Pedagogical Implication from Relevance Theory:

will and be going to

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1. Introduction

This paper investigates how a recently developed pragmatic theory, i.e. Relevance The-
ory (Sperber and Wilson, 1986), is applicable to grammar teaching in the EFL classroom.
Sperber & Wilson (S&W, henceforth) account for the mechanism of utterance interpretation
from a cognitive psychological point of view. According to the theory, hearer's interpreta-
tion of an utterance is constrained by the Principle of Relevance, which is defined in terms
of contextual effects and processing cost. In other words, a hearer presupposes that an ut-
terance made by the speaker always guarantees the maximal relevance, and makes an inter-
pretation of it accordingly. For example, speaker's selection of *will* or *be going to* is deter-
mined by contextual effects provided and less processing cost requiered by each expression
in a given context (Haegeman, 1988). However, in the EFL classroom it is often observed
that *will* and *be going to* are taught as if they were equivalent, leading to unacceptable use
of the two forms by EFL learners (Wekker, 1976). If we apply this Relevance Theoretic
view to English language teaching, these two construction should be separately taught under
the appropriate context for each one.

In this paper, Relevance Theory will be first introduced and the mechanism of utterance
interpretation briefly explained. Traditional descriptive studies on the usages of *will* and *be
going to* will, then, be reviewed and an alternative account for the selection of *will* and *be
going to* by Haegeman (1988) will be argued. Finally, based on Haegeman's argument, im-
plication on EFL teaching *will* and *be going to* will be presented.

2. Relevance Theory

Relevance Theory is a theory of communication; i.e., how we understand each other. In
this section the theory will be briefly outlined and the nechanism of utterance interpretation
and the notion of relevance will be mede explicit.

2.1 Code Model vs. Inferential Model of Communication

Traditionally, utterance interpretation has been accounted for in the following way; first,

a speaker encodes his message in his mind into a linguistic code and sends it to the hearer. The hearer, then, receives and decodes the signal, and recovers a message identical to the one in the speaker's mind. If the hearer cannot successfully recover the message, or if noise destroys or distorts the signal, then, communication fails. Thus, this "code model" assumes that a code must exist in communication, and that the speaker's message must be perfectly recovered by the hearer to ensure success of communication. However, this argument is problematic in some respects. First, communication often does not involve code or language. In order to account for communication in general it is theoretically impossible to establish codes exhausitvely, including so-called "pragmatic code" (For further discussion, see Sperber & Wilson, 1986). This means communication involves more than decoding. Second, let us consider (1) and (2).

(1) Coffee would keep me awake.
(2) Do you know what time it is?

In a given context (1) can be interpreted as an answer to the offer of a cup of coffee, rather than a mere description of the result of drinking coffee. (2) can be a suggestion that it is time to leave, rather than a mere question. To obtain such interpretations, the hearer has to employ extra-linguistic information. These observations show that the mechanism of utterance interpretation cannot be fully explained only by decoding of the utterance. In this respect S&W (1986) criticize the code model and claim that an inferential process is necessarily involved in the mechanism of utterance interpretation. According to S&W, the decoding process only provides an input to the inferential process, and this input is enriched through the inferential process.

What, then, is going on in the inferential process? Let us consider another example.

(3)A: Let's go to a movie this afternoon.
   B: I've got a lecture.   (Carston, 1988:62)

From B's utterance the hearer, first, obtains (4a), and, then, from the assumption (4b) he draws a conclusion (4c).

(4) a. B has a lecture to attend this afternoon.
    b. If someone has a lecture to attend this afternoon, he/she cannot go to a movie this afternoon.
    c. B cannot go to a movie this afternoon.

The interpretation (4c) is possible only when the assumption (4b) is available for the hearer.

This means that it is possible to draw another interpretation if the hearer has different assumptions. Suppose, for example, the hearer knows that B does not like the lecture and always goes somewhere else when he has to attend it. In this case the process of utterance interpretation is something like (5a) and (5b), and the hearer makes an interpretation opposite to (4c).

(5) a. If B has a lecture to attend this afternoon he/she will be happy to go to a movie this afternoon.
   b. B will go to a movie this afternoon.

It seems, therefore, that possible interpretations of an utterance are not necessarily confined to one. However, in reality, we always immediately arrive at one interpretation like (4c) or (5b) without examining other possible interpretations. S&W claim that it is relevance that constrains our utterance interpretation; a hearer always assumes that an utterance guarantees relevance, and makes use of the first accessible assumption (like (4b) or (5a)) which is most relevant in a given context.

2.2 Relevance

In cognitive psychology, it has been suggested that the processing resources available for human cognitive activities are limited, and, hence, that human beings are likely to pay attention only to relevant information. S&W follow this view; a hearer pays attention only to a relevant utterance. In order to draw the hearer's attention, the speaker, in turn, must aim to have his utterance guarantee relevance to the hearer. S&W define the notion of relevance in the following way:

Relevance
a. Other things being equal, the greater the contextual effects, the greater the relevance.
b. Other things being equal, the smaller the processing effort, the greater the relevance.

(Wilson & Sperber, 1991)

Relevance thus is a comparative notion, and is defined in terms of the counterbalance of the contextual effects and the processing effort. In the following sections we will consider how these two aspects constrain utterance interpretation, examining some examples.

2.2.1 Contextual Effect

According to S&W, contextual effects are produced in utterance interpretation when a conclusion is made through the interaction of new assumptions with exiting assumptions. Let us consider (4) again. The conclusion (4c) does not follow only from the new infor-

mation (4a). (4c) is derived only when (4a) is processed in the context of (4b). (4c) is, thus, a newly derived, context-dependent conclusion. S&W call this context-dependent conclusion a 'contextual implicature'. It can thus be concluded that the contextual effects are yielded when the utterance allows the hearer to derive a contextual implicature.[1]

Now consider the following example:

(6) You are now reading an paper on English language education.

Suppose you read, or hear, (6) right now. The situation which (6) describes is obvious, and it does not allow you to derive any contextual implication and, thus, no contextual effects are yielded (at best you will say "So what?" or "What is your point?").

2.2.2 Processing Cost

The previous section has shown that when contextual effects are yielded, an utterance is considered to have relevance. However, there are cases where an utterance does not necessarily have relevance, even though it does provide contextual effects. This is where the other factor, the processing cost, plays a role for determining the relevance. Let us examine one example taken from Blass (1990):

(7) He went to McDonald's. The quarter pounder sounded good and he ordered it.

(Blass, 1990: 85)

Most people living in communities where the fast-food industry is developed are familiar with 'McDonald's', and they can easily comprehend (7). However, consider (8):

(8) He went to a place where food is cooked and sold. It is called 'McDonald's'. There he saw ground meat which was formed into patties, fried and put into something baked with flour...   (Blass, 1990: 85)

(8) is structurally more complex and is much harder to comprehend than (7). This is because extra processing efforts are needed and they are not offset by an increase in contextual effects. When people who are familiar with "McDonald's" are communicating each other, the speaker are likely to make an utterance such as (7). However, when communicating with someone who does not know about the fast-food restaurant, then, (8) may be more appropriate and comprehensible. In the latter case the extra processing cost must be paid by processing more complex structures to ensure its relevance.

These observations lead us to the conclusion that relevance is determined by the trade-off between the contextual effects and the processing effort. S&W further claim that the

speaker must intend his utterance to provide the contextual effects optimal enough to draw the hearer's attention and the minimal effort for the hearer. The hearer in turn presumes the utterance guarantees the optimal relevance and interpretsthe utterance. S&W summarize this as the Principle of Relevance:

Principle of Relevance
Every act of inferential communication carries a gurantee of optimal relevance.

(Wilson & Sperber, 1991)

2.3 Relevance Theoretic view of Grammar Teaching

Having briefly outlined Relevance Theory, I now turn to its application to language teaching. What does the theory imply for EFL teaching? Here, an inferential model of communication proposed by S&W will be reconsidered.

As argued in 2.1 above, communication cannot be accounted for only by the code model. Instead, S&W propose an inferential communication model; the decoding process only provides input for the inferential process, where the linguistic input is enriched and the contextual implication is yielded as a result of the interaction with existing assumptions. According to this view, traditional language instruction in EFL classroom, in which the emphasis has been put on teaching linguistic rules, is considered to develop the learner's decoding ability. Since decoding is only a part of communication process, however, as S&W emphasize, successful communication by EFL learners cannot be achieved in the target language, if they cannot adequately perform their inferential process.

How, then, can the learner's inferential ability be developed in classroom? Here, I suggest that in grammar teaching a target expression should be taught and learned in "relevant context", not in a single sentence. The fact that in traditional language instruction linguistic form, rather than its use, has been emphasized and taught in formal teaching and learning has been considered unavoidable to some extent because of the nature of the classroom environment like in the Japanese classroom. However, the recent shift from the form-centered to communicative language teaching has begun to focus on the significance of teaching and learning EFL in context. Here my claim comes, although it does not seem new in itself. What is new, however, is the application of the notion of "relevant context". Relevant context here means a context in which the target expression provides the optimal contextual effects and requiring less processing cost. In other words, linguistic expressions, when presented in adquate contexts, allow the hearer to access the most relevant assumptions and draw the contextual implicature. Here, learners are required to have pragmatic or sociolinguistic knowledge. Further, this relevance theoretic view of language teaching bridges a gap between linguistic knowledge and its actual use and provides us with a new insight into grammar teaching. In this view, linguistic expressions traditionally taught as

equivalent are now taught distinctively and learned under their relevant contexts. Thus, mechanical practices, like substitutions, have little place in learning in a relevant context, although they are helpful for learners to acquire forms of the expressions.

In the following section I will show how this notion account for the difference betweem two linguistic expressions traditionally taught as equivalent; futurity expressed by *will* and *be going to*. Traditional descriptive study has already investigated the difference between the two. However, the relevant theoretic account of *will* and *be going to* (Haegeman, 1988) provides a psychological and pragmatic account for the distinctive uses of the two constructions.

3. Futurity: *be going to* and *will*
3.1 Some Problems in Teaching *be going to* and *will*

The expressions *will* and *be going to* may not seem to be so problematic in learning and teaching, presumably because both share a common meaning; i.e., the futurity and both are considered interchangable with each other. However, Wekker (1976) points out that EFL learners' use of the two expressions are problematic:

> For even the advanced learner of English, the proper use of *will/shall* and be going to is a persistent problem. As Hayens (1962:2) has pointed out, the student's use of *will* where the native speaker would probably use *be going to*, is one of the features which imparts to this speech the 'un-Englishness' of the non-native speaker. The implications conveyed by *be going to* are frequently different from those of the *will/shall* construction, and although the sentence produced by the student may be grammatical, it is often felt to be odd somehow.(Wekker, 1976: 123)

One of the factors which cause odd usage of *will* and *be going to* is that both are taught as being substitutable or equivalent. Kotera (1990) points out this, criticizing a mechanical practice such as substitutions.

> Judy and I are going to the library.
> =Judy and I will go to the library.
> ...since both are not always equivalent, a structural practice such as above is not appropriate. This kind of practice may lead learners to misunderstand that both are the same.(Kotera, 1990: 175)(Translation from Japanese my own)

Kotera further argues that the differences between the two expressions are not neglectable in teaching and learning futurity. EFL learners at an introductory level may be taught and learn that both *will* and *be going to* can be mapped on a single meaning, futurity. This seems effective for the beginning students in order to lessen their additional efforts to map each form on distinctive meaning. However, as long as the two expressions have different implications, they must be distinctively taught and learned at some later stage.

In the following sections I will briefly summarize the traditional descriptive studies on the usage of *will* and *be going to*, and compare these studies with an alternative view based on Relevance Theory.

3.2 *Be going to* and *will*: Descriptive Studies

Many scholars have studied the usage of *be going to* and *will*. Here, I will discuss those of Declerk (1990), Leech (1971), Palmer (1974), Wekker (1976).

Although, as Declerk (1990) points out, the difference between the two is not always clear, the literature shows the differences can be summerized as follows;

a. *Be going to* implies present orientation, whereas *will* implies future orientation. (Wekker, 1976)

b. *Be going to* implies future culmination of present intention and future culmination of present cause. (Leech, 1976; Quirk et.al, 1985)

c. *Be going to* is used when the intention is clearly premediated. (Wekker, 1976; Declerk, 1990)

3.2.1 Present Orientation and Future Orientation

(9) a. The rock will fall.

b. The rock is going to fall.

Wekker (1976) pointed out that (9a), when presented without any context, is felt to be imcomplete or elliptical, whereas (9b) is not. Wekker argued the reasons for this in the following way;

> Sentences with *will* may be elliptical because they are often conditional upon other events mentioned or implied in the context, but sentences containing *be going to* always carry the implication that all conditions for the future event have been met, so that no reference to other events in the context is needed to complete the sentence. (Wekker, 1976: 127)

Thus, (9a) and (9b), can be paraphrased into, for example, (9a') and (9b') respectively:

(9a') The rock will fall if you sit on it.

(9b') The rock will fall anyway, whether you sit on it or not.

3.2.2 Future Culmination of Present Intention and Present Cause

Leech (1976) suggests that the general implication of *be going to* is future fulfilment of the present, and further classifies it into two; future culmination of present intention and that of present cause. The former implication can be seen in (10), and the latter in (11).

(10) What are you going to do today? I'm going to stay at home and write letters.
(11) There's going to be a storm in a minute. (I can see the black clouds gathering.)

3.2.3 Premediated Intention

Wekker (1976) argued that *will* has the meaning of intention, and that Leech's sugges-
tion that the distinct implication of *be going to* is the present intention is not enough. What
is at issue, Wekker claimed, is whether the intention is premediated or not. *Be going to*
implies premediated intention, and, thus, in the following example, *be going to* and *will* are
not interchangeable.

(12) a. I've sold my car; I'm going to take up cycling.
    b. I can't open this box. --- I'll do it for you.   (Wekker, 1976: 12)

3.3 Relevance Theoretic Analysis of *will* and *be going to*

Haegeman (1988) accounts for the difference between *will* and *be going to* in a different
way, based on S&W's Relevance Theory. She suggests that the selection of *will* and *be
going to* is made by the speaker according to the relevance that either construction yields
against a certain context. Haegeman (1988) described this in the following way:

> *Be going to*...imposes a constraint on the processing of the proposition with which it is associated.
> It signals that this proposition is relevant in a context including at least some present tense propo-
> sitions, or, in other words, it gurantees a contextual effect if the utterance is processed against a
> present context. *Will*, on the other hand, signals that the hearer should extend the immediately
> accessible (present) context for the processing of the proposition and should process the utterance
> against future propositions.

Here, it is clear that selection of either construction should reduce the processing cost and
increase the contextual effects. It seems that Haegeman's proposal is not different from the
traditional descriptive studies discussed above. However, she emphasizes that there *is* a
principled distinction between her account and the descriptive studies. In her proposal, the
distinction between the two future expressions is not one that is part of sentence grammar
(i.e. not inherent in a sentence), but one that occurs at the level of contextualization of the
utterance. She further suggests that two sentences each of which contains either future ex-
pression are truth–conditionally (i.e. at a single sentence level) equivalent. It is impossible
to deny one of the two and simultaneously affirm the other. For example, we cannot say,
I'll kill him, but I'm not going to kill him.

Further, Haegeman refers to the incompleteness of sentences containing *will* as discussed
by Wekker (1976). Wekker suggests that the incompleteness is felt in such a sentence as

(9a) because a sentence internal element is missing. However, Haegeman accounts for this phenomenon in terms of utterance processing. Consider (9a) and (9b) again. The hearer makes use of assumptions concerning the present for processing (9b). It is relatively easy to use the present assumptions and the hearer can have immediate access to them. In processing (9a), however, the hearer has to extend the assumptions to the future. To achieve this, he needs to have a linguistic or nonlinguistic "guideline" for deriving the future assumptions. If there is no such guideline available, the processing (9b) becomes costly.

4. Conclusion

Haegeman's proposal based on Relevance Theory provides a psychological and pragmatic account for the distinctive use of *will* and *be going to*. Although her theory does not seem to seriously contradict the traditional descriptive studies, it differs from previous research in claiming that the difference occrurs in the contextualization of an utterance and that use of either of the two becomes processing guidance.

What, then, does the Relevance Theretic view of the form selection imply for English language teaching? First, the account provides strong evidence that *will* and *be going to* should be taught in appropriate contexts in which the expression has relevance. Students are often given mechanical practice including substitution like *will=be going to*. According to Haegeman's proposal, however, this type of practice does not help learners learn the actual use of the two expressions. To teach learners at a beginning level that both expression share the same meaning, i.e. the futurity, may reduce their burden in distinguishing the two. However, it is important for teachers to recognize these two expressions signal psychologically diffrent processing instruction against a contexts. It is, thus, necessary that once learners have become familiar with the two constructions, they should be distictively taught and learned under relevant contexts. Second, the notion of relevance can be applied to other expressions which are similar in meaning; for example, the past tense vs. the present perfect (See Smith, 1981). Once the teacher notices the selection of a linguistic expression is constrained by relevance, then, mechanical practice or grammatical exercises which are presented without contexts become useless in developing learners' communicative ability. Therefore, it is necessary to further investigate how utterance production and interpretation are constrained by relevance, and to apply its consequence to language instruction, where we will find a linkage between grammar teaching and communicative language teaching.

Notes

1. According to S&W, there are other two ways to yield contextual implication in utterance interpretation. One is the case where the utterance provides further evidence for, and, hence, strengthens, an existing assumption. The other way is the case where a new information provided by the utterance contradicts with an existing assumptions.

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