**The Relevance Theory** is a framework for understanding the interpretation of [utterances](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Utterance). It was first proposed by [Dan Sperber](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dan_Sperber) and [Deirdre Wilson](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deirdre_Wilson), and is used within [cognitive linguistics](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cognitive_linguistics) and [pragmatics](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pragmatics). The theory was originally inspired by the work of [Paul Grice](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_Grice) and developed out of his ideas, but has since become a pragmatic framework in its own right. The seminal book, *Relevance*, was first published in 1986 and revised in 1995.

The theory takes its name from the principle that "every utterance conveys the information that it is relevant enough for it to be worth the addressee's effort to process it", that is, if I say something to you, you can safely assume that I believe that the conveyed information is worthwhile your effort to listen to and comprehend it; and also that it is "the most relevant one compatible with the communicator's abilities and preferences", that is, I tried to make the utterance as easy to understand as possible, given its information content and my communicative skills.

Other key ingredients of relevance theory are that utterances are [ostensive](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ostension) (they draw their addressees' attention to the fact that the communicator wants to convey some information) and [inferential](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inference) (the addressee has to infer what the communicator wanted to convey, based on the utterance's "literal meaning" along with the addressee's real-world knowledge, sensory input, and other information).

The relevance theory aims to explain the well recognized fact that communicators usually convey much more information with their [utterances](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Utterance) than what is contained in their literal sense. To this end, Sperber and Wilson argue that acts of human verbal communication are [ostensive](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ostension) in that they draw their addressees' attention to the fact that the communicator wants to convey some information. In this way they automatically assert that they are "relevant" to their addressees. A relevant utterance in this technical sense is one from which many conclusions can be drawn at a low processing cost for the addressee.

The addressee uses the information contained in the utterance together with his expectations about its relevance, his real-world knowledge, as well as sensory input, to [infer](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inference) conclusions about what the communicator wanted to convey. Typically, more conclusions can be drawn if the utterance contains information that is related to what the addressee already knows or believes. In this inference process, the "literal meaning" of the utterance is just one piece of [evidence](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evidence) among others.

Sperber and Wilson sum up these properties of verbal communication by calling it *ostensive-inferential communication*. It is characterized by two layers of intention on part of the communicator:

a. The informative intention: The intention to inform an audience of something (to communicate a certain content).

b. The communicative intention: The intention to inform the audience of one's informative intention (to draw the audience's attention to one's informative intention).

**Relevance of an utterance**

Here are some examples to illustrate the concept of relevance. If Alice and Bob are planning to go on a trip next weekend and Alice tells Bob:

(1) Next weekend the weather will be really awful.

this is highly relevant to Bob, as he can draw a host of conclusions, modifying his cognitive environment: Alice wants them to rethink their plans and wants to inform Bob of this wish; Bob agrees – or doesn't agree and just wants to bring oilskins; Alice wants to know Bob's opinion on that matter; etc. By contrast, saying

(2) The weather was really awful on 19 October 1974 in Cumbria.

makes just one piece of new, unrelated information manifest to Bob, and is thus hardly relevant; and

(3) The weather is really awful right now.

is not relevant as it doesn't tell Bob anything new; he has already seen for himself. Finally, the sentence

(4) On the weekend 2511 weeks after 19 October 1974 the weather will be really awful.

contains exactly the same information as (1) but requires more effort to process, and is thus less relevant under this definition.

## The two principles of relevance

The first or *cognitive principle of relevance* says that human cognition tends to be geared to the maximisation of relevance.

More importantly for the issue at hand, the second or *communicative principle of relevance* says that every utterance conveys the information that it is

**a**. relevant enough for it to be worth the addressee's effort to process it. (If the utterance contained too few positive cognitive effects for the addressee in relation to the processing effort needed to achieve these effects, he wouldn't bother processing it, and the communicator needn't have taken the trouble to utter it.)

**b**. the most relevant one compatible with the communicator's abilities and preferences. (Otherwise the communicator would have chosen a more relevant utterance – e.g. one that needs less processing effort and/or achieves more positive cognitive effects on part of the addressee – to convey her meaning. After all, she wants to be understood as easily and reliably as possible.)

This principle is summed up as "Every utterance conveys a *presumption of its own optimal relevance*". If Alice tells Bob something – anything –, he is entitled to expect that Alice wanted her utterance to be consistent with the communicative principle of relevance. Consequently, if Alice tells Bob something that does not seem to be worth his processing effort, such as sentences (2) or (3) above, or something that seems to be less relevant than Alice could have put it, such as (4), Bob will automatically search for an alternative interpretation. The most easily accessible interpretation that is consistent with the communicative principle of relevance is the one Bob accepts as the right one, and then he stops processing (because any further interpretations would cost him more processing effort and would thus violate condition **b**).

The constraint that utterances are compatible with the communicator's abilities and preferences accounts for suboptimal communication, such as when the communicator is unable to think of a better phrasing at the moment, as well as for stylistic and cultural preferences (e.g. [politeness](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politeness) considerations), withholding information, and lying.

**Inferences**

**Explicature**

On hearing an utterance, the addressee first concludes that the presumption of optimal relevance is met. He then decodes it, which however yields only very incomplete information. Usually, most of the information conveyed by the utterance has to be inferred. The inference process is based on the decoded meaning, the addressee's knowledge and beliefs, and the [context](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Context_(language_use)), and is guided by the communicative principle of relevance.

For example, take an utterance

(5) Susan told me that her kiwis were too sour.

Information the addressee has to infer includes

* assignment of [referents](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Referent) to [indexical](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indexicality) expressions
  + For the utterance to be relevant, "Susan" most likely has to refer to a Susan both speaker and addressee know.
  + In the absence of other possible female referents, the [pronoun](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pronoun) "her" has to refer to Susan. (In a different context, as when (5) is preceded by "Lucy didn't like the food at the [banquet](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Banquet)", a different inference would be drawn.)
* disambiguation of ambiguous expressions
  + Possible interpretations involving sour [kiwifruit](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kiwifruit) are far more accessible than ones involving sour [birds](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kiwi_(bird)); and even if the sentence were about birds it would not provide enough context to satisfy condition **a** of the communicative principle of relevance.
* enrichment of [semantically](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Semantic) incomplete expressions
  + The possessive "her kiwis" could refer to kiwis Susan ate, kiwis she bought, kiwis she grew herself, etc. Following (5) by "So she didn't win the fruit grower's contest" establishes relevance of the latter option.
  + "too sour" also needs to be specified to make sense. Given the above context, the kiwis must be too sour for the judges at the contest.

Consequently, the explicit meaning of (5) is

(6) Susan told the speaker that the kiwifruit she, Susan, grew were too sour for the judges at the fruit grower's contest.

This is called an [explicature](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Explicature) of (5).

**Implicature**

Further inferences that cannot be understood as specifications and extensions of the original utterance are [implicatures](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Implicature). If speaker and addressee know that Susan is a sore loser, an implicature of (5) could be

(7) Susan needs to be cheered up.

The distinction between explicature and implicature is not always clear-cut. For example, the inference

(8) He drank a bottle of vodka and fell into a stupor. → He drank a bottle of vodka and *consequently* fell into a stupor.

has traditionally been seen as an implicature. However, relevance theorist [Robyn Carston](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robyn_Carston) has argued that an utterance's implicatures cannot [entail](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Entailment_(linguistics)) any of its explicatures, because the otherwise resulting redundancy would not be consistent with the relevance principle. Therefore, the inference in (8) has to be an explicature, or more specifically a case of enrichment. Another argument for (8) to be an explicature is that it can be embedded in [negations](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Affirmation_and_negation) and [if clauses](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/If_clause), which is supposedly impossible for implicatures.

**Real-time interpretation**

The described process does not run in sequential order. An addressee of an utterance does not first decode it, then derive explicatures, then select implicated premises from his cognitive environment, and then derive implicated conclusions. Instead, all of these subtasks run in parallel, and each can aid in solving the others.