, and his wife replies as in (7):

- (7) wo you dian tiwen  
 I have temperature  
 'I have a temperature.'

In the circumstances, husband will have not only a general expectation of relevance but a particular expectation about how his wife's utterance is likely to achieve relevance at this particular point in the discourse: he will be expecting it to achieve relevance as a response to his suggestion that they visit his aunt in hospital. Literally interpreted, of course, her utterance is trivially true and achieves no positive cognitive effects. However, *tiwen* 'temperature' is a scalar term, and different points on the scale should yield different implications when combined with easily accessible contextual assumptions. Assuming some version of a spreading activation model of memory, husband's encyclopedic assumptions about *tiwen* 'temperatures', hospital visits and the possible connections between them should be highly activated at this point. It should therefore be a relatively straightforward matter, by following a path of least effort in the mutual adjustment of content, context and cognitive effects, to arrive at an interpretation on which *tiwen* 'temperature' expresses an ad hoc concept *TIWEN (TEMPERATURE)\**, denoting a temperature high enough to make it inadvisable for the wife to visit her husband's aunt in hospital.

More generally, narrowing is undertaken in the search for relevance. Hearers satisfy their expectations of relevance by looking for true implications (or other positive cognitive effects). Narrowing increases implications. A hearer following the relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure is therefore entitled to narrow the encoded sense to a point where it yields enough true implications to satisfy the general expectation of relevance raised by the utterance, together with any more specific expectations raised by the fact that the utterance has been produced by that speaker, for that audience, at that particular point. If several possible narrowing are available, he follows a path of least effort, using whatever assumptions and expectations are most highly activated (e.g. by the utterance itself and by preceding discourse). If he finds enough true implications to satisfy his expectations of relevance, he assumes that this was the speaker's meaning; if not, he tries another route.

Similar analyses apply to approximation, category extension, metaphor and hyperbole. Consider the category extension in (8),

- (8) Lin Ling benshen dui shangye yingpian bing bu hen fashao, er shi  
 wenyi yingpian  
 de fashao you.

Lin Ling originally to commercial films not at all very fever but literature  
and art films fever friend

‘Originally Lin Ling was not very interested in commercial films but was  
keen on literature and art films.’

In (8), the hearer may take the encoded concept *fashao* ‘fever’, for instance, and consider the assumption that *fashao* ‘a temperature higher than normal’ involves some kind of passion or enthusiasm. Processing the concept rather loosely often results in the construction of a broad (ad hoc) concept of *fashao* ‘fever’, which denotes virtually any process in which some degree of interest is involved. This ad hoc concept is then continuously adjusted as new information derived from the rest of the utterance is processed. The concepts encoded in the string are processed following a path of least effort in deriving implications, with hypotheses about explicatures and implicatures being mutually adjusted at every stage. At some point during this process, the concept encoded by the phrase as a whole is retrieved from memory (a temperature higher than normal). Rather than involving a switch of processing mode, the hearer takes this concept also as a further clue to the speaker’s meaning and he starts considering some of its accompanying information (e.g. the assumption that someone has much more enthusiasms and passions to certain thing than others ,and so on) as additional contextual assumptions. These assumptions are added to the context in their order of accessibility in order to derive the set of intended cognitive effects. In this case, the assumptions considered in processing the encoded concept, which is broadened to *FASHAO(FEVER)\**, contributes to, rather than disrupts, the derivation of the intended effects. This is, however, not always the case. Consider (9):

(9) Lin Ling dui mei jian shiqing dou jinjinjjiao, xiande hen nongmin

Lin Ling to everything means seems very peasanty

‘Lin Ling is always means to everything, just like a peasant who always thinks of  
himself.’

At some point during processing (9), the concept underlying the Chinese word *nongmin* ‘peasant’ is retrieved from memory and some highly accessible assumptions from its encyclopedic entry are considered in their order of accessibility. Having processed some assumptions from the concepts *jinjinjjiao* ‘means’ and *nongmin* ‘peasant’ at an earlier point may present the hearer with some inconsistency, because not all peasants are means, in other words, peasants have any other characteristics, just like frugality, and so on. On the

presumption that the speaker is aiming at optimal relevance, he will test in context the most accessible meaning to see whether it achieves enough cognitive effects. The speaker's familiarity with *nongmin* 'peasant' and the precise expectations about relevant implications often make the pragmatic meaning highly accessible. If, when processed in context, this interpretation provides enough cognitive effects for the effort invested, the hearer would take it to be the one the speaker intended; if not, he looks again. Furthermore, since in understanding words and phrases meanings in utterances are activated and often used as input in an attempt to construct the intended interpretation, hearers can then construct, in subsequent discourse, new intended utterances, which echo the representation, as in (10).

(10) Ta hao bu rongyi jiehun le , laopo yaoqiu jinbu , guazhi  
qu le Xizang bu ding shenme shihou mao huilai bu ding shenme shihou you  
chuan zou le

He with difficult married , wife pursuit progress, held a position as  
subprefect in Tibet, at unknown time cat back, at unknown  
time then ran away.

'With great difficulty, he got married, whereas his wife pursuit progress, so she  
held a position as subprefect in Tibet, coming back casually and leaving home  
uncertainly without being known by others just like a cat's behavior.'

An important advantage of this model is that it accounts for how words are understood in both their original and novel forms. Arriving at the intended interpretation of words in utterances, often involves considering initially just a few highly accessible assumptions from the concepts encoded by the utterance. In (10), this means taking, not only the encoded concepts *MAO* 'CAT', but also the encoded concepts *BUD ING SHIHO* 'AT UNKNOWN TIME' and *CUAN* 'RUN AWAY' as input for inferring speaker meaning.

In searching for implications, the hearer, following a path of least effort, starts pulling out from these concepts a few of their encyclopedic assumptions and adding them to the context of the utterance in their order of accessibility to derive the set of explicatures and implicatures the speaker intended. As in (10), this may involve adjusting the encoded concepts accordingly. The hearer may consider, for instance, highly accessible assumptions associated with the concepts *MAO* 'CAT' and *BUDING SHIHO* 'AT UNKNOWN TIME' and *CUAN* 'RUN AWAY' namely that the wife came back home and left stealthily, just like a cat's walk which is hard to catch others' attention, broadening the concepts accordingly (\**MAO* 'CAT', *CUAN* 'RUN AWAY' \*). These broader concepts may be further adjusted as new information is processed.

The hearer's expectations of relevance, and the resemblance in form (phonological, lexical, syntactic) between the original and the novel form, trigger the retrieval from memory of the concept underlying the original word at some point during processing of the utterance. (Vega-Moreno; Rosa Elena, 2003).

At this point, the concepts encoded at both word and phrase levels are adjusted in accordance with hypotheses about speaker's meaning to the point where the hearer arrives at an explicit content that warrants the derivation of the expected implicatures. This adjustment results in the derivation of one or two strong implicatures (e.g. his wife came back and left without notice in advance) and a wider range of weak implicatures (e.g. his wife's actions are always secret, and don't want to be known by others etc.). It is the pragmatic meaning of *MAO* 'CAT' constructed on-line as a by-product of arriving at an optimally relevant interpretation, not the set of encoded concepts or the concept encoded by *mao* 'cat' in its original form, that is taken to be close enough to the concept the speaker intended as a constituent of the thought she is expressing. It is then this concept that is taken as a constituent of the proposition expressed by her utterances and the one that warrants the derivation of the intended implications just mentioned.

It is worth noticing the interpretation of lexical items in utterance, like utterance interpretation more generally, is not literal or figurative but relevance-driven. The hearer does not need to process the literal meaning of every encoded concept as it is encountered. Instead, only some highly accessible assumptions from the encyclopedic entries of the encoded concepts are processed on-line by following a path of least effort in deriving implications. The output of the interpretation process may be idiomatic, literal, metaphorical, or otherwise. Crucially, the amount of processing effort invested at word, phrase and sentence level in deriving the intended interpretation is highly constrained by the relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure and so kept as low as possible in looking for the intended cognitive effects. It is because of this, and because the construction of pragmatic meaning of a word or phrase is context-dependent that the effort invested in processing the encoded concepts during the construction of the pragmatic meaning of a lexical item varies from utterance to utterance.

#### **4.3 Conceptual adjustment and denotation of words in utterances**

One important reason why a word is endowed with a pragmatic meaning in an utterance is to communicate a concept which we use in our thought, but for which we have no word in

our language. However, unlike metaphors, we can often communicate this concept by modifying a certain word for which we have a stable conceptual representation in memory. When interpreting a word in an utterance, we encourage the hearer to narrow or broaden the original concept to the point where he can derive the set of implications we intend to communicate. For instance,

- (11) zhe jian dayi zhi 500 yuan.  
 This CL coat cost 500 RMB  
 ‘This coat cost 500 RMB.’(‘about 500RMB’)
- (12) ta you yizhang zhengfangxing de lian.  
 He has CL square DE face  
 ‘He has a square face.’(‘approximately square’)
- (13) dazhen bu tong.  
 Injection not pain.  
 ‘This injection will be painless.’ (‘nearly painless’)

in arriving at an optimally relevant interpretation of (11)-(13), as outlined above, the hearer would construct loose uses of round numbers, geometric terms and negatively-defined terms. (11-13) are good examples of approximation, which is a variety of broadening where a word with a relatively strict sense is extended to a penumbra of cases that strictly speaking fall outside its linguistically-specified denotation. Therefore it is these pragmatic meanings constructed on-line by adjusting words meaning, and not the concepts encoded by these words in their original form, that the hearer takes to be a constituent of the speaker’s thoughts and of the proposition expressed by her utterance.

The representation of words we store is often semantically under-specified, denoting a wide range of actions, processes, and behaviors. This is partly why these expressions can keep their figurative flavor. Furthermore, because most words encode a rather unspecified concept, they often need to be pragmatically enriched in context. A certain (stereotypical) narrowing or broadening of the concept encoded by a word or phrase often occurs in understanding the word or phrase. Let us look at the following examples:

- (14) yunyiban hen ping.  
 Ironing board very flat.  
 ‘The ironing board is very flat.’
- (15) gongyuan hen ping  
 Park very flat

- ‘The park is very flat.’
- (16) diqiu            hen ping  
 Earth            very flat
- ‘The earth is very flat.’

The expressions in (14)-(16) are used to communicate different degrees of *ping* ‘flat’ and hence different meanings. The encoded concept [*ping* ‘flat’]\* is enriched differently on each occasion so as to warrant the derivation of an appropriate set of implicatures. In (14), it may include the implication that the ironing board is smooth and level, etc. In (15), however, it would include the implication that the park spreads out on a single plane, or extending at full length. In (16) it must include the implication that the earth extends with a broad level surface. Comparing the interpretations of *ping* ‘flat’ in (14)-(16), we can see different degrees and types of approximation are appropriate in different circumstances.

- (17) A: shui hui chengwei di'er ge Yao Ming ne ?  
 Who will become second Yao Ming NE?  
 ‘Who will become a second YAO Ming?’
- B: zhishao wuniannei zhongguo buhui chuxian di'er ge Yao Ming.  
 At least in five years China not will appear second Yao Ming.  
 ‘At least in five years, a second Yao Ming will not appear in China.’

In(17), the concept encoded by the name of the person *Yao Ming* is just a clue, which helps the addressee to drive a series of encyclopedic information about the person named *Yao Ming*. He performed in the 2000 Summer Olympic Games in Sydney, helped the Chinese National Team capture the title in the 2001 Asian Basketball Championship for Men, became the dominant player in the CB as a 20-year-old player during the 2000-01 CBA season, and now has developed into the best and most dominant basketball player in China. Selected in the first round by the Huston Rocket in 2002. he is one of the most highly anticipated players ever to join the NBA. He is famous for his ability and quickness as a basketball player of his height. Perhaps the encyclopedic information about *Yao Ming* varies from addressee to addressee, but the addressee is likely to have the encyclopedic information that *Yao Ming* is a talented basketball player in China. When the addressee hears her utterance “Who will become another *Yao Ming*”, she retrieves encyclopedic information about *Yao Ming* from her long-term memory and makes a pragmatic adjustment of the meaning encoded by the name *Yao Ming* along a path of least effort, and constructs an ad hoc concept token *Yao Ming* by mutual adjustment or explicit content,

contextual assumptions and cognitive effects. The extension of the concept token *Yao Ming* includes not only *Yao Ming* ‘the specific basketball player’ but also other basketball players who resemble *Yao Ming* in terms of physical height, playing skills, achievements, reputation and so on. This is a case of broadening, like narrowing, which is undertaken in the search for relevance and results from the mutual adjustment of context, content and cognitive effects, constrained by expectations of relevance raised by the utterance itself.

## 5. Conclusion

Although concepts are linguistically decoded, the output of this decoding is not immediately accepted as the constituent of the thought intended by the speaker. Instead, the concept encoded by a word acts as a mere template or pointer to infer the concept expressed by the use of that word and the meaning construction of utterances can be described by assuming an intensive interaction between the lexicon and context. Furthermore, because most words encode a rather unspecified concept, they often need to be pragmatically enriched in context. And also, there is a one-to-many relation between lexically encoded concepts and the concepts they can be used to communicate. The meaning of words in an utterance the speaker intends to convey is pragmatically (re) contracted on-line by relevance-driven inferential mechanisms, which takes as input a set of highly accessible encyclopedic assumptions from the concepts encoded by these words. The amount of processing effort invested, and the depth of processing of the encoded concepts, is highly constrained at every stage by the search for an optimally relevant interpretation.

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