Relevance Theory
• Originally credited to Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, with precursors in the late 60s and 70s.

• Diane Blakemore: *Semantic Constraints on Relevance* (1987)

• It is a reaction against and development of the Gricean approach to Pragmatics.
• The basic idea is that the human cognitive system works so as to maximize relevance with respite to communication.
• So relevance is responsible for recovery of both the implicit and the explicit content of an utterance.
• It can be seen as a subcomponent of 'theory of mind'.
• The main assumption of the theory is that human beings are endowed with a biologically rooted ability to maximize the relevance of incoming stimuli (including linguistic utterances and other communicative behaviour).

• So not just about language use!
• In dealing with other people, humans are unique in their understanding of the INTENTIONS of others. This means that we can have METAREPRESENTATIONS, we can represent the representations of others.
• So an early hominid ancestor, Alf, watching Betty pick berries, did not just see a series of movements by Betty but also realised her intentions to pick the berries and also her BELIEF that the berries were edible.

• Of course, Betty might actually have known the berries were poisonous and was misleading Alf in order to get him the eat the berries and thus die.

• All this is done without language. The communication involved inference and ostentation.
• The pursuit of relevance is a typical aspect of the mental activity of human beings, always geared to obtaining the highest reward (information, benefit etc) from the stimuli that they process. This biological endowment is the result of the evolution of the architecture and complexity of the human mind and part of a general human ability to meta-represent one’s and other people’s thoughts and intentions.
• Relevance regulates communication
• Speakers and hearers need not know the principles of relevance in order to communicate successfully
• Principle of relevance cannot be followed/violated
• Relevance is part of our cognitive abilities
• It is not something we add to our system of understanding utterances

• It is at the heart of our understanding utterances

• (and lots more besides)
• At the heart is the cognitive principle of Relevance and the communicative principle of Relevance.
• Originally there was only one:

• Every ostensive stimulus conveys a presumption of its own optimal relevance.
Cognitive:

Human cognition tends to be geared to the maximization of relevance
• The degree of relevance is a cost benefit analysis between the reward of understanding the stimulus and the processing required to make sense of the stimulus.
• The greater the positive cognitive effects achieved by processing the input, the greater the relevance.
• The greater the processing effort required the lower the relevance.
- Cognitive effects:
  - Generating a new conclusion from the combination of the old and new information
  - Strengthening an existing assumption
  - Contradicting or canceling an existing assumption
Blakemore's story about the woman and the bus:

A bus driver sees in his mirror an worried looking woman crossing the road.

He is about to leave the stop. Seeing her he can derive the new information that she wants to board the bus, her carrying a bus pass will strengthen and support his conclusion, and this assumption is cancelled when he sees her walk off, after handing the bus pass to someone else at the stop.
• Cognitive effects:

• Generating a new conclusion from the combination of the old and new information

• Strengthening an existing assumption

• Contradicting or canceling an existing assumption
• Communicative principle:

• An inferential model of language focuses on speakers' intention.
• Ostensive-Inferential communication

• Informative intention: An intention to inform an audience of something

• Communicative intention: An intention to inform the audience of one's informative intention.
• This is translated as:

• Every ostensive stimulus conveys a presumption of its optimal relevance.
• Follow a path of least effort in computing cognitive effects: test interpretive hypotheses (‘disambiguation’, reference resolution, implicatures etc.) in order of accessibility
• Stop when your expectations of relevance are satisfied (or abandoned)
• disambiguation

• John and Bill passed the port in the evening
• reference resolution

• John told Bill that he wanted to date his sister

• Remember Pragmatic Competence?
• ‘the politicians\textsubscript{i} refused to meet the protesters\textsubscript{j} because they\textsubscript{i/j} feared violence’

and

• ‘the politicians\textsubscript{i} refused to meet the protesters\textsubscript{j} because they\textsubscript{i/j} advocated violence’
• ‘the politicians$_i$ refused to meet the protesters$_j$ because they$_i$ feared violence’

and

• ‘the politicians$_i$ refused to meet the protesters$_j$ because they$_j$ advocated violence’
• In Relevance Theory (RT), an implicature is a communicated assumption derivable solely via pragmatic inference.
(a) the decoded meaning of the sentence is compatible with a number of different interpretations in the same context;
(b) these interpretations are graded in terms of accessibility;
(c) hearers rely on a powerful criterion when selecting the most appropriate interpretation; and
(d) this criterion makes it possible to select one interpretation among the range of possible interpretations, to the extent that when a first interpretation is considered a candidate matching the intended interpretation, the hearer will stop at this point.

(Wilson, 1994)

The decoding of utterances underdetermines their interpretation and serves rather as a piece of evidence about the speaker’s meaning.
• One of the most interesting contributions of RT is, precisely, the claim that there is a wide gap between the (coded) sentence meaning and the (inferred) speaker’s meaning, which has to be filled inferentially.

• Sperber and Wilson also point out that Grice’s emphasis on the role of intentions corroborates the fact that communication can exist without the need for a code. All that the communicator has to do to communicate a thought is to get the addressee to recognize his/her intention to convey it.
• RT explains the hearer’s inference of the (intended) speaker’s meaning from the coded sentence meaning by resorting to another central claim suggested by Grice: that ostensively communicated utterances automatically generate expectations that activate the hearer’s search for the speaker’s meaning.

• But whereas Grice explained these expectations in terms of the assumption by hearers that speakers were observing the Cooperative Principle and its maxims, within RT these expectations are explained in cognitive terms, without reliance on a cooperative principle.
• The differences with Gricean pragmatics are as follows:
• 1. Communication is not necessarily co-operative. The only goal that speaker and hearer have to share is that of understanding and being understood.
• 2. It is not maxim based. The principle of relevance is a generalisation across acts of inferential communication. Communication is essentially an intentional-inferential affair, and linguistic meaning is just the input to the inference.
• 3. Maxim violation (central to Grice’s analysis) has no role to play in RT.