Relevance theory in Spanish pragmatics

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1 Introduction

(1)   [At the restaurant]
      A: A second glass?
      B: I have to drive.

In Example (1), we all understand that A's question counts as an offer of a second glass of wine and that B's reply is a refusal to that offer based on the fact that drinking alcohol is not compatible with safe driving. However, none of those meanings is directly encoded in the linguistic forms uttered by the speakers. If we accept the idea that the meaning of a complex expression is fully determined by the meanings of its constituents and the way in which they are put together, this simple example poses a big challenge. How can it be that we understand more than is actually said? Pragmatic theories offer particular answers to this fundamental question and *relevance theory* (Sperber & Wilson, 1986/1995; Wilson & Sperber, 2012) is one of such answers.

Relevance theory (hereinafter, RT) is a model of how cognitive processes and abilities are brought to bear in human communication. It was originally proposed by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson in their foundational 1986 book, *Relevance. Communication and Cognition* (Sperber & Wilson, 1986/1995; for a general overview, see Allot, 2013; Carston & Powell, 2006; Clark, 2013; Sperber & Wilson, 1987; Wilson & Sperber, 2004) (for Spanish research, see Escandell-Vidal, 1993, 2013; Escandell-Vidal, Ahern, & Amenós-Pons, 2020; Padilla Cruz, 2016a, 2016b; Pons Bordería, 2004; Portolés, 1994; Rosales Sequeiros, 2010, 2014; Sánchez de Zavala, 1990; Santibáñez, 2012a, 2012b; Vicente, 1999; Yus, 2003a). Since then, it has been applied to a large number of topics in a wide range of languages (see Yus, n.d. for a comprehensive bibliography). In this chapter, we briefly introduce the basic tenets of RT and then discuss how it has been applied to various topics in Spanish pragmatics.

2 Review of existing research

2.1 Relevance theory: An outline

Following the path forged by Grice (1975; see Chapter 1 on implicature, this volume), RT assumes that human communication is not merely a matter of encoding and decoding linguistic

messages; rather, encoded messages are only "one of the inputs to a non-demonstrative infer- ence process which yields an interpretation of the speaker's meaning" (Wilson & Sperber, 2004, p. 607). Understanding how this inferential process works and establishing what the other inputs are that can feed it are two major goals of the theory. To this end, RT adopts a psychologically realistic view of human cognition as a supporting foundation for its view on communication.

On the cognitive side, RT assumes an evolutionary perspective: our cognitive resources are limited and hence our minds have evolved to allocate these resources precisely to the facts and stimuli from which we may expect the most relevant results and also to process them in the most efficient way. In RT this generalization is enounced as follows:

First, or cognitive, principle of relevance

Human cognition tends to be geared towards the maximization of relevance.

(Sperber & Wilson, 1986/1995, p. 260)

The word 'relevance' is to be understood in a technical sense. Relevance is a potential property of any kind of stimulus; not only linguistic expressions. The relevance of an input is a function of processing effort and cognitive effects. The maximization of relevance is the result of an adaptation to pursue a balance between cognitive costs and benefits. Humans tend to obtain the maximum effects, investing a minimum effort. This is not, however, just a sensible goal; it is a general feature of how human cognition works in all areas: we have no choice in the matter, so we cannot decide if we want to maximize relevance or to opt out. The assessment of relevance does not use any external metrics, nor does it compare all possible options; rather, it uses a simple heuristic that stops processing when a satisfactory threshold is reached (in the sense of Simon, 1956, 1982; see Escandell-Vidal, 2016a).

On the side of communication, as Wilson and Sperber (2004, p. 609) state, "the search for rel- evance is a basic feature of human cognition, which communicators may exploit." Starting from the assumption that individuals will maximize the relevance of an input, speakers can safely build their messages with the expectation that these will be processed in the most efficient way, given the hearer's abilities and preferences. Similarly, hearers can rely on the expectation that the stimu- lus received will be worth their while. These ideas are captured under the following principle:

Second, or communicative, principle of relevance

Every act of ostensive communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance.

(Sperber & Wilson, 1986/1995, p. 260)

Again, this principle is not a sensible recommendation, but a generalization about how com- municative stimuli will be processed.

The hearer's task is to construct a hypothesis about the speaker's meaning that satisfies the presump- tion of relevance. Taken together, the two principles set the basis for an answer to the questions raised at the beginning of this section. They provide a criterion to decide which inputs should be attended to, where they can be found, and when to stop processing. The generalization reads as follows:

Relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure

a. Follow a path of least effort in computing cognitive effects: Test interpretive hypotheses (disambiguations, reference resolutions, implicatures, etc.) in order of accessibility.
b. Stop when your expectations of relevance are satisfied. (Wilson & Sperber, 2004, p. 613)

This general task can be further analyzed in other subtasks:

> **Subtasks in the overall comprehension process**
>
> a. Constructing an appropriate hypothesis about explicit content (explicatures) via decoding, disambiguation, reference resolution, and other pragmatic enrichment processes.
> b. Constructing an appropriate hypothesis about the intended contextual assumptions (implicated premises).
> c. Constructing an appropriate hypothesis about the intended contextual implications (implicated conclusions). (Wilson & Sperber, 2004, p. 615)

The procedure establishes, then, that contextual assumptions are allowed into the inferential process in order of accessibility. The system stops as soon as a satisfactory interpretation has been found. This yields, of course, a tentative hypothesis about the communicative intention of the speaker, but is not a fail-safe procedure. The accessible assumptions may be insufficient and our expectations may be misguided. However, the preceding criterion does not aim at guaranteeing a successful interpretation, but at describing how the interpretive process will develop. After all, miscommunication occurs and the theory has to provide an explanation for it.

These are the basic ideas that underlie the cognitive approach to human communication advocated for by relevance-theorists. RT is a research program rooted in Grice's central proposal that human communication crucially involves the expression and attribution of intentions, thus bringing cognitive and psychological issues to the foreground (see Gil, 2011, 2015, 2018, for discussion). There are, however, a number of aspects in which RT diverges from Grice and from other neo-Gricean approaches, such as those of Levinson (2000) and Horn (1984). First, Grice suggested that the gap between 'what is said' and what the speaker meant can be explained by assuming that there is a cooperative principle and a set of maxims that make it possible to calculate every step in the derivation of the intended meaning, no matter if the speaker is following the maxims or violating them. Horn and Levinson tried to reduce the maxims to two or three principles inspired by economy and functional pressure. RT, in contrast, postulates generalizations about human cognition that are not limited to explaining how communication works, but how human minds work. Second, Grice equates pragmatics with implicit meaning and leaves "what is said" on the side of coding; for RT, in contrast, inferential processes are not limited to the derivation of implicatures: inference is also required to explain how the explicitly communicated content is pragmatically modulated (disambiguation, reference assignment, concept adjustment, and free enrichment).

After this brief overview in which the principles driving the relevance-theoretic program have been introduced, the next section is devoted to discussing the contributions to RT in the area of Hispanic pragmatics. The section is organized around research topics. Each subsection presents, first, some conceptual tools from RT that have been useful to account for specific phenomena in the analysis of Spanish data. The general and theoretical contributions made by researchers from Spanish-speaking countries to the development of the theory as such are also discussed.

2.2 Research topics

2.2.1 Explicatures and implicatures

RT has its roots in Gricean pragmatics. However, it departs from the standard view in several significant respects. The most salient difference concerns the status and nature of 'what is said.' In most previous approaches, there was an identification of explicit content with what was

linguistically encoded (leaving aside reference assignment and, to some extent, disambiguation), while most pragmatically derived aspects of utterance meaning were considered as part of the implicit meaning.

RT challenges these correlations (what-is-said/ encoded/ semantics and what-is-implicated/ inferred/ pragmatics). The criterion to distinguish between semantics and pragmatics relates to the kind of cognitive process involved, not to the level of representation to which these processes contribute. So, in this more restrictive framework, semantics deals with encoding/decoding processes, whereas the area of pragmatics corresponds to inferential processes. This distinction is crucial, since, as relevance-theorists have extensively argued, there are many aspects of the derivation of explicit content that are not uniquely based on decoding, but also require inference. This is, therefore, a significant departure from the Gricean picture.

There is no exact correspondence between cognitive processes and levels of representation; rather, the two kinds of processes are involved in determining both explicit and implicit content. On the one hand, there are many inferential processes that are needed in order to develop the meaning that the speaker intended to convey in an explicit way; on the other hand, there are linguistic items whose encoded meaning contains indications to guide the hearer along the inferential process.

Two different sets of assumptions can then be distinguished:

> *Explicatures*: "An assumption communicated by an utterance U is *explicit* if and only if it is a development of a logical form encoded by U."
> *Implicatures*: "An assumption communicated by U which is not explicit is implicit." (Sperber & Wilson, 1986, p. 182)

Explicatures have two different sources: the content encoded by the linguistic expressions used in the utterance, and the context. Therefore, explicatures are obtained as a result of inferential processes integrating contextual assumptions that develop the coded content into a contextualized proposition (see Teso, 2003, for an overview in Spanish). This twofold origin is far from being an exception; rather, virtually all utterances need their logical forms to be inferentially developed. The representation resulting from decoding is, in fact, only a blueprint, a propositional schema. A number of inferential processes need to be carried out, such as the disambiguation of potentially ambiguous expressions, the resolution of indexicals and other referential expressions, and the enrichment of vague and underspecified items.

Consider the example in (1). The word *glass* can, in principle, have a variety of meanings. The fact that it is construed as a countable noun makes it easy to discard the mass noun interpretation ('hard, brittle, translucent substance'), but this does not solve the problem, since there are still various senses compatible with the linguistic form ('optical lens,' 'drinking container,' and 'mirror'). Being at a restaurant makes the definition of 'drinking container' more accessible. In some situations, this interpretation could be felicitous (for instance, if the glass is broken or a fly has fallen inside it). But if this is not the case, then a different interpretation has to be found; here, the sense 'contents of a drinking glass' (a metonymic shift) is activated. If the glass contained wine, then *a second glass* is interpreted as 'another glass of wine.' Reaching this interpretation is not a matter of decoding, but of inferential enrichment; an operation that requires accessing knowledge of the world and the situation. All these steps are necessary in the development of the logical form into the full-fledged set of assumptions that the speaker intended to communicate explicitly (Carston, 2002, 2009; Carston & Hall, 2012). Inference is also involved in the derivation of implicatures; in our example, the explicit premise *I have to drive* combines with the common assumption *Don't drink and drive*, to obtain the implicit conclusion of *I cannot accept a second glass of wine*.

The way in which the explicit/implicit distinction is drawn is thus one of the hallmarks of RT. Linguists from other traditions (cf. Bach, 1994, 2010; Levinson, 2000) have contested it, and Spanish relevance-theorists have presented new arguments to provide additional support to the distinction by showing that the functional independence criterion makes the right predictions (see Vicente, 1998, 2002, 2005). In Example (1), the implicit premise *Don't drink and drive* cannot be logically derived from the explicit utterance *I have to drive*.

The existence of so-called "unarticulated constituents" (i.e., those that seem to be communicated by the speakers, but are not linguistically expressed in their utterance) is a central testing ground for pragmatic theories. There are various possibilities, from the idea that these constituents are indeed represented in the syntax by means of silent categories and projections, to the idea that they are better explained in terms of pre-semantic implicatures (as advocated in some neo-Gricean approaches). Vicente and Groefsema (2013) have argued for the classical relevance-theoretic approach, in which inferential processes, together with the principles of relevance, are sufficient to explain how some content can be inferentially added in the course of the development of the explicit content, while maintaining the independence between explicit and implicit assumptions. Scalar implicatures are also a case in point to determine how grammar and pragmatics interact in the derivation of the intended meaning (Vicente, 2015). The interpretive routes leading to the understanding of implicit meaning are also analyzed in Escandell-Vidal (2016a), where RT is compared to other neo-Gricean approaches.

2.2.2   The conceptual/procedural distinction

One of the distinctions postulated in the framework of RT that has been most successful in the area of Spanish studies is that between conceptual and procedural meaning. Blakemore (1987) and Wilson and Sperber (1993) showed that not all linguistic items make the same kind of contribution to utterance interpretation:

> Linguistic decoding provides input to the inferential phase of comprehension; inferential comprehension involves the construction and manipulation of conceptual representations. An utterance can thus be expected to encode two basic types of information: representational and computational, or conceptual and procedural—that is, information about the representations to be manipulated, and information about how to manipulate them.
>
> *(Wilson & Sperber, 1993, p. 2)*

Conceptual items include major word classes (nouns, verbs, adjectives, some adverbs) and build the representational basis of the communicated content. Linguistic items with procedural meaning, such as determiners, tense/ mood/ aspect morphemes, discourse connectives and intonation, among others, do not contribute conceptual representations; rather, they specify computational operations to be performed during the interpretation process. These instructions operate on conceptual representations (both encoded and contextual) and place constraints on the inferential phase of interpretation by guiding the hearer toward the most appropriate contextual assumptions needed to recover the speaker's meaning.

2.2.2.1   Procedural meaning: Discourse connectives, nominal reference and verbal inflection

The notion of procedural meaning first developed in the area of discourse connectives. Blakemore (1987, 1992) showed that linguistic items such as 'after all' and 'moreover' introduce premises,

while 'therefore' introduces conclusions; 'but' and 'however' instruct the hearer to abandon some previous assumptions, and 'so' introduces an implication. The contribution of discourse connectives, then, is not to provide new conceptual material, but to guide the hearers toward the intended interpretation by indicating how the conceptual representations have to be understood and combined together. The notion soon extended to include focus-sensitive particles, such as 'also,' 'too,' and 'either' (Blakemore, 1987, 2002). Cleft constructions and prosodic marking were also good candidates to be accounted for in procedural terms. Similarly, mood indicators can be conceived of as instructions to develop the interpretation by adding further assumptions about the speaker's propositional attitude and illocutionary intention (Wilson & Sperber, 1988a; see Ahern, 2010, for an overview).

The notion of procedural meaning also offered a more satisfactory explanation of referential expressions (in both the nominal and the verbal area) than an approach in conceptual terms. Following Kaplan (1989), Wilson and Sperber (1993) showed that the contribution of 'I' as encoding a concept like 'the speaker' would yield wrong results, while the right predictions are obtained if conceived as encoding the instructions to identify its referent by first identifying the speaker. A similar approach has been suggested to account for the relationship between temporal morphemes in the verbal area and time reference (Wilson & Sperber, 1998b; see Leonetti, 2004, for a view of the parallelism between nominal and temporal reference).

The conceptual/procedural distinction had an enormous impact on Hispanic pragmatics, starting from its application to the analysis of discourse connectives (Montolío Durán, 1997). Connectives indicating contrast have been one of the favorite topics in the research on Spanish. Olmos and Ahern (2009) and Olmos, Innocenti, and Saeed (2011) have argued that discourse connectives not only determine the derivation of implicatures, but also can guide the processes yielding the construction of higher-level explicatures.

The examination of linguistic phenomena has also favored the improvement of the theoretical notions used. A case in point is the proposal by Curcó (2004) in her analysis of *siempre* 'always,' not as a temporal adverb, but as a discourse marker in Mexican Spanish (with an interpretation similar to 'after all').

(2) *Siempre no   me   voy*.
     Always   not I.OBL go.PRS.1SG
     'I am not leaving after all'

The example in (2) is felicitous in a context where both possibilities (leaving or not leaving) are active in the situation, so *siempre* indicates that this tension is finally resolved. To account for this use, Curcó argues that the notion of procedural meaning must be extended, so it can indicate the kind of relationship between two propositions but also place specific constraints on context selection.

The contribution of aspectual adverbs can be explained along similar lines. The notion of procedural meaning can produce very sophisticated explanations. Recently, Erdely and Curcó (2016) and Curcó and Erdely (2018) have suggested an account of the adverbs *todavía* 'still' and *ya* 'already,' invoking the role of abstract aspectual features like 'dynamicity' and 'durativity.' For example, *ya* can be described as encoding two different instructions at the same time: on the one hand, the instructions to incorporate the assumption that a transition has taken place from a dynamic state of affairs; on the other, the instructions to incorporate an assumption about the previous continuity of that state of affairs.

The notion of procedural meaning and the testability of the predictions made by RT have recently inspired a wealth of experimental studies. Focal particles, such as *también* 'also' and *incluso*

'even' have been analyzed, concentrating on their procedural meaning and the predictions about processing effort in online interpretation by using eye-tracking measures. The results suggest that fixations indicate a higher processing effort, while regressions indicate that the stimulus was not optimally processed, so it needs more extended consideration; a result fully compatible with the predictions of RT (Loureda, Cruz, & Grupo Diskurspartikeln und Kognition, 2013; Loureda et al., 2015).

The procedural approach to nominal reference has been particularly fruitful in two aspects. One is the characterization of 'definiteness,' building on the classical notion of 'uniqueness' (or unique identifiability) to take it as an encoded instruction, as in Leonetti (1996). The procedural view of the definiteness feature in determiners and pronouns leads us to establish a neat distinction between semantic and pragmatic aspects of the interpretation of definite noun phrases, and also to account for cases in which the existential and uniqueness requirements encoded in the definite article seem not to be satisfied by the context, so an accommodation process is triggered to satisfy them (this is essentially the problem of 'weak definites,' discussed in Leonetti, 2019). The second aspect in which a procedural approach has had an impact on Hispanic linguistics is the connection between theories of definiteness and accounts of reference and anaphora based on the notions of 'accessibility' and 'givenness': according to these views, determiners and pronouns provide instructions to the hearer concerning the accessibility and the cognitive status of the intended referent (Figueras, 2002; Leonetti, 1996).

Temporal reference can be also explained along similar lines. In the relevance-theoretic perspective, verbal tenses provide instructions to access the representation of the eventuality in its temporal dimension by relating it to the time of speech and/or to a different reference time, in a complex geometry of temporal points and intervals. The procedural indications interact with *Aktionsart* and sentential constituents in various ways and also recruit contextual assumptions to create a relevant interpretation (see Escandell-Vidal, 2014, for the future; Amenós-Pons, 2015, for the past). This has also made possible a more detailed comparison among verbal tenses in different languages by examining whether they encode different processing instructions or if there are conventions of use that favor pragmatic specializations and preferences (Amenós-Pons, 2011). The procedural view has eventually provided the foundation for new approaches in the area of second language teaching and learning by considering to what extent procedural features differ across languages and examining what the best way to deal with these differences in SLA may be. Both theoretical and experimental approaches have been developed in relation with the acquisition of verbal tenses (Ahern, Amenós-Pons, & Guijarro-Fuentes, 2015; Amenós-Pons, Ahern, & Guijarro-Fuentes, 2017, 2019).

Subjunctive mood, a central topic in the Spanish grammar, has also benefited from an account in procedural terms. Ahern and Leonetti (2004) and Ahern (2006, 2008) have shown that mood is better understood as a procedural element, so the classical problem of the indicative/subjunctive alternation can be explained as a result of satisfying the procedural instructions encoded by each mood. More specifically, the cases in which the subjunctive cannot be licensed by a governing superordinate predicate trigger a process of accommodation to supply the assumptions needed to satisfy the encoded procedure. Consider the contrast in (3):

(3) a. Dice   que pones   mucha sal.
         Say.PRS.3SG   that put.PRS.3SG   much salt
         'S/he says you put in lots of salt.'
     b. Dice   que pongas   mucha sal.
         Say.PRS.3SG   that put.PRS.SBJV.3SG much salt
         'S/he tells you to put in lots of salt.'

The verb *decir* ('say') is assumed to select indicative mood, as in (3a). When it occurs with the subjunctive, as in (3b), the semantic instructions expressed by the subjunctive (basically, take the proposition as non-asserted) encourage the addressee to infer that *decir* cannot introduce an assertion, but rather a description of a state of affairs regarded as potential and desirable, and therefore as introducing an order or a suggestion.

Other modalities have also been explored along similar lines (Rosales Sequeiros, 2002).

Thus, the notion of procedural meaning has been revealed as a useful tool to account for a great number of phenomena that seemingly did not fit well with the way in which the division of labor between semantics and pragmatics was previously cast (for a general overview, see Escandell-Vidal & Leonetti, 2000, 2004; Escandell-Vidal, Leonetti, & Ahern, 2011; Leonetti & Escandell-Vidal, 2012; Llopis Cardona, 2016; Pons Bordería, 2008; Portolés, 1993).

In recent years, some theoretical refinements have been suggested. A considerable amount of work has been devoted to make more explicit the status, role, and internal structure of processing instructions (Curcó, 2011; Saussure, 2011; Unger, 2011; Wilson, 2011). In Escandell-Vidal and Leonetti (2011) and Escandell-Vidal (2017), a proposal was advanced to characterize procedural meaning as rigid, in the sense that it has to be obligatorily satisfied in the interpretive process and cannot be adjusted or modified (for an overview of recent developments, see Escandell-Vidal et al., 2011; Sasamoto & Wilson, eds., 2016).

2.2.2.2 Conceptual content, lexical pragmatics, and "figurative language"

Linguistic items with lexical content contribute conceptual representations to utterance interpretation. One might think that pragmatic processes, which operate on the inferential phase of the interpretation process, have nothing to do with conceptual representations. However, this is not the picture that emerges from the perspective of RT. Linguistically encoded concepts normally undergo some kind of inferential adjustment; if I say *I am too tired*, the exact source or degree of tiredness that I want to communicate (tired from what? too tired for what?) is highly dependent on various contextual and discursive factors. As Carston (2002) puts it,

> the lexically encoded concept in the logical form of the utterance is replaced by an *ad hoc* concept, pragmatically derived from the lexical one, and that this new non-lexicalized concept is a constituent of the proposition expressed by the speaker of the utterance. . . . [This is] a pragmatic process whose result is not necessary in order to secure full propositionality, but seems to be required if we are interested in finding that proposition which it is rational to assume the speaker intended to express.
>
> *(p. 28)*

Thus, hearers can also readjust conceptual content by either strengthening or loosening it (or even by a combination of the two). The modulation of lexical content is a process of mutual adaptation, whereby both encoded meaning and contextual assumptions are mutually adjusted according to expectations of relevance (Carston, 2002; Wilson, 2003; Wilson & Carston, 2006, 2007; see Escandell-Vidal, 2012; Rosales Sequeiros, 2012, 2018; Vicente, 2005).

'Loose' uses can be the source of metaphors (Sperber & Wilson, 1985/1986). If people say *Robert is a computer* (example from Wilson, 2008), presumably they intend to communicate a concept broader than the encoded lexical meaning: Robert is not a machine, but has some (not fully specified) set of properties we tend to associate with computers, such as processing information very quickly and lacking human feelings. The exact import of the *ad hoc* concept on every particular occasion depends on general considerations of relevance.

The fact that the concept expressed can be subject to inferential modulation led to the idea that lexical items do not properly encode concepts, but rather instructions to build them (on the basis of other contextual assumptions; e.g., Espinal, 1996; Wilson, 2003, 2011, 2016). This, in turn, dissolves the conceptual/procedural distinction in some sense, since the contribution of all linguistic expressions could be accounted for in procedural terms. This is still a controversial issue on which the theory will need to advance in the coming years (see Carston, 2016).

Metaphor, metonymy, figurative language, and idioms have been favorite topics for Hispanic linguistics of a relevance-theoretic orientation (Romero & Soria, 2005, 2012, 2013, 2014; Rosales Sequeiros, 2011a; Rubio Fernández, 2007, 2012; Vega Moreno, 2007; Vicente, 1992, 1996). While in traditional accounts figurative language had been considered as purely ornamental, RT has favored a different approach, in which so-called 'figures of speech' are not a decorative resource, but have a cognitive import; in fact, it is difficult to paraphrase a metaphor without losing its communicative effect. This indicates that both the cognitive processes needed to build the interpretation and the results of such processes are part of what the speaker wanted to convey. In this sense, RT claims that there is no significant intrinsic difference in the processing of "literal uses," hyperbole, and metaphor.

The predictions of RT have been recently tested with contributions of Spanish researchers. Taking support from the results of experimental work (self-paced reading, paraphrase elicitation), Rubio-Fernández, Wearing, and Carston (2015) and Rubio-Fernández, Cummins, and Tian (2016) have suggested that, despite the fact that they can be considered as two different varieties of 'loose use,' hyperbole and metaphor have some significant differences, in that hyperbole entails a shift along a single, unidimensional magnitude, whereas metaphor involves changes along several different dimensions.

2.3. Descriptive use vs. attributive use

The distinction between descriptive and interpretive ('attributive' or 'echoic') use is central to RT. The main idea underlying this distinction is the following. Utterances can achieve relevance as descriptions of states-of-affairs in the world; in this case, the proposition expressed by the utterance is presented (and understood) by virtue of its resemblance to the situation it is meant to represent. Therefore, the speakers can be held responsible for the truth of their assertion. But an utterance can also be used to represent the thoughts and utterances of another individual; in this case, the speakers are not asserting the content of their utterance, but merely attributing it to someone else (Sperber & Wilson, 1986, pp. 224–231).

The notion of attributive use has provided a new way to look at various phenomena. In fact, it lies at the very basis of one of the relevance-theoretic proposals that has attracted more attention in Hispanic linguistics: accounting for irony. Whereas in most traditional approaches, including Grice's, irony communicates the opposite of what is said, in RT irony is a case of echoic use: the speakers do not assert the propositional content of their utterance and intend to describe a state of affairs. Rather, they echo a previous utterance or a thought they attribute to someone else, with the purpose of making manifest a dissociative attitude toward it (for a general overview and more arguments, see Sperber & Wilson, 1981; Wilson & Sperber, 1992; Curcó, 2000; Rosales Sequeiros, 2011b; Ruiz Moneva, 2001; Yus, 2000. For a critical assessment of the relevance-theoretic account of irony, see Garmendia, 2010, 2015, 2018; Ruiz Gurillo, 2006, 2008; Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez & Lozano-Palacio, 2019). The cognitive stance taken by RT makes it possible to deal with irony, also in terms of cognitive processing. Curcó (2000) examines the status of the cognitive abilities involved in understanding ironic utterances and shows that these require higher-order metarepresentational abilities. Yus (2000) suggests that the identification of the

dissociative attitude involved in the interpretation of irony is largely favored by the number and quality of the incompatibilities detected between the expressed content and the context. Experimental studies have been also carried out to examine the multimodal nature of ironic stimuli, in which gestures, tone of voice, and word order can guide the hearer toward the intended (ironic) interpretation (see Escandell-Vidal & Leonetti, 2014, in press; González-Fuente, Escandell-Vidal, & Prieto, 2015). And, as Yus (2016b) has argued, affective, non-propositional attitudes also seem to play a role in the interpretation of ironic utterances.

The cognitive ability to attribute a thought to another individual is not only useful to explain irony. There are many occasions in which utterances are used to attribute representations to others; e.g., reports, summaries, and translations being additional cases in point. When the speaker represents the point of view of a different speaker, this can also give rise to effects of perspectivization or subjectivization (Escandell-Vidal, 2002, 2019).

This ability also lies at the very heart of a crucial aspect of human communication: the defense against deception and misinformation. As Sperber et al. (2010) have shown, humans are endowed with a set of cognitive mechanisms for epistemic vigilance to this end. Padilla Cruz (2012, 2014) has extensively discussed this issue, considering the abilities required to determine the quality of the information and the reliability of its source. The expectations of relevance are thus fine-tuned to the abilities and preferences of the interlocutor and shifted accordingly from the most naïve to the most sophisticated setting.

2.3.1 RT and the interactional perspective

The issues considered so far represent central topics in the architecture of RT, as part of its basic set of theoretical notions. All of them are oriented to different aspects of the informational content transmitted and all have represented a center of interest in Hispanic linguistics. But the theory is not limited to dealing with the exchange of information. Other phenomena related to more interactional or social aspects of communication have also benefited from the insights deriving from the theory. In this section, three of them are briefly considered: humor, politeness, and new forms of communication.

Humor has been indeed a favorite topic in modern pragmatics and Spanish pragmatics is no exception. This interest is related to the fact that humor involves many different aspects of communication, with implications for cognitive processes and abilities, identity, social interaction, translation, and literary studies, among others (see Chapter 23 on humor, this volume).

The first developments of a relevance-theoretic account of verbal humor came from the work of Curcó (1995, 1996, 1997, 1998). Her contributions represented a shift from the then-dominant view of humor as a property of texts—a view in which a theory of humor was a theory of the formal and structural properties of humorous texts—to an approach rooted in human cognition and the mind, where the main goal is to explain and understand the mental processes by which hearers derive humorous interpretations. The perception and manipulation of the incongruous and the search for relevance, Curcó argues, are the leading forces in those processes.

Yus has also devoted a considerable amount of work to account for humor and humorous effects (Yus, 2003b, 2008, 2016a, 2017c, 2018b). He examines different genres of humorous discourse, including new multimodal types, such as stand-up comedies, cartoons, advertisements, and also the implications of humor for translations. Humor is seen as exploiting the same processes as other instances of (non-humorous) communication, the difference being that for humorous speakers, humor is an intended effect, so they must be aware of how the inferential processes work in order to manipulate them in an adequate direction.

Humor has been considered as well for its relationship to the construction of identity and the creation of social bonds. Padilla Cruz (2015, 2019, in press) has analyzed the way in which humor influences social perception, such as group affiliation or customer satisfaction in service encounters, showing that non-propositional effects are also a relevant aspect in communication.

The social side of human communication has received remarkable attention from a relevance-theoretic perspective. Far from being a theory focused on information and propositional effects only, RT has shown that its basic assumptions can provide useful insights to understand how social aspects enter the picture (see Sperber's, 2001 approach to culture in terms of epidemiology of representations). The general bases were set in Escandell-Vidal (1996, 1998, 2004, 2016b), where it is argued that cultural norms determine the accessibility of contextual assumptions, creating expectations about the course of the interaction, making some interpretations more salient and attributing specific intentions to some forms of linguistic behavior. Padilla Cruz (2005, 2007) has developed an account of phatic communication in which he goes beyond the cultural routines and adjacency pairs to focus on how the phatic effect is recognized and achieved in order to create solidarity bonds between interlocutors.

One of the areas in which RT has most fruitfully contributed to enlarging the existing approaches is that of media discourse and internet-mediated communication (see Chapter 31 on pragmatics and digital discourse, this volume). These are two varieties of communication with very specific properties, which distinguish them from ordinary face-to-face communication. Mass-media targets larger audiences with no direct possibility to reply and combine visual and auditory channels (see Yus, 2017a, for an overview). The use of language in advertising and the way in which ads are interpreted have been addressed by several Spanish scholars. Díaz Pérez (2000) compared advertising strategies in Spanish and British media. Central notions of RT have been successfully applied to the analysis of advertising strategies, including metaphor, garden-path effects, echo, and metarepresentation (Díez Arroyo, 2018; Figueras, 2018; Garcés Conejos, 2003; Pinar Sanz, 2013; Ruiz Gurillo, 2000).

Digital communication modifies some of the emission and reception parameters to allow distant communication and also allows for some multimodal integration. Yus (2011) considers how principles of communication and intention recognition apply to new internet textual types and genres, such as web pages, e-mail messaging, and social networks. Though the medium itself imposes specific constraints on the communication process, the way in which the interpretation proceeds follows general cognitive principles, as stated by relevance-theorists. Internet communication and interactions in the virtual world affect not only the way in which content is presented, but also the strategies that users resort to in shaping and constructing their self-presentation and their online identity (Yus, 2014, 2017b, 2018a): here, non-propositional effects play a crucial role in ostensive internet-mediated communication.

3   Methodological considerations

Following the tradition of modern philosophy of language and, in particular, Gricean pragmatics, most research in RT has adopted the predominant methodological approach in theoretical linguistics: a thorough observation of communicative phenomena, combining data obtained from introspection, attested discourse situations and evidence from psycholinguistic research, which leads to establishing generalizations and principles grounded on human cognition.

In the last 25 years, joint experimental work by linguists and psychologists has developed as a consequence of the need to test the predictions made by the theory. This has opened new paths for research that give a strong empirical flavor to advances in RT. Work by Spanish-speaking

linguists is representative of both methodological lines; i.e., the more theoretically oriented and the more experimental.

4 Future directions and conclusion

This overview has tried to show that RT not only has had a considerable impact on Hispanic linguistics in the last three decades by stimulating both theoretical debate and descriptive/experimental research, but also by regularly motivating significant contributions by researchers from Spanish-speaking countries. Perhaps the most popular notion is the *conceptual/procedural* distinction, but the overall view of human communication advocated by RT has been influential in all domains of pragmatics. Academic syllabi on pragmatics always contain a section on RT, and there are resources for university courses with a relevance-theoretic orientation (Escandell-Vidal, 1993, 2014; Núñez & Teso, 1996; Teso, 2002, 2007). RT combines nicely with the tradition of formal linguistics and has gained ground with respect to other theoretical frameworks with a strong implementation in pragmatics. All in all, although it must share the field with other scientific paradigms, RT today has a salient, well-established place in Hispanic linguistics.

Further reading

Escandell-Vidal, V. (2014). *La comunicación. Lengua, cognición y sociedad*. Madrid: Akal.

An introduction to pragmatics inspired by relevance-theoretic proposals. It reviews the main topics in pragmatics and considers the relationship between social and cognitive aspects of human communication.

Escandell-Vidal, V., Ahern, A., & Amenós-Pons, J. (Eds.). (2020). *Panorama de pragmática*. Madrid: Akal.

The most recent handbook of pragmatics to date written in Spanish. It covers the whole range of key topics in pragmatics from a Spanish perspective. Many of the chapters offer a relevance-theoretic approach, though other theoretical models are also featured.

Escandell-Vidal, V., Leonetti, M., & Ahern, A. (Eds.). (2011). *Procedural meaning: Problems and perspectives*. Bingley, UK: Emerald/Brill.

A collection of papers on one of the most attractive and fruitful notions in the RT framework: the notion of procedural meaning. It contains various contributions by researchers from the Spanish-speaking world and offers some recent developments of the theory.

Sperber, D., & Wilson, D. (1986/1995). *Relevance: Communication and cognition*. Oxford: Blackwell. (The second edition includes a postface) (Spanish version: *La relevancia*. Madrid: Visor, 1994)

The original and most comprehensive presentation of the theory. All the ideas are introduced in a very detailed way, focusing on the inadequacies of other alternative models (the code model of communication, Grice's pragmatics). This is an advanced text and requires some previous knowledge of the basic notions in pragmatics and philosophy of language.

Wilson, D., & Sperber, D. (2004). Relevance theory. In L. R. Horn & G. L. Ward (Eds.), *The handbook of pragmatics* (pp. 607–632). Malden, MA: Blackwell.

A brief introduction to the theory written by its proponents. It covers all main topics and includes various refinements with respect to the original presentation in their 1986/1995 book.

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