Chapter 26

Users’ Relevance on the Web

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter the author analyzes, from a cognitive pragmatics point of view and, more specifically, from a relevance-theoretic approach, the way Internet users assess the qualities of web pages in their search for optimally relevant interpretive outcomes. The relevance of a web page is measured as a balance between the interest that information provides (the so-called “positive cognitive effects” in relevance theory terminology) and the mental effort involved in their extraction. On paper, optimal relevance is achieved when the interest is high and the effort involved is low. However, as the relevance grid in this chapter shows, there are many possible combinations when measuring the relevance of content on web pages. The author also addresses how the quality and design of web pages may influence the way balances of interest (cognitive effects) and mental effort are assessed by users when processing the information contained on the web page. The analysis yields interesting implications on how web pages should be designed and on web usability in general.

INTRODUCTION

According to Sperber and Wilson’s (1986; 1995) Relevance Theory, human beings have developed a cognitive ability to maximize the benefits deriving from the processing of inputs when they engage in interactions with the surrounding world, either through conversations with other people or through the processing of documents such as the vast amount of web pages contained on the Internet. This claim is mainly applied to ostensive communication, in which the identification of underlying intentions and attitudes and the mutual awareness of this identification play a major role in the eventual success or failure of interactions.
with other people, but this cognitive ability also applies to cognitive processing in general and to people’s overall processing of inputs intended to improve their picture of the world (including the information that simply accesses us from the surrounding world without a prior intentionality and also including our own thoughts, some of which are more likely to be entertained than others in a particular situation). Indeed,

as a result of constant selection pressure towards increasing efficiency, the human cognitive system has developed in such a way that our perceptual mechanisms tend automatically to pick out potentially relevant stimuli, our memory retrieval mechanisms tend automatically to activate potentially relevant assumptions, and our inferential mechanisms tend spontaneously to process them in the most productive way. (Wilson & Sperber, 2002a, p. 254)

This chapter aims at applying this claim to how web pages created by Internet users are interpreted by other users (that is, in user-to-user communication through the web page). In this sense, it should be noted that relevance theory has been applied mainly to the output of search engines and information retrieval systems (e.g. White, 2007a, b). In this case, what is analyzed is the users’ assessment of relevance when a computer system displays a number of results from a typed query. This is system-user interaction and not user-user interaction, and hence not a type of communication that cognitive pragmatics would cover. The analysis provided here goes beyond this initial application of relevance theory by focusing on the quality of users’ interpretations of web content that other users upload on the Internet with an underlying intention (for example the intention to share this information with other users) and often (but not necessarily) with the prediction of a specific interpretation of this web content.

**BACKGROUND**

Relevance is an essential aspect of human cognition and sought in interactions with people and the surrounding world. This is mainly the reason why there are two principles of relevance. Initially, Sperber & Wilson proposed one principle of relevance to account for the fact that an act of ostension carries a guarantee of its eventual relevance, but in the Postface to the second edition of their book *Relevance* (1995, pp. 260ff.), they propose that we can distinguish a broad a cognitive principle of relevance: “human cognition tends to be geared to the maximization of relevance”, as well as a narrower communicative principle of relevance: “every act of ostensive communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance”, 1986, p. 158), the latter being the main focus of analysis within pragmatics but one which, in reality, abides by the same overall rules that we follow when interacting with the surrounding world. An ostensive stimulus (in which both sender and hearer are aware of the sender’s underlying intentionality to communicate some information) creates a presumption of relevance, which addressees expect to be optimal (though not always so, unfortunately). The notion of optimal relevance indicates that the balance between possible interest in exchange for the demanded effort is highly satisfactory. But the cognitive principle is important too, since it stresses the fact that we are biologically geared towards processing the most relevant inputs available, including verbal utterances, nonverbal communication and web pages. Besides, it is this evolved disposition that allows for the prediction of the mental states of others, which is crucial in human communication (see Yus, 2006, section 2.3).

The aforementioned communicative principle of relevance predicts a basic procedure for users when they make hypotheses about contextual extensions required for the interpretation of the content of a web page and also about and the hypothetical reward: to consider interpretive
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