

Defining Relevance for Imperatives in Discourse^{*}

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AMPRA 1 – October 19, 2012

1 Introduction

- Imperatives have frequently been omitted from definitions of Relevance.
- The empirical coverage of Relevance should be as wide as possible:
“Relevance can be characterized in terms of logical relations between the [question under discussion] and the semantic content of a new utterance ... we need a dynamic formal semantic theory.”
(Roberts Forthcoming)
- I adopt the dynamic preference semantics of Starr (2010; 2012) to implement imperative Relevance.
- Semantic preferences are general enough that they can be used to directly compute Relevance.
- Benefits over other approaches:
 - No conversion from another semantic type, such as properties (Portner 2004; 2007).
 - No complex stipulations to assimilate imperatives and declaratives (Kaufmann 2011).
- Preference semantics accounts for all utterance types, and I show that this leads to a straightforward unification of Relevance.
- The result is an initial definition of Relevance for *any utterance*.

2 Relevance and the QUD

- Approaches to Relevance have evolved from Grice’s (1989) Maxim of Relevance.

^{*}I would like to thank those who have provided feedback on various iterations of this work, especially Sarah Murray, Will Starr, and Craige Roberts. Thanks also to the Cornell Semantics Group, as well as reviewers and attendees of SWAMP 2011 at Ohio State University, WECOL 2011 at Simon Fraser University, and TLS 13 at the University of Texas, Austin.

- Roberts’s (1996) formal approach to Relevance distinguished itself from:
 - cognitive and planning theory (Sperber and Wilson 1986)
 - purely pragmatic, Gricean approaches to Relevance
- Relevance is relativized to the Question Under Discussion, “a semantic question (i.e. a set of alternative propositions) which corresponds to the current discourse topic.” (Simons et al. 2011:7).

2.1 Assertions and Questions

- Early definitions of Relevance focus on *set-up moves* (questions) and *payoff moves* (assertions).
 - (1) **Relevance to the QUD (Roberts 1996)**
A move m is Relevant to the question under discussion q iff m either introduces a partial answer to q (m is an assertion) or is part of a strategy to answer q (m is a question).
- Later revisions split the definition by utterance type.
 - (2) **Relevance for assertions (Simons et al. 2011)**
An assertion is relevant if it contextually entails a partial or complete answer to the QUD.
 - (3) **Relevance for questions (Simons et al. 2011)**
A question is relevant if it has an answer which contextually entails a partial or complete answer to the QUD.
- Note how (3) formalizes being “part of a strategy to answer [the QUD]”.

2.2 Imperatives

- Neither Roberts (1996) nor Simons et al. (2011) provide a definition of Relevance for commands, the canonical contributions of imperative clauses.
- Roberts (2004) adds imperatives to the *set-up move* portion of the definition of Relevance.
 - (4) **Relevance to the QUD (Roberts 2004), emphasis added**
A move m ... is Relevant to the question under discussion q iff m either introduces a partial answer to q (m is an assertion) or is part of a strategy to answer q (m is a question subordinate to q or an imperative whose realization would plausibly help to answer q).
- However, (4) does not lend itself to precise evaluation like (2) and (3) do.

- I have proposed a definition of command Relevance based on the concept that imperatives introduce preferences (Starr 2010; 2012).

(5) **Relevance for commands (Cormany to appear)**

A command is relevant if what it prefers contextually entails a partial or complete answer to the QUD.

2.3 Generalizing Relevance

- The goal: “...a more general definition of Relevance, wherein behavior is Relevant to a goal to the extent that it potentially contributes to achieving that goal.” (Roberts Forthcoming)¹
- I focus on the propositional content present in all utterance types (Cormany to appear).
- Utterances vary in *illocutionary relation* (Murray 2010), a function that takes the discourse context and a proposition, and returns an updated, structured context.
- The definitions of Relevance vary in a parallel fashion.
 - An assertion is relevant if it [provides an] answer to the QUD.
Declaratives canonically perform set intersection (asserting).
 - A question is relevant if it has an answer which [provides an] answer to the QUD.
Interrogatives canonically impose a partition or cover (questioning).
 - A command is relevant if it what it prefers [provides an] answer to the QUD.
Imperatives canonically impose a preference relation (commanding).
- I exploit this parallelism to compose a unified definition of Relevance.

(6) **Unified Definition of Relevance**

An utterance is relevant if the propositional argument of its illocutionary relation contextually entails a partial or complete answer to the QUD.

- A more formal definition will follow, after looking at the details of preference semantics.

¹Roberts appeals to both *domain goals* and the QUD (*linguistic goals*).

3 Imperative Preferences

3.1 Preference Semantics (Starr 2010; 2012)

- Starr (2012) has a similar view on the roles of different utterance types:
“[D]eclaratives provide information by eliminating worlds ... interrogatives introduce alternatives by grouping those worlds into sets, *imperatives order alternatives*.” (emphasis original)
- Preference semantics is an extension of inquisitive semantics (Groenendijk and Roelofsen 2009).
- The information state is represented in terms of a *preference state* R .
 - A single preference is an ordered pair of propositions, e.g. $\langle\{w_0, w_1\}, \{w_2, w_3\}\rangle$
 - A proposition can be preferred to the empty set $\langle\{w_0, w_1\}, \emptyset\rangle$, but not vice versa $\langle\emptyset, \{w_0, w_1\}\rangle$.
 - R is the set containing all mutually assumed preferences.

3.2 Update Rules

- An utterance takes a scope proposition and, depending on the utterance type, performs a given type of update on R . These rules encode illocutionary relations.
- Updates can introduce a new alternative of the form $\langle p, \emptyset\rangle$ or $\langle p, \neg p\rangle$.
- They may also modify one or both terms of an existing preference, e.g. $\langle a, \emptyset\rangle \longrightarrow \langle a \cap p, \emptyset\rangle$.

3.3 Imperative Updates

- In Starr’s (2012) semantics, updating a state R with a command to do p does three things:
 1. Admits all of the preferences in R .
 2. Introduces a global preference for all p -worlds over all $\neg p$ -worlds $\langle p, \neg p\rangle$
 3. Introduces local preferences within already-present alternatives $\langle a \cap p, a - p\rangle$
- An example of such an update:
 - Initial preference state R_0 : $\{\langle\{w_0, w_1, w_2, w_3\}, \emptyset\rangle\}$
Four worlds under consideration, no preferences relative to each other.
 - Imperative utterance *Jump!* prefers a proposition $j = \{w_1, w_2, w_3, w_4\}$
Note: some members of j are not under consideration.
 - Updated preference state R_1 : $\{\langle\{w_0, w_1, w_2, w_3\}, \emptyset\rangle, \langle\{w_1, w_2, w_3\}, \{w_0\}\rangle\}$

4 Preferences and QUDs

- Cormany (2012; in preparation) show how imperatives are sensitive to the current QUD.
- The alternatives under consideration (in part) determine an imperative's Relevance and felicity.

4.1 Successfully Addressing the QUD

- Consider the alternatives (obliquely) introduced by the following utterance:

(7) A: I don't know where to go for lunch today.

- Alternatives: $\{A \text{ goes to the cafeteria for lunch, } A \text{ goes to the hot dog stand for lunch, } A \text{ goes to the taco place for lunch}\}$
- These form a preference state $R = \{\langle c, \emptyset \rangle, \langle h, \emptyset \rangle, \langle t, \emptyset \rangle\}$
- R can then be updated with a command preferring one option, say t .

(8) B: Go to the taco place!

- What effect does (8) have on R ?
 - Adds a global preference: $\{\langle c, \emptyset \rangle, \langle h, \emptyset \rangle, \langle t, \emptyset \rangle, \underline{\langle t, \neg t \rangle}\}$
 - Adds local preferences:
 - $\{\langle c, \emptyset \rangle, \langle h, \emptyset \rangle, \langle t, \emptyset \rangle, \langle t, \neg t \rangle, \underline{\langle c \cap t, \emptyset \rangle}, \underline{\langle h \cap t, \emptyset \rangle}, \underline{\langle t \cap t, \emptyset \rangle}\}$ intersect each a with t
 - $\{\langle c, \emptyset \rangle, \langle h, \emptyset \rangle, \langle t, \emptyset \rangle, \langle t, \underline{c \cup h} \rangle, \underline{\langle \emptyset, \emptyset \rangle}, \underline{\langle \emptyset, \emptyset \rangle}, \underline{\langle t, \emptyset \rangle}\}$ alternatives are mutually exclusive
 - $\{\langle c, \emptyset \rangle, \langle h, \emptyset \rangle, \langle t, \emptyset \rangle, \langle t, c \cup h \rangle\}$ remove empty and redundant preferences
 - In this case, the local preferences have no effect.
- $\langle t, c \cup h \rangle$ is added to R ; the QUD is thus addressed by the imperative.

4.2 Failing to Address the QUD

- How can an imperative fail to address the QUD, i.e. not be Relevant, under the preference model?
- Follow the same QUD-introducing utterance (7) with:

(9) B: Bring me a sandwich! (*prefers b*)

- The updated preference state is $\{\langle c, \emptyset \rangle, \langle h, \emptyset \rangle, \langle t, \emptyset \rangle, \langle b, \neg b \rangle\}$.
- The new state provides no new information about the previous alternatives, unlike (8).
- Thus (9) is not Relevant, and therefore not felicitous.
- Imperatives that prefer all alternatives equally, or eliminate all alternatives are also infelicitous; see Starr (2012) for full derivations.

5 Unifying Relevance Under Preferences

- The method used above for determining imperative Relevance can be extended to all clause types.

5.1 All Utterance Types in Preference Semantics

- Preference semantics has representations for all utterance types.
 - Assertions use a singleton alternative to filter possible worlds: $\{\langle p, \emptyset \rangle\}$
 - Questions introduce alternatives (sets of propositions): $\{\langle p, \emptyset \rangle, \langle q, \emptyset \rangle, \dots\}$
 - Imperatives prefer a proposition over its complement: $\{\langle p, \neg p \rangle\}$ ²
- Formal similarity: each type places its scope proposition as the first element of a preference: $\langle p, x \rangle$

5.2 Towards a Formalization

- The dynamics of preference semantics allows a formal definition of Relevance.
- To be Relevant, an utterance must satisfy the following:³
 - The utterance must introduce a preference whose first element entails an element of one of the alternatives under consideration.
 - The utterance must alter the preference state R (no re-assertion, no re-statement of the QUD, no re-iteration of commands).
- An initial formalization of these requirements:

²Imperatives cannot relate disparate propositions: $\langle p, q \rangle$. Other elements, such as *rather* in English, may do this.

³Independently, the utterance must not violate any general conditions on felicity, especially the prohibition against introducing absurd preferences $\langle \emptyset, x \rangle$.

(10) **Unified Relevance in Preference Semantics**

An utterance U is Relevant iff

$$\exists \langle p, x \rangle \in R[U] - R : p \subseteq a \ \& \ (\langle a, a' \rangle \in R \vee \langle a', a \rangle \in R)$$

- The definition proposed in (10) predicts the Relevance facts for (8) and (9), repeated as (11).

(11) A: I don't know where to go for lunch today.

B1: Go to the taco place!

B2: #Bring me a sandwich!

(12) **Computation of Relevance for *Go to the taco place!***

$$R = \{\langle c, \emptyset \rangle, \langle h, \emptyset \rangle, \langle t, \emptyset \rangle\}$$

$$R[U] = \{\langle c, \emptyset \rangle, \langle h, \emptyset \rangle, \langle t, \emptyset \rangle, \langle t, c \cup h \rangle\}$$

$$R[U] - R = \{\langle t, c \cup h \rangle\}$$

$t \subseteq t \ \& \ \langle t, \emptyset \rangle \in R$, therefore Relevant.

(13) **Computation of Relevance for *Bring me a sandwich!***

$$R = \{\langle c, \emptyset \rangle, \langle h, \emptyset \rangle, \langle t, \emptyset \rangle\}$$

$$R[U] = \{\langle c, \emptyset \rangle, \langle h, \emptyset \rangle, \langle t, \emptyset \rangle, \langle b, \neg b \rangle\}$$

$$R[U] - R = \{\langle b, \neg b \rangle\}$$

$b \not\subseteq c, b \not\subseteq h, b \not\subseteq t$, therefore not Relevant.

- Another interpretation of *Bring me a sandwich!* is to assume Grice's (1989) Cooperative Principle.
 - Then A tries to infer a reason why b entails one of c, h, t . (Perhaps the cafeteria is the only place that sells sandwiches.)
 - An utterance with no plausible tie to one of the alternatives (e.g. *Stand on your head!*) will still be judged not Relevant.
- Thus universal Relevance is successful, but many refinements are possible, including:
 - Accounting for information structure in imperative responses to QUDs (Cormany 2012).
 - Accounting for probabilistic answers to QUDs (Simons et al. 2011: fn. 3)
 - Accounting for modal questions and responses.
- Relevance is sufficiently general to cover major utterance types, and should extend to minor utterance types, given the appropriate update semantics.

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