

A Contextual Problem of Ad Hoc Concepts in Utterance Interpretation: A Relevance Theoretic Account

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Abstract

Ad hoc concepts comprise a set of linguistic words thought to be apart (*in meaning*) from the propositional content of the utterances where they occur. Their real meaning in a sentence cannot be understood unless they are studied in a theory. Actually, they have been deeply studied in Relevance Theory; therefore, a somewhat detailed account of this theory will be presented first, and then everything about ‘ad hoc concepts’ will be facilitated. It is hypothesized that the contextual information are the only keys that guide a hearer to give the real interpretation of a given ad hoc concept even if he/she arrives at a pragmatic level of comprehension. The main aim of this study is to show the treatment of those concepts in Relevance Theory, and to prove that they are difficult to be interpreted without any contextual information about the utterances which contain them.

1. Relevance Theory

In their paper on “Relevance Theory”, Wilson and Sperber (2002: 249) admit that relevance theory deals mainly with the expression and recognition of intention for both verbal and non-verbal speeches. The main aim of relevance theory is to find how

hearers infer speakers' meaning on the basis of the 'evidences provided'. Wilson and Sperber state that "the relevance-theoretic account is based on another of Grice's central claims: that utterances automatically create expectations which guide the hearer towards the speaker's meaning" (ibid.). They admit that an utterance should be inferred according to the context where it occurred.

Wilson and Sperber (2006: 359) argue that relevance theory is based on two principles related to the role of relevance in cognition and communication, they are:

- A. *Cognitive principle of relevance*: "Human cognition tends to be geared to the maximization of relevance" (ibid.).
- B. *Communicative principle of relevance*: "Every act of overt communication conveys a presumption of its own optimal relevance" (ibid.).

They point that the first (cognitive) principle produces different predications about human cognitive process on how to understand an utterance. According to this cognitive principle, one should choose the most relevant interpretation from the different interpretations in his/her mind; many relevant assumptions arise in the mind when hearing an utterance.

According to the communicative principle, Wilson and Sperber admit that speakers need their hearers' intention in order for the communication process to be in the right way. The success of the communication depends on how the hearer takes the utterance to be relevant enough, and then the hearer utters a sentence that must, in turn, be also relevant, and that's what the speaker is waiting for to know that the communication between them is successful. (ibid.: 360).

Wilson and Sperber (2002: 260) talk much about the cognitive effort (the different inferential interpretations) that should be

handled by the hearer when hearing an utterance, they claim that the hearer should follow certain procedures in doing so, they call it “relevance-theoretic comprehension procedures”, which are as follows:

- 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.

Sperber and Wilson (2008:92) claim that as soon as the most relevant interpretation is reached, the hearer should stop at it, and this is what they call “the cognitive effort”. Sperber and Wilson supply the following example:

1. **Peter:** For Billy’s birthday party, it would be nice to have some kind of show.

Mary: Archie is a magician. Let’s ask him.

(ibid.)

The word “magician” is ambiguous for Peter with two meanings: (a) someone with supernatural powers to perform magic, and (b) someone who does magic tricks to amuse an audience. Peter is talking about a children show, therefore the second meaning is most relevant for him, their friend Archie is a magician and it must satisfy Peter’s expectations of relevance, taking into account that “magician” is an ad hoc concept.

2. Relevance Theory and Utterance Interpretation

Liu (2006: 66-69) admits that relevance theory regards utterance interpretation as a dynamic inferential process where cognition plays a great role. Relevance theory has its effect on utterance

interpretation mainly because of the role and nature of context in the interpretation process. The context here does not mean “co-text or context of situation but the set of assumptions the hearer has about the world”. According to him,

these assumptions may be from information about the immediate physical environment or the immediately preceding utterances” or to a much greater extent, from expectations about the future, scientific hypotheses or religious beliefs, anecdotal memories, general cultural assumptions, beliefs about the mental state of the speaker

(ibid.: 66)

He believes that the context (as understood above) has its straightforward effect on the interpretation of an utterance, i.e., the context determines the right choice of the interpretation of that utterance; otherwise, the lack of contextual information will lead to “a complete failure of communication”. The point is that even if a hearer reaches different possible pragmatic interpretations he/she still needs a contextual aid in selecting the right one. (See 3. 4)

3. Ad Hoc Concepts

Ad hoc concepts are considered as the essence of relevance theory, because they cannot be understood without a relevance theoretic account. However, a full account for the subject will be mentioned bellow.

3. 1 The Notion of Ad Hoc Concepts

Assimakopoulos (2008: 197-98) claims that the notion of ad hoc concepts was first introduced by Barsalou (1987) in the field of cognitive science in his paper “On the Instability of Graded

Structure”. He admits that current relevance theorists have taken the term ‘ad hoc concept’ to refer to a communicated concept that can only be accessed in a given context through the process of pragmatic inference. For Assimakopoulos, ‘ad hoc concept’ is different from a concept that can be accessed through the processes of ‘lexical decoding’. He makes clear that ad hoc concepts can only be interpreted outside the lexical meaning which they really express. The meanings of an ad hoc concepts must not be interpreted in relation to the proposition where they occur, but rather, we have to think about the meanings that they convey by using our ability of producing different representations, and this is what Assimakopoulos calls “mental construction”, he writes:

*Following this evidence about the flexibility with which we can entertain temporary mental constructs that arise in particular contexts, relevance-theorists suggested that during utterance interpretation an encoded concept might get pragmatically adjusted forcing us to construct an ad hoc concept in its place. In this case, what will be communicated to the hearer at the lexical level might not be the literal meaning of a word, but a contextually derived **ad hoc concept***

(ibid.: 198)

Okaura (2009: 217) states that the “term ‘ad hoc concept’ is used to refer to concepts that are constructed pragmatically by a hearer in the process of utterance comprehension”. Consider Leezenberg’s (2001: 286) following example:

2. My job is a jail.

According to Leezenberg ‘jail’ is an ad hoc concept; it refers to a prison, but in the context of (2) it serves as a “subordinate concept” that refers to unpleasant jobs. Leezenberg admits that ‘jail’ in (2) involves a “dual reference”, where it can be interpreted lexically and pragmatically (in a metaphorical way), the pragmatic inference should be chosen; that the speaker of (2) has an ‘unpleasant work’.

De Brabanter and Kissine (2009: 79) admit that ‘ad hoc concepts’ are used metaphorically, they imagine a context containing two people, Rita and Lisa, where they talk about Mary’s being intent on fulfilling her own objectives regardless of other people’s feelings and doings. Lisa utters the sentence in (3) and Rita agrees.

3. **Lisa:** Mary is a bulldozer.

(ibid.)

De Brabanter and Kissine point out that Rita believes that human beings cannot be ‘bulldozers’, but she uses her cognitive effort to understand Lisa’s utterance, therefore she agrees with her. Other good examples are the following:

4. Ronaldino is a beast. (*implicates that his talent for playing football is extraordinary*).

5. **A:** How was work today?

B: I’m dead! (*Implicates that B is exhausted*)

(Bataller, 2004: 61)

Carston (2010: 7-8) points to the fact that ad hoc concepts are most used ‘metaphorically’ in literary texts, Carston quotes the following literary example from Shakespeare:

6. Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,

Signifying nothing.

(Cited in Carston, 2010: 8)

For Carston, most of the words in (6) are used metaphorically; ad hoc concepts are mentioned one after another: ‘walking shadow’, ‘poor-player’, ‘struts’, ‘frets’, ‘hour’, ‘stage’, etc. However, Carston says that ordinary language is also full of ad hoc concepts.

3.2 Beyond the Propositional Content

Assimakopoulos (2005: 6-7) admits that an utterance is constituted of propositions. Those propositions are logical forms that represent structured sets of concepts; they usually reflect the real lexical (conceptual) meaning in that utterance. But he argues that this is against the background of relevance theory, because he believes that utterance interpretation yields propositions that are not part of the truth value of the utterance, i.e., new concepts are constructed and are considered ad hoc in the sense that they convey wider information. Ad hoc concepts, for him, constitute implicated propositions where they are the communicated propositional contents.

Assimakopoulos states that this view of the proposition challenges the traditional view which claims that the basic proposition is communicated by an utterance with its semantic representation. He stresses that “the relevance-theoretic account of meaning construction makes this basic semantic representation of a given utterance a mere template upon which pragmatic enrichment takes place” (ibid.). By “pragmatic enrichment”, Assimakopoulos means ‘pragmatic inference’, i.e., the hearer enriches the semantic content of each communicated concept pragmatically to achieve relevance.

Romero and Soria (2007:7) refer to those pragmatic propositions as “missing constituents”, because looking at the semantic meaning of propositions does not support a complete comprehension, they write:

In RT, enrichment and its capability of adding missing constituents is one of the pragmatic tasks needed to go from the expression to the complete thought expressed by its utterance. In RT, missing conceptual constituents have been normally treated as missing constituents at the level of thought since the result of simply decoding the uttered expression would not result in a complete intended proposition

(ibid.)

Consider the following example:

7. John is a machine.

Semantically, the word 'machine' reflects the meaning of an instrument. It is not suitable, therefore, for John to be an instrument. Here a pragmatic proposition should be inferred, may be that John is strong enough to be like a machine. This inferred proposition does not meet the truth-value of the utterance.

3.3 Lexical Narrowing and Broadening

Wilson (2003: 284) admits that 'narrowing' and 'broadening' have widely dealt with in relevance theory. By narrowing, he maintains that hearers satisfy their expectations by searching for true implications "or other positive cognitive effects". A hearer, according to him, which follows the relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure, is entitled to narrow the thoughts in his mind to the point that enough implications appear to satisfy the general expectations of relevance raised by the utterance, Wilson Continues:

If several possible narrowings 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

(ibid.)

Wilson believes that ad hoc concepts provide “access to a wide array of encyclopedic assumptions” (ibid.). Narrowing the implications on how to understand the ad hoc concept would reduce the cognitive effect and the hearer would arrive at the intended interpretation.

On the other hand, Wilson claims that “broadening” is used in relevance theory to refer to ad hoc concepts which are used to convey more general senses “with consequent widening of the linguistically-specified denotation” (ibid.: 274). Broadening, according to him, refers to the concept ‘extension’. The idea is that concepts which seem to be ambiguous should be broadened beyond the lexical meaning they convey, and then the extended expectations (interpretations) should be narrowed until the most suitable interpretation appears to be relevant to the speaker’s utterance, Wilson writes:

For many years, relevance theorists have been pursuing the idea that lexical comprehension involves ad hoc broadenings or narrowings of encoded concepts based on the use of encyclopedic information constrained by expectations of relevance

(ibid.: 282)

“Narrowing” and “broadening” ad hoc concepts, according to Assimakopoulos (2005: 10-11), refer to what he calls “propositional content adjustment”. He claims that the adjustment of the propositional content follows two processes: one of narrowing and one of broadening. For him, the hearer begins his interpretation of the concept by selecting different (implicit) propositions that are relevant to the concept communicated. This selection is the result of narrowing the contextual assumptions in the search for relevance. Then those propositions should be tested for cognitive effects. At the same time, the inferred propositions are broadened to accommodate more propositions.

Carston (2002: 344) admits that broadening an ad hoc concept includes entities that cannot be found in the lexical content of the uttered concept, it becomes a pragmatically inferred concept that is taken to be a “constituent of the proposition the speaker intended to communicate on the particular occasion of use”. Carston provides the following example:

8. Ken’s a (real) bachelor. (*where Ken is legally married*)
(ibid.)

According to Carston, Ken in (8) is a married man, but he behaves as a bachelor. If we narrowed the lexical interpretation and extended (broadened) the pragmatically inferred ad hoc concept “bachelor”, it would become more “inclusive” than that of the lexical concept of “bachelor” (ibid.).

Dogan (2010: 21-2) points out that the same lexical word can be extended to form an ad hoc concept in the broadening process, while different words come in mind in the narrowing process, consider the following examples:

9. He ordered fish in the restaurant (whale* / trout) *narrowing*.

10. He has a square face (square* / squarish) *broadening*.
(ibid.: 21)

For Dogan, ‘fish’ in (9) yields words that are somehow different from its lexical meaning, and ‘trout’ is narrowed and chosen as the best one because ‘whales’ cannot be served in restaurants. While, ‘square’ in (10) is just extended (broadened) from its lexical meaning to yield ‘squarish’ which best suits the interpretation of the utterance.

3.4 The Contextual Problem of Ad Hoc Concepts

Now it becomes clear that ad hoc concepts reveal a pragmatic meaning, but that meaning differs between one another. Leezenberg (2001: 287) stresses that ad hoc concept construction (i.e., the different pragmatic interpretations of the same word(s) that are considered ad hoc) varies according to the contexts where they occur. Their interpretation is highly affected by the surrounding context. Leezenberg gives the following example:

11. Some lawyers are sharks.
(ibid.)

According to Leezenberg ‘sharks’ can give different ad hoc concepts, for example, depending on whether the utterance in (11) is preceded by (12) or (13):

12. I wonder why Joan took that impossible case to defend.
13. Simon’s defenders have helped him win his lawsuit, but left him bankrupt.
(ibid.)

Leezenberg points that the context of (12) has its effect to interpret the ad hoc concept 'sharks' in (11) as "persons who grab-hold anything they can", but according to the context of (13), 'sharks' will rather refer to "persons that ravage their victims" (ibid.).

This is what Romero and Soria (2007:6) call "optimal relevance", i.e., the most relevant interpretation for an ad hoc concept to its context. They state that "items and phrases need in their interpretation the elaboration of ad hoc concepts". And here, Carston (2000:37) admits that as soon as different pragmatic inferences are 'encoded' for a given ad hoc concept, the context restricts the choice of the right one. Take the following utterances as an example:

14. Mary has wings today.

15. John is a disaster.

16. She is an ocean.

Without their contexts, the above utterances are vague in terms of the ad hoc concepts mentioned within them. One may try to be relevant enough when interpreting those utterances, but it really seems difficult. Without their contexts we may interpret the utterance in (14) that Mary is very busy that day, or is moving everywhere. In (15) we may arrive at a possible meaning that John is clever enough to solve problems, or is being intelligent. In (16) we may conclude that she has a deep knowledge in different fields. However, those are only conclusions which are based on self-knowledge. Giving them their contexts, the interpretation of the above utterances will be restricted. For example, (14), (15), and (16) are uttered after considering the information between brackets in the following examples:

17. (Talking about Mary who has just graduated).

Mary has wings today.

18. (Talking about John who makes trouble everywhere).

John is a disaster.

19. (Talking about a girl who has a limitless self).

She is an ocean.

According to the context of (17) we understand that Mary is very happy that day. In (18) John is being a troublesome person and is hated in his society. In (19) that girl may listen, for example, to thousands of people's problems without being annoyed.

Gile (2009: 111) also talks about the problems that face hearers in the process of ad hoc concepts interpretation. He admits, as have been previously mentioned, that ad hoc concepts require extra contextual effects in their interpretation. He calls this extra information as "knowledge base", and that knowledge is essential in both comprehending and reformulating the meaning to be interpreted in the right way.

Carston (2010: 5) points that ad hoc concepts must be interpreted beyond their linguistic meanings because the linguistic meaning of those words is "pragmatically adjusted or modulated during comprehension". However, Carston also admits that the linguistic meaning of the words that are considered to be ad hoc can be abandoned just if the context of an utterance exists. For him, the context could be any information (even if it is not uttered) that provide a successful interpretation for the ad hoc concept uttered. Consider the following example talking about current issues in the Arab homeland:

20. Freedom is today's problem.

Anyone who watches TV, hears news, reads newspapers, browses through the net nowadays would select the right interpretation for the ad hoc concept ‘today’s problem’ in (20), that freedom is the ultimate concern of the Arab nation nowadays, and that they are fighting in one way or another to get freedom.

4. Conclusions

In the light of the previous discussion, the study arrives at the following conclusions:

1. Based on the Relevance Theory principles, it is found that ad hoc concepts require extra cognitive efforts to reach an optimal relevance.
2. It is noted that those concepts have nothing to share with the propositional content of the sentences that contain them. Their presence in a sentence is really problematic for the hearers; this maybe the reason why they are considered ad hoc concepts.
3. It is impossible for a hearer to interpret an ad hoc concept (in the right way) without resorting to a contextual aid. The context here means the assumptions that are available and acceptable in helping a hearer to reach an accurate interpretation for the word(s) considered to be ad hoc. The context plays a major role regarding those concepts, because even if a hearer arrives at different pragmatic inferences he/she still needs to select the right inference that matches the speaker’s intended meaning; hence, relevance is achieved.

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