Parentheticals and relevance[*]

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1 Introduction

In this paper, I will be concerned with the interpretation of a range of parenthetical expressions which are standardly treated in the speech-act literature as having two properties: (a) they are semantically and pragmatically equivalent to their main-clause counterparts and (b) they are non-truth-conditional, contributing not to the proposition expressed by an utterance but to indicating the type of speech-act performed. I shall survey some standard speech-act analyses, and argue that both claims are false. True parenthetical expressions are neither semantically nor pragmatically equivalent to their main-clause counterparts. In particular, whereas true parentheticals are, indeed, in some sense, non-truth-conditional, their main-clause counterparts are not. This raises two further questions: how can these facts be described, and how can they be explained? Using the framework of relevance theory (Sperber & Wilson 1986; Wilson & Sperber 1993; Wilson 1992), I shall sketch the lines on which answers to these questions might be found.

2 Speech-act accounts of parentheticals

The philosopher Urmson, in a famous paper (1963), treated *think, know, believe, suppose,* as parenthetical verbs. Such verbs can appear in main-clause or syntactically parenthetical position, as illustrated in (1):

(1) a *I suppose* that your house is very old.
b Your house is, *I suppose*, very old.
c Your house is very old, *I suppose*.
(Urmson 1963: 221)

Regardless of their syntactic position, Urmson saw parenthetical verbs as contributing not to the proposition expressed by the utterance but to indicating the type of speech act performed - often indicating, in particular, the speaker's degree

[*]I would like to especially thank Deirdre Wilson for very interesting and detailed comments on earlier drafts of this paper. I am grateful to the British Council and the A.G. Leventis Foundation for financially supporting this research.

of commitment to the proposition expressed. On this account, (1a-c) would be mere stylistic variants. Further examples are given in (2):

(2) a *I believe* that he is at home.
b He is, *I hear*, ill in bed.
c He is, *I fear*, too old.
d You intend to refuse, *I gather*.
e Jones was the murderer, *I conclude*.

The parenthetical expressions in (1a-c), (2a-e), are interesting because they have been treated as providing evidence for a speech-act semantics and against a truth-conditional account of at least some lexical items. In this respect, they resemble a more famous class of lexical items, the so-called performative verbs. In this section, I will compare and contrast the speech-act approaches to these two classes of items.

Speech-act theorists attached particular importance to linguistic devices which enable the speaker to make the illocutionary force of her utterance explicit. Austin's theory of illocutionary acts relies heavily on the idea that an illocutionary act can be performed only if there is a conventional means of performing it - a "formula" or "indicator" whose only function is to indicate the performance of the act. Performative verbs are the illocutionary force markers *par excellence* simply because they explicitly name the act to be performed (Austin 1962). However, "parenthetical" constructions, such as those in (1) and (2), have also been treated as illocutionary force indicators even though, unlike performatives, they do not name any speech act (Austin 1946; Urmson 1963; Strawson 1971).

Speech-act theorists tend to treat all illocutionary force indicators as non-truth-conditional, i.e. as not contributing to the proposition expressed by the *utterance* in which they occur. And there are further similarities in the behaviour of these two classes, as illustrated by the parentheticals in (1) above and the performatives in (3):

(3) a. *I warn you* that Jill is there.
b. Jill, *I warn you*, is there.
c. Jill is there, *I warn you*.
(Holdcroft 1978: 64)

In both cases, the claim of speech-act theorists has been that the examples in (a)-(c) are stylistic variants of each other. And a careful examination of the speech-act literature indicates that performatives and parentheticals have never really been treated independently of each other. Speech-act theorists rarely miss the opportunity

of drawing parallels between them (see, for example, Austin 1946, 1962; Strawson 1971; Urmson 1963, 1977).

Performative verbs are verbs that name illocutionary acts. Austin, in his paper 'Other Minds' (1946: 103), discusses uses of expressions such as *I warn, I ask, I define, other* than the familiar performative ones. When they are used performatively, the speaker is not describing an action, but performing it. In their non-performative uses, he thought, these expressions functioned as signals or indicators of how the utterance is to be understood: as a warning, a promise, an assertion, a guess. As he puts it, they function like *tone* and *expression*, or like *punctuation* and *mood*, signalling the force of the utterance. One question I want to consider in this paper is whether it is really right to classify parenthetical constructions along with mood, intonation or punctuation: are they non-truth-conditional in the way mood, tone or punctuation are?

Urmson, in his papers 'Parenthetical Verbs' (1963) and 'Performative Utterances' (1977), developed Austin's observation concerning the non-performative use of expressions such as "I warn", "I ask", "I define", into a technical notion of parenthetical use. Like Austin, he considers parenthetical verbs as non-descriptive and hence as non-truth-conditional. He too sees them as functioning in a similar way to intonation, choice of words, manner of expression, etc: they signal how the associated statements are to be taken; they *show*, rather than *state*, the speaker's attitude to the proposition expressed, the logical relevance and the reliability of the associated statements.

According to Urmson, 'parenthetical' expressions can function as evidentials indicating the type of evidence ('good', 'moderate', 'poor') the speaker has for the assertion being made. On the standard speech-act account, the pragmatic effect of employing an expression such as *I think* is to weaken the strength of the assertion. When it is used:

> The claim to truth need not be very strong, . . . the whole point of some parenthetical verbs is to modify or to weaken the claim to truth which would be implied by a simple assertion p (Urmson 1963: 224-225).

Thus, our assertions may come with varying degrees of strength, as illustrated below:

(4)	a.	John is in Berlin.	*stronger*
	b.	*I think* John is in Berlin.	*weaker*
	c.	John is, *I think*, in Berlin.	*weaker*
	d.	John is in Berlin, *I think*.	*weaker*

Granting that this is so, it would be interesting to know why. It is not enough to know that these constructions signal illocutionary force or degree of commitment; we need to know how this is so.

Regarding the relation between performative and parenthetical verbs, Urmson claims that "parenthetical and performatory verbs have much in common as against ordinary descriptive verbs" (Urmson 1963: 233). As we have seen, he also distinguishes between performative and parenthetical verbs on the basis of their function: 'doing' (e.g. *I guarantee, I bet*) is one thing, and 'orientating the hearer' (e.g. He'll come to a bad end, *I guarantee*; He'll forget to come, *I bet*) is another (Urmson 1963: 238, 1977: 263). There is a further more important difference between performative and parenthetical verbs that Urmson seems to be drawing. Parenthetical verbs are seen as comments *loosely attached* to the sentences they accompany. They give rise to complex speech acts, one part of which comments on the other (Urmson 1963: 227, 233). As Urmson notes:

> They are not part of the statement made, nor additional statements, but function with regard to a statement made rather as 'READ WITH CARE' functions in relation to a subjoined notice, ... They help the understanding and assessment of what is said rather than being a part of what is said (Urmson 1963: 239-240).

With true performatives, by contrast, only a single speech act is performed. For, Urmson, then, the two types of construction are parallel, but distinct.

Strawson (1971: 159-161) also linked performative verbs to expressions attached to the utterance to make the 'character' or 'intention' of the latter clear (ibid.: 160). Adopting the standard speech-act view, he treats the explicit performative as the primary linguistic means for indicating the illocutionary force of the utterance. Parenthetical comments are also a means of signalling illocutionary force. Examples are phrases such as *This is only a suggestion, I'm only making a suggestion*, or *That was a warning, I'm warning you* (ibid.). Strawson goes on to note that from such parenthetical comments to the explicitly performative formula the step is only a short one. In other words, the function of both *parenthetical comment* and *explicit performative formula* is very much the same. Like Urmson, however, he draws a fundamental distinction between the two types of construction in terms of a two-utterance effect. For Strawson, the use of a performative verb "subtracts" the effect of having two utterances, one a comment on the other, which is created by the use of parenthetical comments. Instead, we have a "single utterance in which the first-person performative verb *manifestly*" (ibid.) indicates the illocutionary force of the utterance. Thus, the speech-act analysis of performatives is, or ought to be, quite different from the analysis of

parentheticals. In particular, if parenthetical constructions involve two utterances, or a complex utterance, presumably each one, or part of one, could have its own truth conditions. After all, a *comment* ought to have truth conditions too. This is rather different from claiming that parentheticals are devoid of any descriptive content.

There are a few points to be emphasized in these accounts. Firstly, the claim that performative verbs are non-truth-conditional has been seriously challenged (Lemmon 1962; Hedenius 1963; Lewis 1970; Warnock 1971; Wiggins 1971; Bach 1975; Ginet 1979; Cresswell 1979; Bach and Harnish 1979; RÄcanati 1987). If this claim is false, might not the treatment of parenthetical expressions as non-truth-conditional be invalid too? Secondly, speech-act theorists do not generally distinguish between true (i.e. syntactic) parentheticals, and their main-clause counterparts. Thirdly, they do not operate with a distinction between conceptual and procedural meaning. In a framework which makes use of such a distinction - the framework of relevance theory, for example - it would be instructive to consider on which side of this distinction true parentheticals fall. In the next section, I will consider the truth-conditional question, arguing that there are clear differences in the truth-conditional states of true parentheticals and their main-clause counterparts.

3 Testing for truth-conditionality

There is a standard test for distinguishing truth-conditional from non-truth-conditional meaning, which I am going to apply to the types of parenthetical verbs illustrated in (1) and (2) above. Before doing so though, I would like to emphasize an important syntactic difference between main-clause constructions like (1a) and true parentheticals like (1b-c).

This difference is best brought out by looking not at declaratives such as (1a-c), but at non-declaratives. On Urmson's account, (5a-c):

(5) a. *I beg you* to come with me to Paris.
b. Come with me, *I beg you*, to Paris.
c. Come with me to Paris, *I beg you*.

and (6a-c):

(6) a. *I wonder* whether he's coming.
b. Is he, *I wonder*, coming?
c. Is he coming, *I wonder*?

are stylistic variants. Yet in (5a) 'I beg you' is the main clause and 'come with me' is a subordinate clause, whereas in (5b) and (5c), 'come with me' is not an embedded clause at all.

This is shown in (5) by the fact that imperative morphology in English is found only in main clauses. The infinitival 'come' in (5a) indicates the presence of a subordinate clause, embedded under a main verb 'I beg'. By contrast, 'come with me' is a main clause in (5b) and (5c). Similarly, English yes-no interrogatives exhibit subject-aux inversion only in main clauses. The non-inverted "whether he's coming" in (6a) indicates a subordinate interrogative clause embedded under a main verb "I wonder", whereas "is he coming?" in (6b) and (6c) is a main clause.

In fact, there is a true parenthetical counterpart of (5b-c) and (6b-c) with the parenthetical comment in fronted position, but it is not (5-6a) but (7a-b):

(7) a. *I beg you*, come with me.
b. *I wonder*, is he coming?

Thus, if we are looking for stylistic variants, we should really be considering (8a-c) and (9a-c):

(8) a. *I beg you*, come with me to Paris.
b. Come with me, *I beg you*, to Paris.
c. Come with me to Paris, *I beg you*.

(9) a. *I wonder*, is he coming?
b. Is he, *I wonder*, coming?
c. Is he coming, *I wonder*?

I will return to this issue later. Meanwhile, given these facts, the results of our tests for truth-conditionality, which show a marked difference between true parentheticals and their main-clause counterparts, should not be too surprising.

The core mechanism of the test consists in embedding into a conditional the sentence which includes the expression to be tested, and seeing if this expression falls within the scope of the 'if'. If it does, it is truth-conditional; if it does not, it is non-truth-conditional (for a detailed exposition of the way the test works, see Ifantidou-Trouki 1993). Let us examine how the test applies to main-clause "parentheticals" first:

(10) If *I think* that John is in Berlin, he will not come to the meeting.

The question is, under what circumstances is the speaker claiming that John will not come to the meeting? If *I think* makes no contribution to truth conditions, then (10) should be synonymous with (11):

(11) If John is in Berlin, he will not come to the meeting.

Clearly, the two utterances are not synonymous; *I think* does fall within the scope of "if" in (10) and is therefore truth-conditional. The results generalize quite straightforwardly to other main clause 'parenthetical' verbs, such as 'believe' and 'suppose'.

The results of applying the embedding test to true parentheticals are quite different. These can indeed be embedded into a conditional:

(12) If John is, *I think*, in Berlin he will not come to the meeting.

(13) If John is in Berlin, *I think*, he will not come to the meeting.

However, there is an important difference between (10), the embedded main-clause construction, and (12) - (13), the embedded true parentheticals. (12) and (13) are *not* synonymous with (10). Semantically, the embedded parentheticals in (12) and (13) take the whole utterance in their scope. These utterances are thus equivalent to (14):

(14) *I think* that if John is in Berlin he will not come to the meeting.

The same point applies to disjunctions. Just as (12) is synonymous with (14), so (15):

(15) Either John is, *I think*, in Berlin, or he will be there soon.

is synonymous with (16):

(16) *I think* that either John is in Berlin or he will be there soon.

This scope effect becomes even clearer if we substitute *I think* with a third person parenthetical, as in (17):

(17) a. This is, the catalogue says, a Tintoretto.
b. If this is, the catalogue says, a Tintoretto, it is the most valuable painting in the museum.
c. The catalogue says that if this is a Tintoretto, it is the most valuable painting in the museum.

In other words, true parentheticals take wide scope even when embedded into the antecedent of conditionals. Their main-clause counterparts do not. These main-clause counterparts are clearly truth-conditional. In the case of true parentheticals, the issue is not so clear-cut. One might argue that (17c) correctly states the truth conditions of (17b), or one might agree with the speech-act theorist that what is being asserted is merely the embedded conditional, with "the catalogue says" functioning merely as a comment on this assertion. Things may became clearer if we consider some further examples.

'If . . . then' and *'either . . . or . . .'* are 'non-factive' types of connectives, in the sense that they do not commit the speaker to the truth of the propositions embedded under them. Notice, however, that with factive connectives such as *because, since* and *although*, which automatically commit the speaker to the truth of the propositions embedded under them, the scope facts are quite different. Thus consider (18a) and (18b):

(18) a. John's here, although his train, I think, was late.
b. Susan's lucky, because she should, I think, have lost the election.

Here, the speaker is clearly committed to the following:

(19) a. I think his train was late.
b. I think she should have lost the election.

In other words, the parenthetical has a narrower scope than it did in (12) and (15). The question is, though, whether the parenthetical expressions fall within the scope of, and therefore interact with, 'because' and 'although', as they would if they were genuinely truth-conditional. For (18a) and (18b) the results are quite clear: the parentheticals remain outside the scope of the connectives. The facts being contrasted in (18a) are (a) that John is here and (b) that his train was late, rather than the fact that the speaker *thinks* his train was late. What makes the speaker conclude that Susan is lucky in (18b) is the fact that Susan ought to have lost the election, rather than the fact that the speaker *thinks* she should have lost. Hence the parenthetical *I think* seems to have non-truth-conditional status even when it takes narrow scope.

In this section, I have tried to show that main-clause "parentheticals", as in (1a), and true parentheticals, as in (1b-c), behave very differently from each other, both syntactically and semantically: only the main-clause construction is truth-conditional, and moreover, under embedding, main-clause constructions and true parentheticals exhibit important differences in scope. At the same time, true parentheticals present a variety of descriptive problems that are entirely unexpected on the standard speech-act account. Hence, we need a new descriptive and explanatory framework in which to analyse them. In the next section I shall start to analyse them in the framework of relevance theory.

4 Relevance theory and non-truth-conditional semantics: possibilities for description

Relevance theory provides a rich enough framework for describing the facts about parentheticals that have been presented above. Here I will make two proposals:

(i) Parenthetical constructions encode elements of *conceptual representations*, which may be true or false in their own right, even if they do not contribute to the truth conditions of the utterances in which they occur.

(ii) To the extent that they are non-truth-conditional, parenthetical constructions, rather than contributing to the proposition expressed, contribute to what Wilson and Sperber (1993) call *higher-level explicatures*. By definition, higher-level explicatures do not contribute to the truth conditions of the utterances which communicate them, though they may be true or false in their own right.

I shall argue, first, that true parentheticals encode concepts in just the same way as their main-clause counterparts. If this is so, they are clearly quite different from tone, expression and mood, which are all non-conceptual in nature. In order to justify this claim, I must introduce the distinction between conceptual and procedural meaning drawn by Blakemore (1987) and Wilson and Sperber (1993).

The idea behind this distinction is that expressions in a language may encode two basic kinds of information. Some encode *concepts*, constituents of conceptual representations: the word 'boy', for example, encodes the concept BOY, the word 'play' encodes the concept PLAY, and so on. However, within the framework of relevance theory, not all word meaning is analysed in conceptual terms. Certain expressions are seen as encoding information about *computations* rather than

representations: that is, about how the associated utterances should be inferentially processed. On this approach, the meaning of a linguistic construction is *procedural* if it constrains the inferential phase of comprehension by indicating the type of inference process that the hearer is expected to go through (Wilson and Sperber 1993).

Blakemore (1987) has convincingly analysed certain discourse or pragmatic connectives in procedural terms. Expressions such as 'after all', 'so', 'but', 'however' are not seen as encoding concepts, but as indicating to the hearer what type of inference process he is in. This immediately raises a question: are all non-truth-conditional expressions to be analysed in procedural terms? I shall argue, following Wilson and Sperber 1993, that they are not.

Notice first that main-clause "parentheticals" should be treated as encoding concepts because, as we have seen, they are truth-conditional. The assumption is that most ordinary nouns, verbs, adverbs and adjectives which contribute to truth conditions do so by encoding concepts (Wilson 1992). The simplest semantics would then treat the true parentheticals as encoding exactly the same concepts, and there are several arguments for this.

Notice first that the speaker who uses such a parenthetical can lay herself open to charges of untruthfulness in their use:

(20) Peter: John is waiting at the airport, *I think.*
Mary: That's not true; you don't think anything of the sort.

This can be explained on the assumption that parenthetical comments encode conceptual representations, which, though not contributing to the truth conditions of the utterance which incorporates them, can be true or false in their own right.

But the most important argument for the view that true parenthetical comments encode concepts is based on *compositionality* (Wilson 1992). Parentheticals often have a complex syntactic and semantic structure. Consider (21) - (22):

(21) John is, *I increasingly tend to think*, a fool.

(22) This is, *I strongly suspect, despite all indications to the contrary*, a Tintoretto.

These complex parentheticals can be easily understood on the assumption that they encode concepts, which are capable of undergoing the regular compositional semantic rules. It is not clear how they can be analysed in procedural terms.

I shall now argue (following Wilson and Sperber 1993) that there is a second important difference between Blakemore's pragmatic connectives and the true parentheticals we are dealing with here. Blakemore analyses her connectives as constraints on *implicatures*, i.e. as contributing to the implicit aspect of communication. True parentheticals, by contrast, appear to contribute to what Sperber and Wilson call the *explicatures* of an utterance, i.e. to the explicit aspect of communication.

Sperber and Wilson define *explicatures* as explicitly communicated assumptions. More technically, "an assumption communicated by an utterance *U* is *explicit* if and only if it is a development of a logical form encoded by *U*" (1986: 182), where 'development' is a process of enriching a linguistically encoded logical form. According to Wilson and Sperber (1993), Wilson (1992), the explicatures of an utterance will typically include:

(a) the proposition expressed by the utterance

(b) higher-level descriptions obtained by optionally embedding this proposition under a speech-act verb or a propositional-attitude verb.

The truth conditions of the utterance depend only on the proposition expressed, whereas the higher-level explicatures of an utterance make no contribution to its truth conditions, though they may be true or false in their own right.

To illustrate, the explicatures of the utterance in (23) might include the propositions in (24):

(23) Mary: John is at the airport.

(24) *(a)* *John is at the airport.*
(b) Mary is saying that John is at the airport.
(c) Mary is asserting that John is at the airport.
(d) Mary thinks that John is at the airport.

Mary's utterance in (23) is true if and only if John is at the airport, i.e. if and only if the explicature in (24a) is true. The remaining explicatures (24b-d) may be true or false in their own right but make no contribution to the truth conditions of Mary's utterance (Wilson and Sperber 1993; Wilson 1992). In more technical terms, the most deeply embedded explicature of (23) is the *proposition expressed* by (23) and (24b-d) are *higher-level explicatures* of (23).

Having distinguished the propositional form of an utterance from its higher-level explicatures, let us see in more detail how the latter are obtained.

Higher-level explicatures, like logical forms and fully propositional forms, are conceptual representations recovered by a combination of decoding and inference (Wilson and Sperber 1993: 11). To obtain (24a) the hearer must not only decode the semantic representation of the utterance but make an inference about the intended referent of "I"; to obtain the higher-level explicatures (24b-d) he must make additional inferences about Mary's attitude to the proposition she is expressing, and the type of speech act she is intending to perform. According to Sperber and Wilson, the greater the degree of decoding involved, the more explicit the communication. Thus, explicitness is a matter of degree. Within this framework both the fact that true parentheticals encode concepts, and the fact that they are nonetheless non-truth-conditional, can be described. Consider (25):

(25) John is, I think, at the airport.

If the parenthetical *I think* is genuinely non-truth-conditional, it can be analysed as providing the hearer with explicit guidance as to the intended higher-level explicature, namely (26):

(26) Mary thinks John is at the airport.

This higher-level explicature is identical to the one in (24d) above: the difference lies merely in the greater degree of decoding involved in obtaining it from (25) as opposed to the less explicit (23).

Main-clause "parentheticals", as we have seen, encode concepts too, and these appear to contribute to the truth conditions of utterances in the regular way. Thus, consider (27a-b):

(27) a. *I think* that Bill has cheated in the exams.
b. *I believe* that Bill has cheated in the exams.

These would communicate the information in (28) and (29), respectively:

(28) *Mary thinks that Bill has cheated in the exams.*

(29) *Mary believes that Bill has cheated in the exams.*

In this case, though, the information in (28) and (29) would constitute the proposition expressed by (27a) and (27b), thus accounting for their contribution to truth conditions.

A description, of course, is not an explanation. Why is it that true parenthetical constructions appear not to contribute to the truth conditions of utterances, whereas their main-clause counterparts do? Moreover, why do we feel that the addition of a parenthetical verb, pre-fixed, inserted or utterance-final, weakens (*I think*) or strengthens (*I know*) our assertions? Here, I shall not attempt a full explanation, but merely indicate the lines along which I think an explanation might be sought.

5 Relevance theory and parentheticals: possibilities for explanation

The questions that have been raised in this paper are:

(a) are the utterances in (1a-c) really stylistic variants of each other, i.e. syntactically, semantically and pragmatically equivalent?
(b) are true parentheticals and their main-clause counterparts really non-truth-conditional, as speech-act theorists claim?
(c) do these expressions encode conceptual or procedural information?
(d) do they contribute to the implicit or the explicit aspect of communication?
(e) if parentheticals weaken the associated assertions, why should this be so?

I have argued that true parenthetical constructions are neither syntactically nor semantically equivalent to their main-clause counterparts. Paralleling the syntactic distinction is a distinction in semantic scope and truth-conditional status. Thus, I suppose contributes to the truth conditions of (1a) but not to those of (1b) and (1c). These facts can be described using Sperber and Wilson's distinction between the proposition expressed and higher-level explicatures: whatever the truth-conditional status of 'I suppose', it encodes the same conceptual information, which undergoes compositional semantic rules in the regular way.

However, there is a problem with this account: it assigns the same propositional structure to true parentheticals and their main-clause counterparts. Thus, both the main-clause construction in (30) and its true parenthetical counterparts in (31) are seen as communicating the information in (32):

(30) I think John is in Berlin.

(31) a. John is, I think, in Berlin.
b. John is in Berlin, I think.

(32) Mary thinks John is in Berlin.

Of course, (32) acts as the proposition expressed by (30) and a higher-level explicature of (31) - but no real explanation has been given for why this is so, or of what the pragmatic consequences of this analysis might be.

One way of developing such an explanation might be to pursue the idea proposed by speech-act theorists, that true parentheticals constitute two utterances, or two speech acts, one commenting on the other (see, for example, RÄcanati 1987: 36-40). This hypothesis is reinforced by recent claims that true parenthetical constructions are phonologically, syntactically and semantically independent of their host clauses (Mittwoch 1977, 1979, 1985; Haegeman 1984, 1988; Fabb 1990; Espinal 1991; Burton-Roberts forthcoming). On this approach, (31a) and (31b) would assert *both* that John is in Berlin *and* that the speaker thinks that John is in Berlin, with the main point of the utterance generally being made by the most deeply embedded assertion. If such speculations proved to be correct, one might further speculate that intuitions about the truth conditions of (31a-b) are intuitions about the sub-part of it which makes the major contribution to overall relevance, i.e. which constitutes its main point. Along these lines, one might explain the differences between main-clause constructions like (1a) and true parentheticals such as (1b) and (1c).

With this in mind, let us turn to a final difference between these examples: the difference in strength of assertions associated with the presence, absence and syntactic position of expressions such as "I think". Recall that speech-act theorists regard (30)-(31) as equivalent in strength, and weaker than the plain assertion in (33):

(33) John is in Berlin.

I would also like to point out a further difference, not generally noted by speech-act theorists: namely, that the main-clause construction in (30) would generally be understood as carrying a weaker commitment to the claim that John is in Berlin than its true parenthetical counterparts in (31a) and (31b). In each case, I shall argue that where parentheticals do express a diminished commitment to the proposition expressed, this follows from the semantics of the constructions in question together with *considerations of optimal relevance*.

Sperber and Wilson (1986) define the notion of optimal relevance as follows:

An utterance, on a given interpretation, is optimally relevant if and only if:
(a) it achieves enough contextual effects to be worth the hearer's attention;
(b) it puts the hearer to no unjustifiable processing effort in achieving those effects.

According to Sperber and Wilson, the very fact of requesting the hearer's attention by means of an utterance, creates in him an expectation of optimal relevance: that is, of adequate contextual effects, achieved for no unjustifiable effort. By clause (a), the utterance is expected to yield more effects than any other information the hearer could have been attending to at the time. If highly relevant information is being processed at the time the hearer's attention is requested, for example, a mother's attention while attending to her badly injured child, virtually no interruption would be relevant enough to be worth her attention. When lying leisurely by the beach though, any ordinary remark would be relevant enough to be worth the hearer's attention.

According to clause (b) of the definition of optimal relevance, a speaker who wants to eliminate any risk of being misunderstood, should make the intended interpretation as easy as possible to recover. That is, she should not unnecessarily complicate her utterance (linguistically, logically, context-wise), and hence put the hearer to wasted effort. It follows from this that the extra effort demanded by the presence of extra linguistic material implies extra or different effect. I shall argue that this fact explains the differences between (30), (31) and (33), and similar examples.

Suppose that while their plane is about to land, Mary is entertaining the thought in (34):

(34) If someone is waiting for us, it will be easier to handle the TV set, the computer and the suitcases.

With this thought in her mind, Mary says:

(35) Mary: We have so much luggage to carry!

Susan replies with one of the utterances in (36):

(36) Susan: (a) John is waiting at the airport.

(b) *I think* John is waiting at the airport.

(c) John is waiting at the airport, *I think.*

Note that, whichever of these she produces, Mary will be able to derive from her utterance, together with the contextual assumption in (34), the contextual implication in (37):

(37) John will help us with the luggage.

Note too, however, that (36a) is less linguistically complex than (36b-c); hence it takes less effort to recover (37) from (36a) than from (36b-c). In particular, since (36b-c) include (36a) as a subpart, (36b-c) will require all the effort needed to process (36a) and more besides. According to the definition of optimal relevance, this *extra processing effort* incurred by the parenthetical construction *I think* needs to be offset by *extra or different contextual effects*. The different contextual effect in this case is generally a diminished commitment to the proposition expressed. Where the parenthetical verb is *I know*, the extra contextual effect would often be a strengthened commitment to the proposition expressed.

According to the definition of optimal relevance, if all the speaker of (36b) or (36c) wanted to communicate was a strong assertion that John was waiting at the airport, she should have done so by means of (36a). As long as she can trust him to assign the appropriate degree of strength to her assertion, she should avoid using (36b) or (36c) in order to spare her hearer some unnecessary effort, and, what is more important, to avoid misunderstanding: (36b) or (36c) would prime the 'diminished commitment' interpretation. In this way, the pragmatic effects noticed by speech-act theorists follow naturally from the relevance theoretic framework and in particular, from considerations of optimal relevance.

Clearly, much more work remains to be done if these explanations are to be made fully convincing. Nonetheless, I hope that along these lines it might be possible to preserve the genuine insights of speech-act theory and incorporate them into a psychologically adequate theory of comprehension.

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