Abstract

This paper sets out to investigate the notion of context from a relevance-theoretic perspective, building up on previous research on the matter (Assimakopoulos 2003). Endorsing the idea that contexts are best viewed in cognitive terms as sets of assumptions that are brought to bear during the processing of an utterance, I collect the main arguments that relevance theorists have put forth regarding their treatment, focusing mainly on the central innovation of Relevance Theory on the matter, i.e. the proposal that contexts are actually selected during utterance interpretation rather than determined in advance of it. I then address the question of how contexts for interpretation are actually constructed on-line as well as how considerations of relevance, in the technical sense that Sperber and Wilson assign to the term, facilitate the seemingly effortless selection of contexts by the hearer and, to a certain extent, the speaker too.

First and foremost, I would like to congratulate those involved in the preparation of this Festschrift for their wonderful initiative. Jacques, whose research has been important in many respects and highly influential, certainly deserves to be rejoiced in this way, and I’m delighted to be taking part in this celebration. On this note, I would like to thank the editorial committee for their kind invitation and Joanna Blochowiak in particular for her guidance and consistently accommodating attitude. The ideas put forth in this paper date back to my PhD thesis (Assimakopoulos 2008) and have been largely influenced by lengthy discussions that I have had with Ronnie Cann, Caroline Heycock, Daniel Wedgwood and Deirdre Wilson, none of whom is of course responsible for the particular views expressed here. At the time, this research was partially financed by an AHRC Doctoral Award and a Doctoral Scholarship from the College of Humanities and Social Science of the University of Edinburgh.