Relevance theory and media discourse: a verbal-visual model of communication

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Abstract
In 1986 Sperber & Wilson’s Relevance theory emerged in pragmatic analyses as an ambitious attempt to provide a thorough explanation of how addressees pick up one single interpretation (based on nondemonstrative inference) that is consistent with the addressee’s intention. In the application of this theory to media discourse, some problems arise associated with the correct attribution of the addresser’s (author or character) communicative intention. One reason can be found in the lack of physical, face-to-face co-presence of both ends of media communication: author and spectator. The aim of the present article is to propose a Model for verbal-visual media discourse extracted from Sperber and Wilson’s ideas which comprises the interpretive possibilities of media communication in sixteen categories with four basic qualifying parameters: addressee, verbal or nonverbal discourse, intentionality, and the outcome of the addressee’s interpretation. The article ends with an exemplification of some categories of this Model using English comics as one of the verbal-visual discourses that can be analysed under the perspective of this Model.

1. Relevance theory: a brief overview

Sperber and Wilson (1986) developed a cognitive approach to interpretation from their initial proposal of the unification of Grice’s (1975) classical conversational maxims in a single principle of relevance. In their approach, these analysts underline the importance of the maxim of relevance, in a clear contrast to the lack of interest in the notion of relevance that can be found in the pragmatic studies during the seventies (see Gazdar 1979: 45), with perhaps one exception in Dascal (1977).

Apart from this revision of Grice’s ideas, Sperber and Wilson (S&W henceforth) begin their study with the reformulation of three aspects that are traditional objects of analysis in pragmatic research: (a) how the process of human interpretation is achieved. In this respect, more emphasis is given to the inferential model of communication, which provides a better explanation of human interaction than the code model. (b) The importance of context in comprehension, with a much more dynamic perspective in which context is not given beforehand in communication, but rather it is created (and varied) in the course of interpretation. And (c) the rejection of the well-known notion of mutual knowledge and the proposal of the alternative concept of mutually manifest assumptions (in a given cognitive environment) which, as S&W argue, does not suffer from the same limitations as the former notion, especially concerning the endless recursiveness that mutual knowledge produces (A knows p; B knows that A knows p; A knows that B knows that A knows p; ad infinitum). According to S&W, this notion prevents us from distinguishing for sure what information is actually shared by the interlocutors, and what information they merely know. In this still unresolved pragmatic issue, S&W’s position has been criticized by several
researchers who claim that either this recursiveness is short-circuited, for example by linguistic co-presence, physical co-presence and community membership of the interlocutors in Clark & Marshall’s (1981) proposal, or that S&W’s alternative notion of mutually manifest assumptions presents the same limitations as the traditional notion of mutual knowledge (Gibbs 1987: 568; Mey & Talbot 1988: 250; see Garnham & Perner 1990 and S&W 1990 for further discussion). In any case, information shared by interlocutors (or made mutually manifest to them in S&W’s terms) is essential to select the addressee’s intended interpretation in and of media discourse.

S&W’s cognitive theory centers around the importance of intention and inference in every communicative act. In their approach to intention, S&W come close to the ideas of Grice (1975) and Strawson (1964), among others, about meaning and communication centred on the addressee’s recognition of the addresser’s informative intention, with the help of the parallel recognition of the communicative intention underlying that utterance (or stimulus, as S&W prefer to call it). The explicit manifestation of one’s intention that something becomes manifest for the hearer becomes an ostensive communicative action. Ostensive stimuli must satisfy three requirements: (S&W 1986: 153-154): (a) attract the audience’s attention; (b) focus it on the communicator’s intentions; and (c) reveal the communicator’s intentions.

As far as inference is concerned, S&W (1987: 697) think that inference can fill the gap between the semantic representation of utterances and the message that this utterance eventually communicates. They emphasize the role of the communicators in manifesting both their communicative and informative intention with the utterance, while the hearer tries to work out different hypotheses on what the correct interpretation is. With this pragmatic approach, S&W avoid traditional views that explained communication as a simple, straightforward decoding of the messages encoded by the communicator.

S&W define inference as the process by which an assumption is accepted as true or probably true on the strength of the truth or probable truth of other assumptions. In their theory, S&W support the non-demonstrative view of inference, since no model can explain the cognitive operations in our minds that result in the correct interpretation, nor are there ways to measure the degree of success in the formation of inferences: “in demonstrative inference, the only form of inference that is well understood, the truth of the premises guarantees the truth of the conclusions. In nondemonstrative inference, the truth of the premises merely makes the truth of the conclusions probable” (S&W 1987: 701). In such a way, the kind of inference in which S&W are interested is one’s spontaneous mental operations based on assumptions which are not subjected to rigid models of logical deduction.

However, although inference is not, in a strict sense, logical, it does have deductive rules that people access spontaneously before reaching cognitive operations of hypothesis confirmation. Starting points of inferential processes are the hearer’s previous mental representations and factual assumptions about the world. Every new assumption inferred is combined with pre-existing assumptions in order to modify and improve the general representation of the world that all human beings possess. But not all assumptions reach the same degree of prominence in the hearer’s mind: they are organised from the most likely ones to the least likely. We cannot pay attention to all the informative barrage that accesses our senses from the world around us (Recanati 1993: 285). Much information is processed only at a preliminary processing level, whereas other information, the one that the hearer expects to become relevant, reaches a second, deeper processing level. S&W take for granted that there is a direct relationship between the strength of our assumptions and the probability that these
become true, and we expect our cognitive mechanisms to strengthen or weaken previous assumptions stored in our minds.

In their interpretive model, S&W also stress the importance of deduction, which is the result of bringing together new information \( P \) and old information \( C \) previously stored in the hearer’s mind. S&W name this cognitive operation contextualization (S&W 1986: 108), in a rather more restrictive sense than, for example, the one suggested by Gumperz (1977: 199). This contextualization can produce contextual effects. A contextual effect is generated when the context is modified in a certain way by the new information. This modification of context results in the strengthening or weakening of former assumptions.

All this theoretical background is the base on which S&W place the central proposal of their theory, which can be summarised in four statements (Wilson 1994: 44): (a) every utterance has a variety of possible interpretations, all compatible with the information that is linguistically encoded; (b) not all these interpretations occur to the hearer simultaneously, some of them take more effort to think up; (c) hearers are equipped with a single, general criterion for evaluating interpretations; and (d) this criterion is powerful enough to exclude all but at most a single interpretation, so that having found an interpretation that fits the criterion, the hearer looks no further.

In a nutshell, for S&W interpretation depends on the addressee’s choice of one interpretive hypothesis (among many other possible hypotheses) that is consistent with the addressee’s communicative intention.

However, processing the information underlying ostensive communication is subject to risk and effort: the risk of not being completely sure of what assumption, in a range of multiple other assumptions that every communicative activity can produce in the hearer, is the one that the speaker wants the hearer to process (Blakemore 1992: 21); and the effort of choosing one proposition and processing it, after having compared it to previously stored information. This is why every ostensive communicative activity carries the guarantee of its relevance, that is, the speaker is aware of the cognitive effort that the hearer has to make, and presupposes that despite this, the benefits of the eventual interpretation of the utterance are worth this effort.

From this perspective, we can deduce that different degrees of relevance are generated from the fact that every information-processing activity demands a certain amount of mental effort from the hearer, and the bigger this effort, the less relevant. In conclusion, the definition of relevance can be formulated roughly with two preliminary conditions (S&W 1986: 125):

Condition 1: an assumption is relevant in a context to the extent that its contextual effects in this context are large.

Condition 2: an assumption is relevant in a context to the extent that the effort required to process it in this context is small.

When these two conditions are satisfied, the utterance is consistent with the principle of relevance. If the hearer finds a (first) interpretation that satisfies these conditions, the process of interpretation will stop at this point.

In the following paragraphs, I will incorporate the proposal of Relevance theory on how inferential processing takes place, as a part of the attributes of a Model of communication of and in verbal-visual media discourse.
2. Relevance theory and media discourse: the verbal-visual Model of communication

The application of Relevance theory to media discourse, specifically discourses that share verbal and visual channels of communication, implies the incorporation in pragmatic analysis not only of communicative situations in which the addressee’s choice of an interpretation matches the addressee’s intended one, but also situations where for some reason communication does not reach an optimal level of interpretation. For example, in Peter Shaffer’s Amadeus, Salieri asks Mozart what opinion he has about his music, and Mozart answers that he never thought that such music was possible. Salieri, when given this answer, cannot know whether Mozart has praised him or has criticised his music, because both interpretations are likely to be selected as consistent with the principle of relevance. Examples like this of intentional ambiguity cause problems for optimal interpretation (see Morgan and Green 1987: 727), and illustrate a picture of interpretation that moves away from the code model of communication, and into a more down-to-earth inferential view of hypothesis formation and confirmation.

In this sense, any model of interpretation that offers a series of categories in an attempt to explain the quality of communication should not avoid the analysis of errors in communication. Specifically in the model proposed by S&W, the different steps leading to successful or wrong interpretations both in conversational interaction and in media communication should be dealt with, although this analysis is clearly influenced by the problems involved in the study of the role of intention in communication. Wilson (1994: 47) acknowledges the importance of misinterpretation in conversational interaction when she states that Relevance theory does not exclude the possibility of interpretive errors: “because utterance interpretation is not a simple matter of decoding, but a fallible process of hypothesis formation and evaluation, there is no guarantee that the interpretation that satisfies the hearer’s expectation of relevance will be the correct, i.e. the intended, one. Through mismatches in memory and perceptual systems, the hearer may overlook a hypothesis that the speaker thought would be highly salient, or notice a hypothesis that the speaker had overlooked. Misunderstandings occur... Relevance theory claims that the interpretation that satisfies the expectation of relevance is the only one that the hearer has any rational basis for choosing. To claim that a choice is rationally justified, however, is not the same as claiming that it is invariably correct.” Carston (1987: 713) shares this opinion when he points out that “speakers may betray assumptions and attitudes they haven’t intended to convey; hearers may experience a nagging uncertainty about whether a speaker is making some insinuation or whether they are themselves responsible for projecting it into the interpretation.”

This idea of uncertainty in interpretation that I am suggesting increases in the case of written communication, especially in the reception of literary texts and also in the discourse in which we are interested here: verbal-visual media discourse. The reader (spectator henceforth) is aware of the fact that the authors of media discourse cannot explain their intentions in the creation of the verbal-visual text, unlike face-to-face interaction. And vice versa, the author of the text can only hope that the would-be addressee will be able to pick up the intended interpretation, but there is no way to check the final quality of that interpretation. The author will expect the multiple addressees of the verbal-visual discourse to fit the requirements of the ideal spectator of that discourse: the spectator that invariably selects the right interpretation throughout the reception of the media text. In general, the text will be much more profusely connotated than many of its interpretations and it will be difficult to choose one single model interpretation of the text. Undoubtedly, Foucault (1971) was right when he suggested that the only way to make a commentary of a text that reveals all the connotations that the author...
intended to communicate with this text is, significantly, to copy out the text again with the same words.

The lack of real face-to-face interaction (physical co-presence) between author and spectator can lead to an overemphasis on the properties of the text and its underlying code as the only safe source of meaning (Randall 1988: 48), or the assumption that this safe source can only be the meaning proposed by the spectator (as in Reception theory; see Iser 1978, among others). In this sense, there has been some criticism about whether Relevance theory can be applied to fictional discourse (see Rebul 1987, Green 1993, Trotter 1992; Pilkington 1991, 1992). Clark’s (1987a, 1987b) proposal of different communicative layers is also worth mentioning: in every communicative act there are several layers of interaction, but the number of layers increases in fictional discourse. In this sense, three sources of meaning are proposed for literary discourse: character, author and reader. In a play like Hamlet, for instance, Clark (1987b: 17) proposes at least three layers of interaction: the layer of communication between Hamlet and Ophelia, the layer of the actors playing their parts on-stage, and the layer of Shakespeare communicating with the audience/reader through the play. According to Clark (1987a: 715), Relevance theory is unable to provide a coherent explanation of the interrelationship of all these layers if this explanation is based on the dichotomy of communicative and informative intentions: “S&W... presuppose that all communication is flat -that it has only one layer, one type of relevance... Shakespeare and Melville [Clark’s literary examples] have intentions towards us, but these are not ‘informative’ or ‘communicative intentions’... Even if relevance theory could explain... how Ophelia understood Hamlet, it would not explain how we do.” For Clark, it seems as if the application of Relevance theory to fictional discourse can only work in the measuring of contextual effects and processing effort of the reader, that is, measure the (optimal?) interpretation only at the layer of fictional communication understood as one single layer (see Rebul 1987: 729).

Clark’s proposal of different layers in discourse is undoubtedly applicable to media discourse in a similar way to literary works like Hamlet. But contrary to Clark’s doubts regarding Relevance theory, I think this theory is applicable to media discourse in many (if not all) of its communicative layers. For instance, in this paper I draw a symbolic line between author/spectator communication and character/character communication. In both layers, the addressee has to work out the (supposedly) optimal balance of contextual effects and processing effort involved in the interpretation of the stimulus and choose the (first) hypothesis consistent with the principle of relevance. As in both layers there is a communicator producing a stimulus which, in most occasions, aims at one single interpretation, S&W’s theory is appropriate to explain the outcome of interpretation in these two layers, not just in the author/spectator layer.

Of course, claiming that different addressees, who belong to different communicative layers in media discourse, try to grasp the communicators’ intended interpretations of their (verbal or nonverbal) stimuli, does not necessarily imply that this interpretive activity is bound to be always effective. Indeed, it can be stated that between the production of a stimulus (supposedly intentional) and the ulterior ascription of its relevance by both spectators and characters, there comes what could be named a stage of processing challenge (specifically in literary and media communication, but also in everyday face-to-face interaction) in which all sorts of communicative outcomes can occur: misinterpreted explicit intentional messages, unintentional transmission of information taken as if it were intentional and, of course, optimal interpretation of both intentional and unintentional communication, that is, a correct selection of one interpretive hypothesis plus the correct estimation of its underlying intention. In short, in this stage of processing challenge, the addressee has to overcome two aspects of interpreta-
tion that might be a source of eventual errors in communication: on the one hand, the appreciation of what intention (or lack of it) lies behind the production of a message or of a nonverbal action; on the other hand, the identification of one interpretation precisely in the terms in which the addressee wanted the message to be interpreted (later in this article I will label this optimal choice of interpretation maximal interpretive efficiency). Obviously, the inadequate overcoming of the first interpretation obstacle will almost inevitably lead to a failure in the second obstacle in the stage of processing challenge.

The characteristics of verbal-visual media discourse increase the problems in overcoming this processing challenge. In the first place, the lack of face-to-face interaction makes it difficult to weigh the intentions that the author had in the making of the media text. Secondly, in the interaction taking place within the story we are faced with a paradox: characters do share the same physical space and can interact effectively (verbal-visual media discourse is filled with true-to-life contextual information available to the characters during interaction); but on the other hand, the author of the media discourse might not let the characters behave in such a way that it resembles real conversational interaction, because often authors are forced to create funny and/or unnatural speech situations in order to entertain the audience.

So far, several aspects of media communication have been roughly sketched: the difference between author/spectator communication and character/character communication; the integration of verbal and nonverbal channels of communication; and what I have labelled stage of processing challenge, comprising two aspects of interpretation: firstly, the identification of the variety of intention that the utterance carries, or identification of the lack of intentionality; and secondly, the correct selection of one interpretation (among other alternative interpretations) that is consistent with the interpretation intended by the addressee. According to S&W, in order to achieve an optimal interpretation, the addressees have to weigh the balance of contextual effects and processing effort that the utterance produces in the addressees’ mental activity during the process of interpretation, and they will tend to choose the first interpretation that offers an optimal balance. Whatever happens in the stage of processing challenge will influence the combination of effects and effort, and consequently will also affect the final estimation of relevance by the addressees. For example, in the following exchange (S&W 1986):

(1) A: Do you want some wine?
   B: You know I am a good Muslim.

B expects A to access some encyclopaedic information about Muslim religion, extract contextual assumptions like (2a-c) and finally derive the contextual implication (2d):

(2) (a) Wine is an alcoholic drink.
    (b) Muslims do not drink alcohol.
    (c) B is a Muslim.
    (d) B does not want wine.

Now, let us imagine that A does not know that Muslims cannot drink alcohol (that is, imagine that this bit of information is not mutually manifest for A and B in a given cognitive environment C). Here, there is a failure in the stage of processing challenge due to A’s inability to pick up one interpretation consistent with B’s intended interpretation, even though the
ascription of what intention underlies the utterance is correct (A surely knows that B intends an implicated meaning, in the Gricean sense, with his utterance).

In conclusion, four basic dichotomies must be taken into account when proposing a model of how interpretation happens in media discourse: (1) whether communication takes place directly between the author and the spectator (with no intermediate interaction between characters), or it happens between characters inside the story of the media discourse concerned; (2) whether communication is achieved by verbal means or by nonverbal means; (3) whether communication is intentional or is only an accidental transmission of information (if intentional, the addressee has to determine which variety of intention lies behind the addressee’s communication); and (4) whether the interpretation intended by the communicator is the one chosen by the addressee (spectator or character). I will deal with these four dichotomies in the following paragraphs.

Spectator-oriented communication versus character-oriented communication. Although the conversational interaction that happens between characters is a part of the whole discourse addressed to the spectator, I think that it is useful to draw an imaginary line between these two varieties of communication, because they can work as perfectly separated entities. Using Genette’s (1993: 36) words, in the fictional text characters “state (Yes, prince, I have a burning desire for Teseo...), promise (You will be here, my daughter...), order (Get out!), ask (Who told you that?), etc., as in other situations, with the same intentions and consequences as in real life, the only difference that all this happens in a fictional universe perfectly separated from the real world in which the spectators live” (my translation). In short, the communication between author and spectator (which I will label spectator-oriented communication) would cover all the (non)verbal messages that reach the spectator without an intermediate conversational interaction between two or more characters. On the other hand, communication between characters (labelled character-oriented communication) will cover all the exchanges of information, through (non)verbal means, that take place between two or more characters in face-to-face speech situations. Needless to say, narrative media discourses like films or comics, in which there is a (spectator-oriented) story or plot containing many verbal-visual (character-oriented) conversational exchanges are the ones where this preliminary distinction is more obvious and pervasive, but we can still find this dichotomy in other media. For example, in many TV ads certain short conversations between characters can be isolated which are just one element in the whole spectator-oriented advertisement.

Verbal messages versus nonverbal messages. In one of the examples proposed by S&W (1986: 25), Peter asks Mary how she is feeling and she pulls a bottle of aspirin out of her bag and shows it to him. S&W seem to have a pragmatic picture of communication as an exchange of information from an addressee to an addressee using a message which does not necessarily have to be verbal (see Strawson 1969: 336). Although S&W prefer codified verbal communication because of its capacity to show the speaker’s ostensive intentions, and to attract the hearer’s attention to the presumption of relevance that the utterance carries (S&W 1986: 174), many pragmatic analysts have stressed the importance of the contextual information provided by nonverbal means in the final comprehension of utterances, in such a way that nonverbal behaviour can reinforce, minimise, or even contradict the verbal message that it accompanies. Needless to say, in a study of verbal-visual media discourse, the importance of nonverbal communication must be taken into account.

Intentional communication versus non-intentional communication. The analysis of intention in communication is essential from the perspective of Relevance theory, since successful communication occurs when the hearer identifies the informative intention
underlying the speaker’s ostensive behaviour. Nevertheless, the analysis of intention has not been devoid of problems, because as linguists we try to access inextricable mental areas of human cognition where intentions are generated before being transferred into analysable utterances (Kendon 1981: 9-10, Stamp & Knapp 1990: 292-293). The problem of the study of intention becomes even more evident when we analyse communication between the author of media discourse and its potential spectator. In the analysis of discourses like this, traditionally “the idea of intentionality... is excluded from the range of concepts theoretically important for the comprehension of texts, and is considered a rather harmful concept” (Thiebaut 1994: 63, my translation). Many theories have rejected completely the mere suggestion of an eventual analysis of intention in written discourse (for example Wimsatt and Beardsley’s intentional fallacy), while other theories take the (objective) information provided by the text as the only valid source of meaning. In general, a problem is that the addressee of the text cannot be absolutely sure of the author’s intentions when creating that text; and at the same time, the text might not show exactly the author’s intentions due perhaps to the authors’ inability to put their ideas into writing. In a rather eclectic position, I think the limitations of all these contradictory views about what the right source of meaning in reader-oriented communication (or spectator-oriented in media discourse) is supposed to be must be overcome. The right source of meaning is not only the author’s intention (intentio auctoris), nor only the objective information provided by the text (intentio operis), nor only the reader’s (or spectator’s) interpretation (intentio lectoris), but all three simultaneously: the authors (usually) want a certain interpretation for the fictional text, and their intentions are transcribed into textual words (and images in verbal-visual media discourse). The readers/spectators also intend to interpret the text in the best possible way, but they cannot be sure of whether there is a match between the author’s intended interpretation and the spectator’s (on the other hand, there is no real need for an intentional match, unless the reader/spectator is, for example, a literary critic), but nevertheless the interpretation chosen will be valid, at least from the addressee’s point of view (see Eco 1992: 41, 1995; Suleiman 1980: 23, von Glasersfeld 1983: 208, Bredella 1992).

For an analysis of intention in a communicative Model for verbal-visual media discourse, I will start from a preliminary definition of intention in a general sense: an utterance (or nonverbal action) is intentional if the communicator deliberately addresses it to the spectator/character to be interpreted in a particular way, that is, when the addressee has the explicit desire to communicate a message to the addressee. Sometimes, the author/character does not intend to communicate any information. In this case I will call it, using W&S’s (1993) terminology, accidental transmission of information.

Having proposed this preliminary definition of intention we can now establish several sub-intentions that will help the analyst in the study of interpretation in media discourse. For these sub-intentions I propose a new terminology: (a) spectator-oriented intention and character-oriented intention; (b) direct intention and indirect intention; and (c) overt intention and covert intention. They will be dealt with below.

(a) The difference between spectator-oriented intention and character-oriented intention is, I think, clear from the preceding paragraphs. Here, I merely wish to draw attention to the fact that the author’s intention when creating the discourse often has no relationship to the actual intention that characters have in their conversational exchanges. As Genette (1993: 37) points out regarding literary discourse, “the words exchanged between characters in a novel are, evidently, real speech acts performed in the fictional universe of the novel: a promise by Vautrin or Rastignac does not affect Balzac, but it does affect Vautrin as if I myself was the speaker.”
(b) Regarding the distinction between direct intention and indirect intention, it is possible to establish a semantic continuum starting from the messages that transmit the information contained in its propositional form (which S&W call explicatures), up to the messages (even by means of nonverbal behaviour) whose final meaning cannot be deduced only from the propositional form of the utterance, but further combinations with contextual information are needed in order to generate contextual implications. As a consequence, and at this level of sub-intentions, when the addresser tries to communicate an interpretation that can be deduced from the propositional form of the message (explicature), we will say that this interpretation corresponds to a direct intention. On the other hand, if the information provided by the utterance or nonverbal action requires further combinations with contextual information to yield an optimal interpretation, the interpretation intended is a result of the addresser’s indirect intention.

In this sense, I would stress the fact that by direct intention I do not mean the intention to communicate the literal content of an utterance, which does not really exist as such (Dascal 1983: 31; García Landa 1992: 90). With a direct intention, the addresser wants to communicate the propositional form of the utterance, or rather one of the possible propositional forms in a given context, not a decontextualized, literal meaning. This idea has been studied by Dascal (1983) in relation to Grice’s (1968) terminology of word meaning, utterance meaning and utterer (or speaker) meaning.

The (non)verbal form transmitted by the communicator contains a propositional meaning that can vary according to the qualities of what could be called preliminary context. So, an utterance like “yesterday she bought a cat there” has a propositional meaning in whatever conversational interaction, but some minimal contextual information is needed to elucidate the inherent ambiguity of the indexicals “yesterday” and “there.” The meaning of the most straightforward interpretation of this sentence in that minimal context would be Gricean utterance meaning. As Dascal affirms, “an utterance type may be ambiguous... but on each occasion it will usually retain only one of its meanings... Furthermore, an utterance type may have an ‘incomplete’ timeless meaning (its propositional content and/or its illocutionary force may not be fully specified), whereas when used under given circumstances, the missing elements are supplied... When these adjustments of the meaning of the utterance type to the occasion of use are made, the result is utterance meaning.”

With a direct intention the addressee will intend to communicate the most direct interpretation that can be obtained from the utterance according to the attributes of the speech situation, while with an indirect intention the interpretation intended will not be found only in the propositional content, but in the union of propositional content and contextual information so that eventually the correct interpretation (often in the form of Gricean implicatures and closer to what Grice called speaker meaning), is reached. For example, to access the right interpretation of an utterance as ironic, the hearer has to extract the propositional meaning of the utterance in a given initial context C, and afterwards infer that the speaker did not intend to communicate this straightforward meaning, but a more connoted interpretation (implicature) accessible only with the help of contextual information (for instance background knowledge or mutually manifest assumptions between interlocutors).

Dascal (1983) proposes that pragmatics should study Gricean speaker meaning, and that semantics should deal with Gricean utterance meaning. The progressive inclusion of contextual features in pragmatic analysis can be represented in a continuum of layers of significance (see Dascal 1985) starting from the most propositional interpretation of the utterance, up to the most context-dependent speaker meaning. However, I would argue that
it is possible that the propositional meaning of an utterance matches the interpretation intended by the speaker. Under these circumstances, both utterance meaning and speaker meaning would coincide as the result of the speaker’s direct intention, and the hearer’s processing activity would remain in one of the lowest layers of significance proposed by Dascal. Although Dascal is right when he states that only speaker meaning mirrors the interpretation intended by the speaker, this does not imply that the speaker’s intention always has an indirect quality.

(c) Lastly, I propose a dichotomy of overt intention and covert intention. With this terminology I attempt to consider the frequent communicative situations in media discourse where there is an intention to deceive the addressee (spectator/character) leading him or her to choose a certain interpretation which differs from the final interpretation that the speaker wants to convey. The intention that the speaker ostensively displays with a deceitful purpose, will be called overt intention, while the actual intention underlying the communicative act will be called covert intention. For example, in the graphic novel Downside (Dave McNamara and Peter Ketley, 1993) two characters, a man and a woman, are arguing on the edge of a cliff and suddenly the man jumps off as if committing suicide. When the woman, frightened, leans over the edge and sees the other character standing on a small rock ledge a few metres below, she realises that she has been deceived by the man. In our terminology, the man’s overt intention would be to transmit an interpretation of suicide; his covert intention would be just to deceive the woman. Anyhow, the underlying covert intention can aim at a second alternative meaning, besides deceit, as in (3):

(3) A pair of suburban couples who had known each other for quite some time talked it over and decided to do a little conjugal swapping. The trade was made the following evening, and the newly arranged couples retired to their respective houses. After about an hour of bedroom bliss, one of the wives propped herself up, looked at her new partner and said:

“Well, I wonder how the boys are getting along”.


In this example, the author has the overt intention to lead us readers to the interpretation of this text as a case of heterosexual relationship, but eventually we find out that the author’s covert intention was to provide the opposite interpretation. Here the reader is deceived because the elements and organisation of the story lead inevitably to a first accessible interpretation with a high number of contextual effects and demanding very little processing effort (a cognitive phenomenon called garden-path, see Mey 1991), so “heterosexual relationship” is selected as the most relevant interpretation but, as the reader soon finds out, not the only one.

In my opinion, with these six varieties of intention, a wide range of communicative situations in media discourse can be explained. Some examples of possible application will be provided later in this article.

Maximal interpretive efficiency versus minimal interpretive efficiency. S&W stress the importance of the addresser’s ostensive behaviour in interpersonal communication: if the communicator manages to convey one single interpretive hypothesis (by means of an utterance or a nonverbal behaviour) which provides many contextual effects without demanding a high degree of processing effort, success in communication is guaranteed. Nevertheless, in the preceding paragraphs I have suggested that in media discourse there is a high probability that
the interpretation intended by the addresser, and the interpretation selected by the addressee will not match. The coining of the terminology *maximal interpretive efficiency* and *minimal interpretive efficiency* acknowledges this probability. The scope of these two concepts is clear-cut in media communication:

*Maximal interpretive efficiency* is obtained in two varieties of discourse comprehension: (a) when the addressee interprets the addresser’s intentional message *precisely in the way* the addresser wanted it to be interpreted; and (b) when the addressee processes optimally the information *exuded* by the environment which accesses the addressee’s sensory organs without the mediation of intention in the source of the message. Fraser (1983: 32) comments on the first variety when he states that “on the assumption that in uttering a sentence the speaker always means one and only one sense to be understood, the task of the hearer is to determine which one.” S&W also mention this variety in their proposal of an interpretation consistent with the *principle of relevance*: “for an utterance to be understood, it must have one and only one interpretation consistent with the fact that the speaker intended it to seem relevant to the hearer—adequately relevant on the effect side and maximally relevant on the effort side. We will say that in this case the interpretation is *consistent with the principle of relevance*” (W&S 1988: 141). In these cases, according to Relevance theory, the addressee has to establish the most suitable propositional form of the utterance in an initial context $C$ and check whether the explication of the utterance fits *speaker meaning* or not. If that *direct* interpretation does not offer a good balance of contextual effects and processing effort, the addressee will have to extract further contextual implications that cannot be deduced from propositional form alone, but in combination with contextual information. In the specific case of *spectator-oriented communication*, what is important, according to Miall (1988: 158-159) is not so much the prior meaning of the text as how the addressee progresses from a first partial apprehension of meaning to a more elaborate and complex interpretation. The spectators can be quite satisfied with the interpretive hypothesis which they come up with, and at least in theory, this hypothesis might be the same as the interpretation intended by the author of the media discourse (*maximal efficiency*). Perhaps we could even set up something like a *scope of maximal processing* comprising a range of acceptable interpretations of media discourse; a scope beyond which interpretations could be said to be definitely incorrect (see Eco 1995). The same could be applied to *character-oriented communication*.

On the other hand, *minimal interpretive efficiency* is reached in two similar varieties of discourse comprehension: (a) when the addressee is unable to interpret the addresser’s intentional message *precisely in the way* the addresser wanted it to be interpreted; and (b) when the addressee does not process optimally the information *exuded* by the environment which accesses the addressee’s sensory organs without the mediation of intention in the source of the message. The reasons for this *minimal efficiency* are varied. In intentional communication, for example, the addresser’s choice of an utterance could be misleading in its suggested balance of contextual effects and processing effort; and the addressee’s estimation of the addresser’s sub-intention (in the terms proposed above) could also be erroneous.

3. A taxonomy of interpretive categories: the verbal-visual Model of communication in the media

The four dichotomies that I have analysed, together with the proposal of different sub-intentions, provide a better picture of the communicative situations that arise in verbal-visual media discourse. The (mathematical) combination of these parameters generates sixteen different
communicative categories. This set of sixteen categories conforms the Verbal-Visual Model of media communication (VV-Model henceforth). See Table 1 for a list of the sixteen categories and the four characteristics of each of them.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CATE</th>
<th>EXCHANGE</th>
<th>MESSAGE</th>
<th>INTENTIONAL</th>
<th>EFFICIENCY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Spectator-oriented</td>
<td>Verbal</td>
<td>Intentional</td>
<td>Maximal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
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<td>Verbal</td>
<td>Intentional</td>
<td>Minimal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
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<td>Verbal</td>
<td>Unintentional</td>
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<td>Unintentional</td>
<td>Minimal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
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<td>Nonverbal</td>
<td>Intentional</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>14</td>
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<td>Minimal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Character-oriented</td>
<td>Nonverbal</td>
<td>Unintentional</td>
<td>Maximal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1. The *VV*-Model and its sixteen interpretive categories.

In the next section I will provide some examples of verbal-visual discourse analysed from the perspective of the *VV*-Model. The medium studied will be communicative situations extracted from some English comics, a medium that offers the pragmatic analyst a wide variety of possibilities as has been demonstrated in previous studies (see Yus Ramos 1995a, 1995b, 1996, Watts 1989). Of course, the choice of this corpus does not mean the *VV*-Model cannot be applied to other verbal-visual media. Indeed, the *VV*-Model applies optimally to discourses in which the character-oriented versus the spectator-oriented dichotomy is clear-cut, and in which the verbal and visual channels of communication are exploited extensively. Verbal-visual narrative discourses like films, for example, provide many instances fitting the sixteen categories which conform the *Model*. For other verbal-visual media, newspapers for instance, the model is less applicable mainly due to the lack of conversational interaction that can usually be found in this medium (with the exception of printed interviews, perhaps). Nevertheless, I would argue that even if the chosen verbal-visual media discourse is not *optimal* for the application of the *VV*-Model (in the sense that it contains instances for most or all the categories proposed), we can still use its categories to explain the outcome of the addressee’s interpretive efficiency. For instance, the printed ads by tobacco companies that can be found nowadays in most English magazines often have no reference whatsoever to the product advertised, and only the “Health Authorities warning” below the page helps us to deduce that the ad actually advertises a tobacco company, with the actual name of the brand usually remaining unidentified (see Barnard 1995). In this particular case, spectators might not be able to work out the intended meaning of the ad, and the outcome of the interpretation of these ads would fit the qualities of category 6 of the *VV*-Model (spectator-oriented, nonverbal, intentional, with minimal interpretive efficiency). Despite the obvious lack of all the character-oriented categories of the *VV*-Model in this example, some of its spectator-oriented categories are still applicable.

Therefore, the application of the sixteen categories of the *VV*-Model depends on the particularities of the media analysed. Sometimes many (or even all) categories will be identified, as in the narrative discourse of films or comics. On other occasions, only a subset of the sixteen categories will be applicable, as in the discourse of advertising.

4. The *VV*-Model: some examples from English comics

The *VV*-Model allows for the analysis of varied communicative instances and also of the final quality of spectator and/or characters’ processing activity. For instance, in dialogue (4) a series of spectator-oriented panels (no conversational interaction between characters is involved) can be explained with one of the categories of the *VV*-Model:

(4)  
[panel 1: complete darkness, sound of alarm-clock represented as onomatopoeias]  
[panel 2: a light is switched on, the alarm-clock strikes 3 o’clock, character A has woken up]  
A: Jesus- This facking [sic] alarm clock’s gone off too early again.
[panel 3: character A stretching in the dim light] A: Mind you- I may as well get up. I'll never get back to sleep now.

[panel 4: character A draws back the curtains, there is sunshine outside, the radio is on] Radio: ...and now it’s time for Steve Wright in the afternoon...

(“Student Grant”, Viz 55, 8-1992, p. 19)

In this series of panels, all the visual information of the scene produces a high number of contextual connections with the reader’s cognitive frames, and with the help of background information it is not difficult to conclude that the reader will come up with several contextual assumptions which will yield the contextual implication that the clock has woken up the character at three o’clock in the morning. But in panel four, the reader realises that this was not the correct interpretation of the panels. This final interpretation is perfectly possible, but before panel four is viewed it produces fewer contextual effects in exchange for the same processing effort. As the readers stop their interpretive activity at the first interpretation that is consistent with the principle of relevance (in this example “three o’clock in the morning”), this second, less likely interpretation (“three o’clock in the afternoon”), which eventually turns out to be the correct one, is never taken into account. This layered probability of interpretations is the key to the humorous strategy displayed by the comic artist using the overt/covert intentions mentioned before. Besides, as the readers choose precisely the (first) interpretation that the artist intended them to choose, the resulting interpretive efficiency turns out to be, paradoxically, maximal. Therefore, all the visual information in (4) would fit the requirements of category 5 of the VV-Model (reader-oriented, nonverbal, intentional, with maximal interpretive efficiency).

The sixteen categories of the VV-Model, together with the six sub-intentions proposed above, can also work as a framework to explain the reason for interpretive errors in media discourse. For example, in character-oriented communication, category 10 of the VV-Model (character-oriented, verbal, intentional, with minimal interpretive efficiency) can account for different communicative situations as, among others, the ones exemplified below:

(a) Direct intention misunderstood. In this situation, the character addressed chooses a (first) interpretation, among all the possible interpretations in a context C, that is consistent with the principle of relevance (a good balance of contextual effects and processing effort), and although the attribution of intention is correct (the character infers that it is direct), the interpretive hypothesis picked up is erroneous. Here are two examples:

(5) [a mother with a cold talking to her spoilt son]
   A: Oh dear, I think I’ve caught a cold.
   B: No mother. It’s natural selection. Nature is weeding out the runts... you’ll probably die. Anyway, how about some nice hot soup?
   A: Oooh... that sounds lovely.
   B: Yes it does... and don’t forget to make toasted soldiers for me as well.
   A: What?... But I...

   (“Spoilt bastard”, Viz 63, 12-1993, p. 3)

(6) [two yobs -A is one of them- and another customer B in a pub]
   A: Two pints of bitter an’ whatever he’s ‘avin’, luv.
   B: That’s very decent of you, lads.
   A: Not really, you’re paying.

   (“Yobs”, Private Eye, 1988, p. 75)
The archetypal character of the phrases “how about...” in (5) and “whatever he’s having...” in (6) makes it easier for the hearer to access encyclopaedic information about the usage of these phrases in conversation. Besides, the information provided by the context in both situations, that is, the character’s cold in (5), and the speech situation of the pub in (6), undoubtedly favour the contextual implications (7) and (8) respectively:

(7) My son wants to make me a bowl of hot soup.
(8) I am about to be offered a drink by these men.

As a humorous contrast, the interpretation turns out to be the opposite of the one that initially provided the best balance of contextual effects and processing effort.

(b) Direct intention interpreted as indirect. In this situation we face one of the challenges for linguistic explanation that has aroused most interest in the field of pragmatics: the semantic divergence that can take place between propositional meaning and implicated (in Gricean terms) meaning, inside the direct/indirect continuum, and given certain contextual attributes. Indirect speech acts, metaphors, irony, etc. challenge linguistic analysis because utterance meaning differs from speaker meaning. For instance, several explanations have been proposed for the fact that utterances like the classical can you pass the salt? are usually understood as a request in most contexts, and not as a factual question about the hearer’s ability to perform the action (see, for example, the natural approach vs. the conventional approach in Morgan 1978; or the surface-meaning hypothesis vs. the use-meaning hypothesis in Geukens 1978).

Specifically, in this situation of category 10 of the VV-Model an utterance with a direct intention is interpreted by the (character) hearer as if the underlying intention were indirect (and hence the processing challenge is not resolved). S&W (1986: 169) mention this possibility when they propose that the first optimally relevant interpretation might happen to be relevant in a way unexpected by the communicator. In this case, the interpretation intended is not consistent with the principle of relevance, that is, an interpretation that the communicator could have been confident enough that it would eventually be optimally relevant for the hearer. Two examples of this erroneous valuation of intention could be (9) and (10), where a factual request for information is interpreted as having a second (and therefore indirect) hidden meaning:

(9) GUS How many times have you read that paper?
    [BEN slams down the paper and rises]
    BEN [angrily] What do you mean?
    GUS I was just wondering how many times you'd-
    BEN What are you doing, criticising me?
    GUS No, I was just-
    BEN You'll get a swipe round your earhole if you don't watch your step.
    (Harold Pinter: The Room and the Dumb Waiter, quoted in Burton 1980: 89)

(10) A: Do you know where today's paper is?
    B: I'll get it for you.
    A: That's OK. Just tell me where it is. I'll get it.
    B: No, I'LL get it.
    (Gumperz 1982: 135, emphasis in the original)
(c) Indirect intention interpreted as direct. Here we face the opposite situation in the erroneous attribution of intention in the direct-indirect continuum. This error leads to minimal interpretive efficiency, and the quality of the final estimation of relevance will be inevitably affected. A reason for this faulty interpretation lies, according to S&W (1982: 129) in the possibility that the (character) hearer only processes some propositions which are important for the comprehension of the utterance, while other relevant contextual implications are left outside the interpretation at a direct level: in the interpretation of a (seemingly) direct intention “only a subset of the speaker’s m-intended propositions have a chance of being identified as such... Of course, the speaker may have further m-intentions, and the hearer may suspect that he has. But if they fall outside that subset identifiable by the principle of relevance, we know of no way in which those suspicions might be confirmed. Some speakers, shy lovers for instance, m-intend their hearers to comprehend much more than they actually manage to convey. However, comprehension consists in retrieving only those m-intentions which have been made retrievable by the speaker.”

As an example from the corpus of comics analysed, in (11) character A says an utterance, Merry Christmas, with an indirect intention, since the intended interpretation (asking for money) cannot be obtained directly from the propositional information of the utterance (wishing someone a good Christmas) and a combination of the explicature with contextual information is therefore required. As B’s interpretation is incorrect (she chooses the sense provided by a direct intention), character A is forced to underline the intended interpretation with a nonverbal action (hold out his hand) which, following Barthes’s (1977) terminology, works as an anchorage of the utterance reducing its range of interpretations:

(11) [a postman -A- at character B’s front door]
A: A very Merry Christmas to you!!
B: Thank you. And to you.
A: [holding out his hand] Hold on! I said, Merry Christmas!
B: Oh! I see! alright. Just let me get my purse!
A: Jesus! 50p... I got a quid from next door!

(“Postman Plod”, Viz, Spunky Parts, p. 74)

In (12) the author plays with the idiomatic expressions stand on one’s own two feet and get legless that correspond, by their own idiomatic status, to an indirect intention. An aspect deserving further attention would be the analysis of idioms that tend to acquire a direct status through overuse, and tending to an archetypal meaning beyond its initial idiomatic interpretation, but this analysis is beyond the scope of this article. In example (12), character A offers a semantic play of direct-indirect meanings that result in the characterisation of the character as cruel, but there is also an example of minimal efficiency in B’s interpretation of the idiomatic expression stand on your own two feet:

(12) [A is walking in the street and encounters a vagrant sitting on the pavement and playing the flute]
A: [to the reader] Look at this poor unfortunate victim of the nineties, a street beggar.
[to the vagrant] You want to learn to stand on your own two feet!
B: But I'm paraplegic you heartless bastard!
A: Whoops! I can feel a bit of guilt creeping in. Here son, have a tenner. Go and get yourself legless.

16
The *VV-Model* also allows for the analysis of accidental transmission of information, that is, information which is manifest to the character as a part of what S&W call *cognitive environment* but without a prior intention in the transmission of information. It could happen that a character hears other characters’ conversations (characters that Clark 1987b would call *overhearers*) and interprets the utterances correctly (*category 11 of character-oriented communication*) or incorrectly (*category 12*), and the same can be said about nonverbal behaviour (*categories 15 or 16 depending on the quality of interpretation*). In (13), for example, character A is unable to establish the correct interpretation of information that his cognitive environment *exudes* without intentionality. Once again, the mediation of cognitive information makes it easier for the character to choose a (first) interpretation that offers a high number of contextual effects in exchange for little processing effort, but it turns out not to be the right interpretation of the exuded information, and the *interpretive efficiency* is, therefore, minimal (*category 16 of the VV-Model*):

(13)  
[Character A watching his neighbour over a fence. The neighbour is surrounded by birds, he is giving them bits of food]  
A: What are you doing?  
B: What does it look like I’m doing?  
A: You’re a big softy at heart, “feeding the birds”!  
B: I’m not feeding them, I’m poisoning the little bastards! That’ll teach them to wake me up at 4 o’clock in the morning!!

(“Happy Larry”, *Smut* 26, 1-1993, p. 37)

We could go on with further examples that would cover all the interpretive *categories* of the *VV-Model*. The basic idea underlying this *VV-Model* is, in any case, that with just the sixteen *fourfold categories* proposed we can analyse most communicative situations in media discourse and incorporate Relevance theory to the study of media communication. The difficulty to evaluate the presence or absence of intentionality in media communication has led to a high number of *categories* in the *VV-Model* that indicate erroneous interpretations; errors that in real face-to-face interaction are often solved in the course of interaction, but that in media discourse, at least in character-oriented communication, often remain unchanged.

In addition, I have proposed Relevance theory as an adequate theoretical framework to determine what I label *maximal or minimal interpretive efficiency*. The applicability of S&W’s ideas to media discourse opens new fields of research for Relevance theory, as has been demonstrated, for example, by Tanaka (1994) in the application of Relevance theory to the verbal-visual discourse of advertising.

**References**


