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Identity inferences: implicatures, implications and extended interpretations

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Abstract

This paper considers how ideas from relevance-theoretic pragmatics can be applied in understanding the construction of identity in interaction, while presupposing that consideration of ideas about identity can make a significant contribution to pragmatic theories. While previous work on pragmatics has focused on the construction and performance of identity (see, for example, Spencer-Oatey and Ruhi 2007), this has not been much discussed in work from a relevance-theoretic perspective. For illustration, the paper refers mainly to a video recording of a UK House of Commons Select Committee session on drug addiction. While the video provides considerable relevant data about identity construction, the paper does not develop a detailed analysis of the video or the extracts it focuses on. Instead it uses them to argue for the usefulness of relevance-theoretic ideas in understanding identity and impression management. The ideas focused on are: that communication can be stronger or weaker (i.e. it can be more or less clear that particular assumptions are being intentionally communicated); that there is no clear cut-off point between very weakly communicated implicatures and non-communicated implications; that interpretation generally involves going beyond what the communicator intended to derive the addressee's own conclusions; that the effects of communicative interaction include more than the derivation of new assumptions; that adjustments to 'cognitive environments' (the sets of assumptions which are accessible to individuals at particular times) can continue

after interactions take place. These ideas can be useful in a number of areas including in understanding identity in general, literary identities, attitudes to language varieties, the production of communicative acts, and the teaching of spoken and written communication.

Keywords

identity, implicature, impression management, pedagogy, pragmatics, relevance theory, spoken and written communication

1. Introduction

This article discusses extracts from a video recording of a UK House of Commons session in order to suggest that ideas from relevance theory can be useful in understanding the construction and ascription of identity in communicative interaction (and impression management).¹ The overarching idea is that we need to look not only at implicatures but also at non-communicated implications when considering the role of inference in identity construction. The specific ideas focused on are: that communication can be stronger or weaker (i.e. it can be more or less clear that particular assumptions are being intentionally communicated); that there is no clear cut-off point between very weakly communicated implicatures and non-communicated implications; that interpretation generally involves going beyond what the communicator intended to derive the addressee's own conclusions; that the effects of communicative interaction include more than the derivation of new assumptions; that adjustments to 'cognitive environments' (the sets of assumptions which are accessible to individuals at particular times) can continue after interactions take place. The next section discusses the relevance-theoretic ideas with reference to interactions in the video. Section three briefly indicates some areas in which these ideas can be applied: in understanding the

¹ Identity and impression management are closely connected. As the focus of this paper is quite general, I will simply refer to 'identity' while believing that the comments I make are also relevant to impression management.

construction and representation of identities in general, literary identities (of and by authors, characters and readers), attitudes to language varieties, the pragmatics of production, and in the teaching of spoken and written communication (including academic writing). The paper concludes that, while this approach (perhaps unavoidably) treats aspects of identity as simpler than they are, it helps to understand identity construction and can be usefully applied in developing communicative practice. Another motivation for this approach is that focusing on identity can help to develop pragmatic theories, including relevance theory.

2. Pragmatics and identity

This paper considers how ideas from relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995; Sperber and Wilson 2005; Wilson 2016; Wilson and Sperber 2004; B.Clark 2013) can contribute to understanding of identity. Identity is of course a very complex notion. As U.Clark (2013: 7) points out, it involves both individual, psychological aspects and social, cultural, ones:

As well as being something constructed or emanating from within ourselves . . . identity is also a sociocultural phenomenon that comes from within local, interactional discourse contexts that are social and cultural in nature . . . in studying language as a social phenomenon, as much attention needs to be paid to the ways in which identities, and particularly social identities, are ascribed and constructed by others as well as by ourselves within specific social and cultural contexts.

(B.Clark 2013: 7)

As with many linguistic and behavioural phenomena, then, a full account of the construction of identity will involve consideration of both individual, psychological factors and social,

cultural ones. It will also require an account of how these relate to each other. This paper focuses on inferences made by individuals in interaction and therefore on the psychological part of the story (while recognising that the inferences are part of social interaction and they involve sociocultural assumptions).

As Bucholtz and Hall (2005) point out, a wide range of approaches have contributed to research on identity and their discussion maps out some of the significant complexities involved in understanding it. Joseph (2004) and many others have pointed out that language is central to individual identity. Given that every communicative act unavoidably provides potential input to processes of identity construction, questions about identity should surely be addressed by all pragmatic theories. There has been very useful work on this in pragmatics, particularly in work on (im)politeness.² While much work on (im)politeness does not mention identity explicitly, there has been more explicit focus on this in recent years. Spencer-Oatey (2007) argues for the importance of considering questions about identity and insights from theories of identity in work on face. Garcés-Conejos Blivitch and Sifianou (2017) explore the connections between ideas and about face and identity, arguing that they are closely connected and also difficult to distinguish. This is because, they argue, ‘they co-constitute each other and are thus intrinsically related’ (Garcés-Conejos Blivitch and Sifianou 2017: 248). They argue convincingly for greater focus on identity in work on (im)politeness

There has been very little work on identity which focuses on the mechanics of pragmatic inferential processes (i.e. on how pragmatic principles guide production and interpretation) from ‘neo-Gricean’ or ‘post-Gricean’ perspectives.³ From the perspective of relevance theory, some theorists have discussed identity construction in specific contexts and applied specific ideas from relevance theory in analysing them. Curcó (2005) explores the pragmatic

² Key sources on identity in general include Bucholtz and Hall 2005, Joseph 2004, Preece 2016; for work on (im)politeness in general, see Bousfield 2008, Culpeper 2011, Culpeper, Haugh and Kádár 2017, Haugh 2015, Kádár and Haugh 2013, Spencer-Oatey 2008; for work on pragmatics and identity in particular, see, for example, Spencer-Oatey and Ruhi 2007

³ The most well-known neo-Gricean approaches are those developed by Horn 1984, 1988 and Levinson 1987, 2000; the most well-known post-Gricean approach is relevance theory

effects of code-switching (between Catalan and Mexican Spanish) with reference to the notion of *ad hoc* concept construction. She analyses data from family conversations which shows how code-switching can lead to effects which are more subtle than can be captured simply in terms of associations with Gumperz's (1982) distinction between 'we code' and 'they code'. Lorenzo-Dus (2003) focuses on metarepresentation in the discursive co-construction of identity in a television talk show. Martínez-Camino et al (2018) focus on how particular kinds of conceptual representations contribute to rhetorical strategies in advertising which aim to persuade consumers by suggesting connections between products and the construction of particular kinds of identities. Yus (2016, 2018a, 2018b) focuses on processes of contextualisation and non-propositional effects in discussing the construction of identities in various kinds of online communication. This paper focuses on the kinds of conclusions inferred as part of identity construction and how they can extend over time.

The paper does not discuss the many ways of thinking about identity and how it is constructed and does not take a position on how we can theorise different notions of identity. It assumes that there are personal/individual and social/cultural ways of thinking about identity, that these must interact in some way, and that communicative interaction is affected by and contributes to the construction of identities. One thing which the paper does assume is that individual and social identity can be partially understood with reference to a number of different kinds of assumptions about individuals or groups. The construction and ascription of identity will include forming assumptions such as 'X is Scottish', 'X is reliable', 'X is caring', and so on. On this view, some of the things individuals do in identity construction and impression management involve behaving in ways which make particular assumptions about themselves or others more or less likely to be made.

2.1 Identity in a formal political context

In February 2012, the comedian, actor, writer and broadcaster Russell Brand submitted written evidence to a UK House of Commons Home Affairs Select Committee on Drug Addiction. Later, on 24 April 2012, he appeared before the committee to give further evidence.⁴ There is a large amount of data in the video recording of this session which could be used to explore the construction, performance and ascription of identity.

Brand and others in the session, including observers, are, of course performing identities throughout. There are many things which we could focus on in considering identity including: clothes and nonverbal behaviour; verbal and nonverbal forms or 'styles' in general; details of language used and variation in the use of specific forms at all linguistic levels including pronunciation, lexis and phrasing; explicit discussion of identities in general and specific aspects of them.

Media presentations of the event also provide interesting data. To take just one example, a report on the Guardian website begins:

- (1) Comedian, actor and former heroin addict, Russell Brand, . . .
(<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2012/apr/24/russell-brand-drug-addiction-mps>)

The article could, of course, have described him differently (I described him above as a 'writer and broadcaster' as well as a comedian and an actor but did not mention his status as a 'former heroin addict'). Brand himself is very much aware of mediatisation processes and how little control individuals have over them, as evidenced by this part of the session

⁴ The written evidence is available at: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201213/cmselect/cmhaff/184/184wea30.htm>. A video of the full session is available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O_LHull-jYQ. An 'uncorrected' transcript is available at: <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/home-affairs-committee/news/120424-drugs-oral-ev/>).

(10:54)⁵ where Michael Ellis asks Brand whether he would like to act as a role model ‘for those who might look to you as an example’:⁶

(2) Russell Brand: As the great Tupac Shakur said, “Role is something people play, model is something that people make. Both of those things are fake”. What I want to offer people is truth and authenticity in the treatment of this illness, in our regard to the criminal components of it, in assisting victims and in the way we legislate and organise our society. I can’t be responsible — as you know, you lot hold committees all the time about the reprehensible behaviour of our media, what the cipher of my image is used to represent in the media, I have no control over.

Michael Ellis: You do. Forgive me, you do because your behaviour is some aspect of what’s portrayed about you, isn’t it?

Russell Brand: Yes, of course, but how is this going to be written up? This could be written up as, “Michael Ellis is sprawled on a pin there by the wit of Brand” or they could say, “Recalcitrant former drug addict rambled on”. You know, if you read it in The

⁵ i.e. at 10 minutes 54 seconds into the video. I will use this convention to present timings from now on.

⁶ I have provided very ‘broad’ transcripts here. They are slightly more accurate than the uncorrected transcript available at the www.parliament.uk website but they have been adapted to remove features such as hesitations and I have provided punctuation for ease of reading which, of course, makes the transcript less accurate.

Telegraph it is going to say one thing; if you read it
in the Socialist Worker it is going to say another
thing.

Russell Brand is a well-known person in the UK and clearly members of the committee are aware of this. In fact, his status as a ‘celebrity’ is one reason for inviting him to provide evidence to the committee (in writing and then in this session). Some of the interactions assume shared awareness of his status and of some aspects of his public identities.⁷

This paper only takes a tiny step towards an analysis of identity construction. A fuller account would consider the complexities involved in the ways different contributions construct, perform and ascribe identities. One thing Brand aims to communicate in the session is that the main focus in dealing with drug addiction should be on research and support for abstinence-based recovery. He also insists, as in (2) above, that he wants to offer ‘truth and authenticity in the treatment of this illness’. It is interesting to consider to what extent Brand’s contributions can be seen as supporting a view of Brand himself as truthful and authentic. It is not clear that the terms ‘true’ or ‘authentic’ can be used straightforwardly when discussing the performance of identity (it is performance, after all) but viewers of Brand’s contributions are surely going to make inferences about how truthful and authentic he is and the session provides interesting evidence to explore this. The aim here is not to develop a full discussion of this but to show how some ideas from relevance theory can contribute to an analysis, beginning with the idea that communication can be stronger or weaker.

2.2 Stronger and weaker communication

⁷ See Arthurs and Shaw 2016 for discussion of Brand’s public identity and his ‘migration’ from entertainment to politics, focusing on an interview on the BBC programme *Newsnight* in 2013. His appearance in this session can be seen as part of this process.

Early work in pragmatics, inspired by the work of Grice (1975, 1989) focused on the notion of implicature. While Grice did not propose a pragmatic theory (and, in fact, never used the word ‘pragmatics’ as it is understood in current pragmatic theories), he proposed that a key part of an account of how we understand each other in interaction was a distinction between explicitly and indirectly communicated assumptions.⁸ Here is an example of the type often used to introduce the idea:

(3) Alex: Are you coming to Jordan’s party?

Caitlin: I’m babysitting tonight.

As anybody teaching an introductory pragmatics class would point out, what Caitlin’s utterance explicitly communicates (that she is babysitting tonight) is not on its own an answer to Alex’s question. For that, Alex needs to recognise that Caitlin’s babysitting will prevent her from going to the party and so (unless there are specific contextual assumptions which affect things) the key implicature here is (4):

(4) Caitlin is not going to Jordan’s party.

A Gricean account would (partly) say that recognising that what Caitlin communicates explicitly does not answer the question, leading Alex to look for something that she is implicating. The assumption that she is implicating (2) makes her utterance consistent with what we expect in verbal interaction. Grice’s account assumes that ultimately rational principles guide interaction. Caitlin’s utterance would not be rational if she only intended to communicate (4), given that she could have simply said this with less risk of

⁸ Grice did not say much about the nature of explicitly communicated assumptions (what he termed ‘what is said’) and contemporary pragmatic theories have made significant steps in developing fuller accounts of this. For discussion, see Carston 2002; Sperber and Wilson 1995: 176-202; B.Clark 2013: 157-199.

misinterpretation. Partly what makes Caitlin's utterance rational is that it communicates both that she is not going to the party and a reason for this.

There is more to say, of course. First, as most pragmatic theories now presuppose, there is inference involved in working out explicitly communicated assumptions (here this includes assigning referents for *I* and *tonight* and assuming that this is a statement rather than a question). Alex also needs to assume that Caitlin thinks the party is tonight and that she thinks babysitting is inconsistent with going to the party. We could say that Caitlin's utterance communicates an explicitly communicated proposition (an 'explicature' in relevance-theoretic terms), some 'implicated premises' as well as the 'implicated conclusion' in (4):⁹

(5) *Explicature (explicitly communicated proposition):*

Caitlin is babysitting on the evening of the day on which she is speaking.

Implicated premises:

Jordan's party is tonight.

Caitlin can't go to parties on evenings when she is babysitting.

Implicated conclusions:

Caitlin can't go to any parties tonight.

Caitlin can't go to Jordan's party tonight.

While Grice's own examples often focus on just one implicature of a particular utterance, he recognised more complexity than this, including the possibility that utterances could give rise

⁹ Of course, what we have typed here is a collection of utterances which also require inference in order to be understood. We are following the standard convention where these are to be understood as propositional forms inferred by Alex.

to a range of implicatures and possible indeterminacy about what is communicated.¹⁰ More recent work in pragmatics has gone further in considering the scope of pragmatic inferences and the uncertainties involved in interpretation processes. Arguably, relevance theory goes furthest with regard to both. As well as assuming that pragmatic inference is involved in arriving at explicatures, relevance theory assumes a range of ways in which what is intentionally communicated can be less than fully determinate. A key idea is that what is communicated can be communicated more or less strongly.

We can demonstrate this by contrasting the exchange in (3) with an example where it is less clear exactly what is being implicated, such as (6):

(6) Alex: How you getting on with your new flatmates?

Caitlin: They're minions.

The word *minion*, like many words, is ambiguous. Among other things, it can refer to a subordinate or servant, someone viewed favourably by a superior, or a character from the series of films which began with *Despicable Me* (dir. Pierre Coffin, Chris Renaud) in 2010. One task of any pragmatic theory is to explain how addressees work out the intended sense of ambiguous expressions. Things which affect this include the relative accessibility of different senses and nonverbal behaviour. At the beginning of Gerard Manley Hopkins's 1877 poem *The Windhover* (which begins 'I caught this morning morning's minion'), the only nonverbal indications come from the layout of the words on the page. Readers have recognised that the poem is about a kestrel in flight and interpretations are likely to follow from the first two senses mentioned above, seeing the kestrel as a servant of and also

¹⁰ 'Since, to calculate a conversational implicature is to calculate what has to be supposed in order to preserve the supposition that the Cooperative Principle is being observed, and since there may be various possible specific explanations, a list of which may be open, the conversational implicature in such cases will be disjunction of such specific explanations; and if the list of these is open, the implicature will have just the kind of indeterminacy that many actual implicatures do in fact possess'. (Grice 1975: 58; reprinted in Grice 1989: 39-40).

viewed favourably by ‘morning’. Readers who know about Hopkins’s religious faith, often present in his poetry, and of the notion that kestrels have been seen as symbols of Christ, can go further in developing metaphorical interpretations, perhaps also making connections between ‘morning’ and God. The film character interpretation was of course not available when this poem was written. When Caitlin speaks, prosodic and nonverbal behaviour might well encourage particular ways of understanding the utterance and of course the accessibility of interpretations will be affected by such things as how recently any of the *Despicable Me* films appeared, whether Alex and Caitlin have discussed or had shared experience of them, and so on.

2.3 Weak implicatures and non-communicated implications

An important idea in the relevance-theoretic account is that there is no clear cut-off point between very weakly communicated implicatures and non-communicated implications.

Assuming that the film character interpretation of (6) is salient and Alex goes for this sense, how will he understand what Caitlin intends to communicate? Clearly, he will go for a metaphorical interpretation. The implicatures he derives from this will be a range from a set associated with characteristics of minions, such as the assumptions in (7):¹¹

(7) *Possible implicatures of Caitlin’s utterance in (4):*

- a. Caitlin’s new flatmates are excitable
- b. Caitlin’s new flatmates are unpredictable
- c. Caitlin’s new flatmates are fun

¹¹ Metaphor is not the focus of this paper so I do not say more about the details of metaphorical interpretation here. Earlier relevance-theoretic accounts (e.g. Sperber and Wilson 1986: 217-243) focused mainly on how addressees look for particular implicatures of metaphorical utterances. More recent accounts (e.g. Carston 2002, 2010; Wilson and Carston 2007) start from the assumption that we adjust lexical concepts and use them to look for implicatures. Here, presumably, this would involve creating a minion concept which is understood as a human with minion-like qualities. For discussion of both kinds of accounts, see Wilson and Sperber 2012; B.Clark 2013: 253-279.

- d. Caitlin's new flatmates are annoying
- e. Caitlin's new flatmates are difficult to live with

Which of these is Alex likely to access and decide that Caitlin is definitely communicating? It is hard to be sure. Unlike Caitlin's response in (3) above, there is no one implicature which Caitlin is definitely communicating. Rather, she is providing evidence for a range of possible assumptions, each of which Alex might access and think about. In an everyday context, Alex might go on to ask questions or make suggestions and he and Caitlin can develop their understanding of the situation and her thoughts about it together. Caitlin's utterance in (6) provides evidence for a relatively wide range of relatively weak implicatures while her utterance in (3) provides stronger evidence for far fewer.

Sperber and Wilson (1986: 193-224; see also Pilkington 2000) suggest that we can account for utterances which are taken to have 'poetic effects' by suggesting that they provide evidence for a relatively wide range of relatively weak implicatures. They also suggest that this is a way of accounting for impressions, such as in this example:

Mary and Peter are newly arrived at the seaside. She opens the window overlooking the sea and sniffs appreciatively and ostensively. When Peter follows suit, overlooking the sea and sniffs appreciatively and ostensively. When Peter follows suit, there is no one particular good thing that comes to his attention: the air smells fresh, fresher than it did in town, it reminds him of their previous holidays, he can smell the sea, seaweed, ozone, fish; all sorts of pleasant things come to mind, and while, because her sniff was appreciative, he is reasonably safe in assuming that she must have intended him to notice at least some of them, he is unlikely to be able to pin down her intentions any further.

(Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995: 55)

They suggest that in this case there is no reason to assume that Mary had intentions that were more specific than this, that it is not possible to offer an explicit paraphrase of what she intended to communicate, and that she could not have achieved the same effect by speaking. This means that Peter might access a range of assumptions for each of which it is not clear whether Mary intended to convey that particular one. Sperber and Wilson suggest that cases such as this are at one end of a continuum of paraphasability:

If asked what she intended to convey in this case, one of the best answers Mary could give is that she wanted to share an impression with Peter. Thus, at one end of the paraphrasability continuum are cases where the speaker's meaning is fully determinate, and at the other are those involving the communication of impressions, where the communicator's meaning cannot be paraphrased without loss.

(Sperber and Wilson 2015: 122)

We could understand Caitlin's utterance in (6) as one which aims to give a kind of impression or even that it gives rise to 'poetic effects' to some extent (not comparable, of course, to the kinds often focused on in literary or aesthetic works).¹² It is important to notice, though, that very few utterances convey only a very small set of assumptions. The closest we can imagine is when an individual says what time it is in response to a request from a stranger. We might say that this utterance merely tells the other person (approximately) what time it is. Even here, though, we can say that the utterance provides evidence for some

¹² A much-discussed example is Flaubert's comment on the writer Leconte de Lisle that '*son encre est pale*' ('his ink is pale'). For discussion, see Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995.

implicatures about the speaker's willingness to engage with the stranger, to be helpful, and so on.

We can also look again at Caitlin's response in (3) repeated here as (8), and what it implicates:

(8) *Explicature:*

- a. Caitlin is babysitting on the evening of the day on which she is speaking.

Implicated premises:

- b. Jordan's party is tonight.
- c. Caitlin can't go to parties on evenings when she is babysitting.

Implicated conclusions:

- d. Caitlin can't go to any parties tonight.
- e. Caitlin can't go to Jordan's party tonight.

The final implicated conclusion here (8e) is the most strongly communicated implicature. Only special contextual assumptions would prevent Alex from inferring this (e.g. if there is an arrangement where Caitlin can go to parties later in evenings when she has been babysitting, or if Jordan's party is not tonight and Alex had thought Caitlin's babysitting clashed with it). (8d) is communicated slightly less strongly. We can imagine, for example, that Caitlin would go to other parties but is using this utterance mainly to make clear that she won't be going to Jordan's party tonight.

What about the implicated premises (8b) and (8c)? Often (including by students) these will be seen as contextual assumptions, i.e. as assumptions shared by Alex and Caitlin which Caitlin can presume Alex is aware of when formulating her utterance. In many cases, not much follows from how we label them but there are two reasons for calling them

implicated premises here. First, relevance theory views contexts as dynamic with contextual assumptions selected and sometimes created as part of the process of interpretation. It's possible, for example, that Alex has never thought before about whether Caitlin's babysitting affects her attendance at parties (he might not even have known that Caitlin does any babysitting) and so he might infer (8c) as part of the process of understanding her utterance. On this view, not all of the assumptions shared by Alex and Caitlin will act as contextual assumptions for this utterance. Second, Caitlin's utterance provides evidence for these assumptions and so it can be seen as communicating them, whether or not Alex and/or Caitlin were already entertaining them. If Jordan's party is not tonight, Alex is still likely to assume that Caitlin thinks it is as this makes it possible for him to arrive at an interpretation which makes sense for him (in relevance-theoretic terms, one which meets his expectations of relevance).

There are also further assumptions for which Caitlin's utterance provides at least some evidence of varying degrees of strength. Here are some suggestions, each of which can be seen as contributing to understanding of Caitlin's identity:

(9) Possible further implicatures of Caitlin's utterance:

- a. Caitlin is reliable
- b. Caitlin takes responsibilities seriously
- c. Caitlin doesn't mind missing social events because of work commitments
- d. Jordan's party is not the most important event in Caitlin's diary
- e. Caitlin assumes that Alex understands the way she thinks quite well

This is just an initial list and we could easily think of more. Each of these is significantly weaker than the assumptions in (6) and it is quite possible that Alex will not entertain any of

them. Nevertheless, Caitlin's utterance does provide some evidence for each of them. If somebody were to ask Alex if Caitlin is reliable, Alex is likely to think that she is. If someone were to say that Caitlin isn't reliable, Alex might think about what she said in the interaction in (3) and use it as evidence that she is (at least) not completely unreliable.

It is typical of many interactions that they provide evidence for a fairly wide range of conclusions with varying degrees of strength. Alongside assumptions arising from the meanings of linguistic expressions, we make inferences based on prosody and nonverbal behaviour. This is well-known and of course it is very common for advice on public speaking, interviews, and so on to focus on such things as smiling and body language. The relevance-theoretic approach offers a useful way to think about the inferences we make based on all of our behaviour in communicative interactions, including how we make inferences which contribute to the construction and ascription of identity, such as the possibility of Alex's assumptions about Caitlin's reliability being affected by the interaction in (3).

2.4 *'I don't feel entirely qualified to talk about legislation'*

Almost every contribution to the session discussed here could be used to illustrate these ideas. Here and below, I have chosen utterances which contribute to the construction of Brand's identity.

Here (0:30) is the first question in the session from the chair, Keith Vaz, and the beginning of Brand's response:

- (10) Keith Vaz: Could I start with a point about what you say in your evidence that you disagree with the legalisation of drugs because you think that a deterrent effect is necessary, is that right?

Russell Brand: I don't feel entirely qualified to talk about
legislation.

We could represent what Brand communicates here as follows:

(11) *Explicature*:

- a. Brand does not feel entirely qualified to talk about legislation
(with regard to drugs and addiction)

Implicated premises:

- b. People who do not feel entirely qualified to talk about something
should not talk about it (in a situation such as this session)

Implicated conclusions:

- c. Brand should not talk about legislation on drugs in this House of
Commons session
- d. Brand is not going to answer Vaz's question

We can think of this as similar to Caitlin's response in (3) where strong implicatures are that Brand will not answer Vaz's question and that this is because he doesn't feel qualified. Similarly, this provides evidence for other conclusions about Brand if we think about what kind of person would decide not to answer on this basis:

(12) Possible further implicatures of (10):

- a. Brand does not think people should act as if they understand
more than they do.
- b. Brand does not claim knowledge he doesn't have.
- c. Brand has respect for experts.

- d. Brand is honest.

Some of these weaker implicatures contribute, of course, to assumptions about whether Brand is being honest and authentic during this session. This is arguably one motivation for Brand's response here.

2.5 '*Time is infinite*'

Another utterance, towards the end of the session (26:25), gives rise to a wider range of possible conclusions:¹³

(13) Keith Vaz: I think we are running out of time. I have a final
question about —

Russell Brand: Time is infinite. We cannot run out of time.

Arguably, the most obvious feature of this utterance is that it is a joke. As often happens, the joke depends on awareness of how we understand utterances in context, i.e. of pragmatics. Vaz clearly means that the session has been running for almost as long as has been scheduled for it. Brand responds as if the utterance meant that all time was coming to an end. Brand shows good understanding here of how linguistic expressions can have more than one meaning. In another part of the session, he picks up on and expresses a negative attitude to the 'carrot or stick' metaphor:

(14) Michael Ellis: You would say there needs to be carrot and stick,
would you?

¹³ This example is discussed briefly in B.Clark (2012).

Russell Brand: I don't think there needs to be a carrot or a stick.

Both of those things are like bizarre metaphors.

Vaz's utterance in (13) uses a conventionalised metaphor where time is something we can run out of and Brand's response also draws attention to that. But what is the main thing this utterance does? It mainly implicates that Brand is being jocular. This is something he does several times during the session. What are the effects of this? Surely they are likely to implicate that Brand is not taking the session seriously and so to undermine the construction of him as a serious person focused on the issue of drug addiction? There are, though, several other directions we could follow (another conventionalised metaphor) in understanding his utterance in (13). We could think about Brand as somebody who cannot stop himself from making jokes (which fits with the construction of him as not serious). We could think that this shows he is clever and good at humour based on word play. These could be seen as constructing an identity as somebody non-serious and as implicating a contradiction in him. We could also think about Brand's identity as inherently contradictory. This is something he has developed in his comedy. Arthurs and Shaw (2016) discuss his 'Messiah Complex' stand-up show and suggest that this is part of a 'rebranding of his celebrity persona' which involves representations of conflicting parts of his personality. Perhaps, then, the combination of serious, arguably earnest, contributions with jocular ones reflects this continuing identity as someone who is both serious and comedic. Another line of interpretation might focus on the humour as undermining the seriousness of the politicians. The humorous utterances make fun of the politicians and the procedures of parliament and so could be seen as a defence mechanism or as communicating that there is something ridiculous about this session. Notice, also, that the utterance also provides evidence for some more serious implicatures. Given that time is infinite, there is no need to restrict the amount of time given to this discussion. The utterance could, then, be seen as implicating

that the politicians could do more, including allotting more time, to address the issues around drug addiction. In this way, the utterance can be seen as implicating that Brand is more serious about doing something about drug addiction than the politicians are.

Brand's utterance provides relatively weak evidence for implicatures such as these. We could argue that Brand's utterance supports some of them while for others this is less clear. As mentioned above, there is not always a clear cut-off point between weakly communicated implicatures and non-communicated implications. Therefore, pragmatic theories, and accounts of the pragmatics of identity construction, need to consider non-communicated implications as well as communicated ones (i.e. implicatures).

2.6 Non-communicated implications

As mentioned above, relevance theory assumes that there is no clear cut-off point between very weakly communicated implicatures (which the communicator provides some evidence for) and non-communicated implications (which the addressee is responsible for). Another reason for considering non-communicated implications is that understanding utterances often involves calculating ones which are clearly not intended. In discussing this with reference to written literary works, Wilson (2011, 2018) makes a distinction between 'comprehension' (inferring communicative intentions) and 'interpretation', which goes beyond comprehension in order to satisfy expectations of relevance:

. . . in recognising the author's informative and communicative intentions, readers must necessarily go beyond them and derive some contextual implications (or other cognitive effects) of their own . . . Since the communicator's informative and communicative intentions are partly strong and partly weak, comprehension shades off imperceptibly into the

broader interpretation process and comprehension is not a well-defined domain.

(Wilson 2011: 74)

An example Wilson gives is one where two people who have just met at a party are talking and one tells the other where they grew up (in Cornwall, in Wilson's example). The speaker gives evidence for a range of weak implicatures which follow from the fact that she grew up there but of course she cannot know exactly what conclusions the hearer will draw. In order to satisfy his expectations of relevance, then, the hearer will go beyond what the speaker could have intended to draw conclusions of his own.

So understanding Brand's utterance in (13), and many others in the session, will involve deriving a fairly wide range of weak implicatures and also a number of non-implicated conclusions. An account of these will contribute to understanding the construction of Brand's identity during the session. In a full account of these, we would need to consider not only the utterances Brand produces but also nonverbal communication and behaviour (including the way Brand walks into the room, takes off his coat and places it over the back of his chair, the ways he sits, and so on), the clothes Brand wears, his physical properties, including his muscular arms and tattoos, the prosody of utterances, his accent, and so on. Again, there are many possible conclusions where it is not clear to what extent they are intended and so part of what is communicated.

2.7 *'Who's next? Theresa May?'*

Brand's accent, prosody and lexical choices are also relevant. Compare, for example, his utterance in (2) ('I don't feel entirely qualified to talk about legislation') with (15), which follows immediately (26:34) from (13) above:

- (15) Russell Brand: Who's next? Theresa May? She might not show up. Check she knows what day it is.
- Keith Vaz: Mr. Brand, I have one more question for you.
- David Winnick: It's not quite a variety show, Mr. Brand.
- Russell Brand: You're providing a bit of variety, though. You're making it more like *Dad's Army*.

In (2), Brand uses the premodifier *entirely* which is typical of formal speech. In (15), he uses only simple lexis. His pronunciation in (15) is also typical of traditional London working class speech, e.g. there is no initial /h/ in his pronunciation of *who's* and a glottal stop in *it is* (by contrast, the /t/ in *infinite* just before this is clearly articulated). This would be described by sociolinguists as a case of 'style-shifting' or 'code-switching' in its broader sense.¹⁴ This is consistent with a view where he is switching quickly from one constructed identity (serious and authentic in discussing drug addiction) with another (cheeky, irreverent comedian). Brand can be seen as performing more than one identity and this is one place where switching happens quite quickly.

Brand's nonverbal behaviour also switches here. He moves from leaning forward when making serious points, with beat gestures and other hand movements performed in front of him, as he does in most of the session, to sitting back, looking around and grinning, when he is being more comedic. Brand's performance here can be seen as supporting the idea that he is using humour to make fun of the committee and the procedure, and to highlight aspects of them which can be seen as intimidating, off-putting, and distant from everyday reality. There is a tension here when considering questions about honesty, truth and authenticity. Brand is performing a comedic persona here and so being inauthentic. At the same time, he is known for performing this persona and so arguably this is more authentic

¹⁴ I am grateful to Sylvia Shaw for comments and advice on this passage.

than the more serious persona he performs elsewhere. His comic performances often focus on contradictions, with non-serious and negative personality traits subsumed into more serious, often political points.¹⁵ So the switches Brand performs here could be seen as undermining the attempted performance of a serious, honest and authentic identity (by departing from the more serious performance style elsewhere) or as supporting it (by being consistent with Brand's more generally performed identities). A fuller analysis would also consider how these different features are intertwined at various points in the session with individual utterances combining aspects of both (demonstrated right at the start where Brand says 'hello' with different styles when facing observers and when he first faces the committee and then says 'good morning' to the committee after Vaz says 'good morning' to him).

2.8 Extended inference: manifestness and cognitive environments

Another feature of the relevance-theoretic account which can be useful in thinking about identity is the notion that interpretation is about sometimes subtle changes in our ways of understanding the world rather than simply accessing a small set of new assumptions or adjusting existing ones. Key ideas here are the notions of 'manifestness' and 'cognitive environment'. These are related: an individual's cognitive environment at a given time consists of all of the assumptions that are manifest to them at that time.

'Manifestness' is weaker than 'knowledge'. One motivation for using the term is that it avoids philosophical issues associated with the notion of knowledge. Another is that it plays an important role in accounting for some of the subtleties of communication. Here is a definition:

(17) *Manifestness:*

¹⁵ See Arthurs and Shaw 2016.

An assumption is manifest to an individual at a given time if and only if he is capable at that time of representing it mentally and accepting its representation as true or probably true.

(Sperber and Wilson 1986: 39)

Notice that 'manifestness' is not a purely psychological term. There are assumptions which are manifest to me now which I have never entertained but which I am nevertheless capable of entertaining and thinking of as true or probably true. Here are two assumptions which I assume were manifest to readers before reading this article but which I assume readers are unlikely to have thought of before:

- (18) a. Urszula Clark has written more linguistics articles than Dorothy L. Sayers.
- b. Gerard Manley Hopkins never met a minion of the type in the *Despicable Me* and *Minions* films.

These are unlikely to have been entertained by any readers of this article before they began reading it. They were, however, manifest and could have been entertained if required, e.g. (18b) might be useful when thinking about the opening of Hopkins's *The Windhover*.

On this view, communication is about adjusting cognitive environments, and particularly 'mutual cognitive environments'. The mutual cognitive environment of two or more individuals is made up of the assumptions which are mutually manifest to those individuals, i.e. assumptions which are manifest to them and it is manifest to each that they are shared. This is also a matter of degree. Particular assumptions can be more or less manifest (more or less likely to be entertained as true or probably true) and it can be more or less manifest that they are mutually manifest. This is useful in thinking about cultural assumptions (for

discussion, see Sperber 1996, Sperber and Claidière 2008). It is highly manifest to me that I am writing this during a global pandemic and that there are government guidelines about wearing masks in certain spaces. As these assumptions have circulated through various media, as well as being discussed in conversations, I also assume that most other people in my community are aware of this and so some communicative acts presuppose shared awareness of these assumptions. It is less clear that the details of government guidelines are mutually manifest. Here are three utterances I witnessed recently:

(19) I forgot my mask.

(20) Mask.

(21) I think you have to wear a mask if you go inside.

(19) was uttered (to me) by a family member on a trip to the local shop. She clearly presupposed that I knew that the guidance is that we should wear masks in shops at the moment and this short utterance was enough to implicate that she would have to wait outside unless I had a spare mask with me or I let her borrow mine. (20) was uttered by the same family member as I stepped into a shop without a mask on. Again, she presupposed that we shared the assumptions necessary for me to realise what she meant to communicate. (21) was uttered by me to a friend who was about to go from a pub garden where we had been sitting into the inside part of the bar. (19) or (20) would not have been appropriate unless I knew that he knew the advice was to wear a mask inside the pub.

Ideas about continuously changing cognitive environments are useful in thinking about the subtle and complex nature of communication and in thinking about how the effects of interactions develop across turns and about how some effects might develop after the initial interaction took place. One aim of this paper is to suggest that this can also be useful in considering identity and how identities are constructed, ascribed and modified by

communicative interaction. The communicative and other behaviour produced by Russell Brand and other participants in the House of Commons session considered here do not only affect representations of Brand's identity or identities at the time when they are made and during the session. They also contribute to this later and can be adjusted in various ways which extend over time. Speaking personally, my memory tells me that I was aware of the name Russell Brand before I knew who he was or what he did. I had picked up, though, that he was well-known and some sort of celebrity. I then saw him on television and became aware of his comedic persona. I then read his writing (about football) in the *Guardian*. Later, I became aware of other kinds of journalism, his autobiographies, and his interest in politics. My understanding of his identities has, of course, evolved over time and each encounter with him or his work has adjusted my representations. The notions of manifestness and cognitive environments are useful in thinking about these extended processes of identity construction and representation. The notions of manifestness and mutual manifestness are, of course, important in understanding public identities and how they can affect interactions, since only mutually manifest assumptions can contribute to intentional communication.

3. Future research

This paper has suggested that ideas from relevance theory are useful in understanding the construction of Russell Brand's identity (or identities) in this House of Commons session. Naturally, these ideas can also be useful in considering identity in other contexts.

3.1 Identity in general

As with all implicatures, identity implicatures can be more or less strongly communicated and utterances can vary with regard to whether they give rise to a smaller set of more strongly communicated assumptions or a wider range of more weakly communicated assumptions. All interactions provide evidence about identity and this evidence can continue

to affect understanding of identities after interactions have taken place. The relevance-theoretic approach provides a useful framework for discussing the role of implicatures and non-communicated implications in the construction of identities and impressions. At the same time, given that every communicative act provides evidence for identity construction, it is clear that pragmatic theories will be impoverished if they do not take account of this.

3.2 Identity in literary texts

Just as spoken utterances always come with pronunciation, written ones are always multimodal. They come with particular fonts and layouts, in particular kinds of packaging and with particular imagery. The identities of authors and texts are constructed partly by cover design, images on the cover (including author photographs), descriptions of the author, quotes, etc. Nørgaard (2018) offers an extended discussion of the ways in which multimodal features contribute to our understanding of novels. Some of the effects she discusses can, of course, be understood as contributing to our sense of the identities of books and authors. Our sense of these develops as we read and in moments when we are not reading, including times away from the book between when we start reading it and when we finish our first reading, or after we have read it and find ourselves thinking about it some more.¹⁶

We also, of course, construct our sense of the identities of characters as we read or view texts. Some of the enjoyment of texts comes from our sense of understanding a character, from the beginning of a reading or viewing or as we develop understanding while reading, and as characters develop and change during the narrative. Again, the notion of a dynamic and constantly changing cognitive environment is useful here, with assumptions about identities continuing to develop after reading.¹⁷

¹⁶ B.Clark (2014) considers how evaluations of texts can develop from inferences we make after as well as before and during our first reading.

¹⁷ Hogan (2019) provides a very useful account of how literary identities are constructed and represented, and begins with a very useful summary of ideas about identity.

3.3 Attitudes to language varieties

This framework is also useful in thinking about attitudes to language varieties, which are often explored using matched guise or verbal guise techniques. Typically, participants are asked to listen to speakers and then respond to prompts to indicate a rating for attributes such as friendliness, intelligence, and so on. These studies are extremely useful in providing evidence about inferences we make about the attributes of speakers and, of course, these can be understood as cases of identity construction. In recent work, McKenzie and Carrie (2018) have used techniques such as these to compare explicitly stated attitudes to language varieties with implicitly held attitudes revealed by responses to matched guise stimuli. On the approach discussed here, this can be seen as an investigation of weak implicatures or non-communicated implications which participants infer based on accent and other features of speech sounds, such as voice quality.

3.4 Pragmatics and production

While work in pragmatics in general often explores what communicators do, there has been far less work on the pragmatic inferences involved in production than on interpretation from both a neo-Gricean and a post-Gricean perspective. However, as Clark and Owtram (2012: 128-129) point out, both Grice and Sperber and Wilson have something to say about speakers/communicators. Grice's 'general pattern for the working out of a conversational implicature' explicitly describes inferences addressees make about the inferences of communicators (which include inferences about potential addressee inferences):

He has said that p; there is no reason to suppose that he is not observing the maxims, or at least the Cooperative Principle; he could not be doing this unless he thought that q; he knows (and knows that I know that he knows) that I can see that the supposition that he thinks that q is required; he has

done nothing to stop me thinking that q; he intends me to think, or is at least willing to allow me to think, that q; and so he has implicated that q.

(Grice 1975: 31)

There has not been much work on production from the perspective of relevance theory, but Van der Henst et al (2002; Van der Henst and Sperber 2004) present experimental evidence to support the view that communicators are willing to expend effort not otherwise required in order to produce utterances which require less effort for interlocutors. Their studies showed that a statistically significant number of responses to a question about what time it is involved a response which was rounded. Speakers who had digital watches rounded less often than those with analogue watches but some speakers with digital watches went to the effort of rounding to make processing easier for addressees. Their work also showed that speakers responded differently when their interlocutor indicated that they were setting their watch (and so more accurate responses would be more helpful) and that responses to speakers who said they had an appointment at a specific time were more likely to be rounded when the meeting was further away than when it was very close (if it is 3.08 and your meeting is at 3.30, a rounded answer, such as 'ten past three', is more helpful than an accurate one). Park (in progress; Park and Clark in progress) aims to build on this work by developing an account of production from the perspective of relevance theory. More specifically, Park proposes that production, like comprehension, is governed by a 'fast and frugal heuristic' in the sense of Gigerenzer et al (1999). In this work, it will clearly be important to consider how communicators aim to construct identities by the utterances they produce and how this affects the formulation of utterances.

3.5 Teaching spoken and written communication

Another area where ideas about identity can be usefully applied is in teaching spoken and written communication. Some of the classroom work reported in Clark and Owtram (2012; see also B.Clark 2016) can be understood as being about making people more aware of implicatures and non-communicated implications which their particular formulations provide evidence for. The tasks described there include ones where students identify inferences which readers might derive from texts. Having developed their understanding of pragmatics more fully, students then look at texts they or other students have drafted (sometimes working in groups) and identify ones which they think it would be better to avoid. In other tasks, they work to a brief (e.g. copy for a website, a letter from bank to customers, an email apologising for anticipated failure to meet a writing deadline) where, before drafting their text, they identify inferences they hope readers will make and work on their texts with the aim of encouraging readers to make those inferences.

Using the framework described here in this way helps students to think critically about their own spoken and written communication. In working on these tasks, it is useful to talk explicitly about how these inferences contribute to identities constructed and impressions created by particular formulations. This is an important feature of all kinds of professional communication, including coursework and other academic writing. Students develop understanding of how readers are likely to make inferences about their understanding of academic and other conventions by the way their work is formulated. Some tasks focus explicitly on what readers are likely to look at and think about first. Does this essay follow formatting and presentation guidelines? Does it have a clear contents page? Does the list of contents suggest a clear structure? Does the introduction help the reader to understand the essay's aims and structure? And so on. Classroom tasks can also focus on nonverbal behaviour in spoken contexts, including the importance of posture and stance, of establishing eye contact with smaller and larger audiences, and so on.

Focusing on these things is not new. Most advice on academic writing and professional communication aims to address ideas like these. A key thing the relevance-theoretic framework offers is a structured way of thinking about inferences of different kinds and how to think strategically about how to encourage them. It also helps students to think more fully about the range of things which contribute to inferences. Students in classes like this have reflected informally and in coursework on how these tasks help to change their communicative practice and to think more fully about all stages of communication from initial ideas through drafting, revision and performance.

3.6 Final comments

This article has argued both that relevance-theoretic ideas about communication and cognition can help in understanding identity and that focusing on identity can contribute to the development of relevance theory, including in developing an account of communicative production. The framework provided by relevance theory does not account for all aspects of identity construction and ascription, and exploring implicatures and implications in this way is a different process from those involved in actual interaction. However, this framework is a useful way of understanding the two-way relationships between communicative interaction and identities, and it is helpful in teaching spoken and written communication.

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