The task of the speaker and the task of the hearer

Anne Cutler

MRC Applied Psychology Unit, 15 Chaucer Road, Cambridge CB2 2EK, England

These brief remarks will be addressed to Sperber & Wilson's (S&W's) view of verbal communication. First, S&W draw a distinction between two separate processes of comprehension: a decoding process and an inferential process. They are principally concerned with the operation of the latter; the former they dismiss as automatic and therefore "not so much a part of the comprehension process as something that precedes the real work of understanding" (p. 177). Second, they imply that the work of understanding (though "real") is less than the work of speaking; the brunt of the work in communication is borne by the speaker. "It is left to the communicator to make correct assumptions about the codes and contextual information that the audience will have... The responsibility for avoiding misunderstandings also lies with the speaker" (p. 43). If the speaker has done her job properly, the end of the utterance should confirm all the provisional choices... that have been made along the route" (p. 208).

This picture is distinctly unfair to the hard-pressed hearer. Hearers are presented with signals which are for the most part semantically, syntactically, lexically, and phonologically unpredictable; moreover, the signals arrive in a noisy channel and are frequently subject to considerable distortion and attenuation. Speakers, on the other hand, have in principle a free hand in what they choose to say and how they choose to say it. S&W's principle of relevance is based on the observation that speakers do not take advantage of this freedom; in contrast, they constrain their utterances quite severely in order to make life easier for hearers.

In fact, S&W have here revealed only the tip of an iceberg. Speakers construct their speech output so as to cater to listeners' needs in a far more detailed fashion than is captured by the
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guarantee of relevance or by Grice's injunctions to speakers not to bore, puzzle, offend, or deceive audiences. In particular, there is abundant evidence that speakers adjust their output to assist the listener at those levels which S&W claim are the subject of "automatic" processing - even at the level of segment production, as the following examples will show.

On the one hand, consider the inhibition of certain phonological rules of elision and assimilation. The application of such rules can result in a distortion, in casual speech, of phonetic segments which would be clearly articulated in more formal speech (Cooper & Paccia-Cook 1980; Kaisse 1985); for example, the sequence [tj] can become the affricated segment [tʃ]. This palatalisation rule can apply across word boundaries, as in "Meetcha after work?" Cooper and Paccia-Cook investigated the applicability of such palatalisation as a function of the informativeness of words preceding and following the boundary. For example, they varied word frequency of occurrence, comparing relatively common words ("rode your horse"; "had utensils") with much less frequent ones ("goad your horse"; "had euglena"). Varying the frequency of the word preceding the boundary had no effect on the frequency of palatalisation across the boundary, but varying the frequency of the word after the boundary had a strong effect - palatalisation was used significantly less often before rare words. Cooper and Paccia-Cook also looked at the effect of contrastively stressing each word; again, stressing preceding words had no significant effect on the applicability of palatalisation, but stressing following words almost completely inhibited it.

In other words, distorting the ends of words is something speakers are fairly happy to do; but they are reluctant to distort word beginnings if the words are either rare or contrastively stressed, that is, if their information value is high. The beginning is the most important part of a word for the listener - distortion of word onsets disrupts word recognition far more than distortion of later segments (Bagley 1980; Cole 1973; Marslen-Wilson & Welsh 1978). So the speakers in Cooper and Paccia-Cooer's studies were clearly making phonological choices in such a way as to minimise disruption to the listener.

The same kind of motivation can be discerned in a pattern observed by Cutler (1983) in the correction of slips of the tongue. Errors of lexical stress occur quite frequently - synTAX, orligin for Origin. Mostly such errors remain uncorrected by the speaker. This should cause the hearer little problem, since prosodic stress plays no role in word recognition; far more than distortion of later segments (Bagley 1980; Cole 1973; Marslen-Wilson & Welsh 1978). So the speakers in Cooper and Paccia-Cooer's studies were clearly making phonological choices in such a way as to minimise disruption to the listener.

Relevance and mutual knowledge

Martin Davies
Philosophy Department, Birkbeck College, University of London, Malet Street, London WC1E 7HX, England

It is common for philosophers of language to abstract from considerations of context dependence. The resulting picture of language is an idealised one; but the assumption behind much work over the last twenty years is that the idealisation does no serious theoretical damage. This assumption is, in turn, nourished by the idea that context dependence in general can be treated on the model of the indexicality exhibited by the word "I". The meaning of "I" specifies a very simple rule for assigning a reference relative to a context. Give or take "I," "here," "now," and a few other expressions to be treated on the same lines, the linguistic meaning of a sentence will determine a proposition expressed and, in particular, will determine truth conditions.

One of the major virtues of Sperber & Wilson's (S&W's) Relevance is its stress upon the fact that the common picture is not just idealised but mythological; truth conditions are radically underdetermined by linguistic meaning. Whether or not the bold claims for relevance theory can be sustained at every point, the treatment of metaphor in Relevance and the subsequent paper (Sperber & Wilson 1986b) is a real advance. It shows that the apparent dichotomy between speaker-meaning accounts of metaphor following Searle (1979) and "seeing as" accounts following Davidson (1978) is spurious, thus correcting an impression given, for example, by Davies (1983). And it gives some determinate theoretical substance to the suggestion of Blackburn (1984, pp. 171-79) that a metaphor is an "invitation to explore" a comparison or image.

The radical underdetermination of truth conditions by linguistic meaning is enough to show that something is seriously wrong with the code model of communication: Even in the case in which there is only a single determinate thought to be communicated, the content of the thought is not fully encoded in the sentence uttered. But there is something else wrong with the code model as a model of human communication - that is, communication amongst creatures for whom there is a difference between entertaining a proposition, or having a proposition presented as a candidate for belief, on the one hand, and actually going forward in judgement and believing the proposition, on the other.

If propositions really were encoded in sentences, and I were equipped with a mechanism for decoding, then upon hearing an utterance of a sentence I would be presented with a proposition as a candidate for belief. This would be similar to the way in which, if I have a perceptual experience of the world as being a certain way, then the proposition that the world is that way is presented as a candidate for belief. In the case of perception, if I take my experience at face value, then I believe that the world is indeed that way. What is more, I usually do take my experience at face value. I do not require a justification for doing that; rather, I should need a reason not to take it so (cf. pp. 257-58, n. 28). But still, the difference between perception and belief remains. In the case of communication on the code model, it