

Vol. XVII No. 2, Fall 1997

## **The Language of Peace and Conflict: Relevance Theory and the Anglo-Irish Agreement<sup>1</sup>**

by *John Wilson and Jonathan Rose*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The aim of this article is to bring to the attention of a wider audience the potential for political analysis, and in particular political analysis linked to issues of peace and conflict, of the area of "linguistic pragmatics." The main example we are concerned with is that of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. The article aims to identify, in the main, British government and unionist interpretations of various issues inherent in the Agreement. In particular, those contexts where such interpretations are in conflict. The article claims that an awareness of pragmatics, specifically Relevance Theory, may help us understand and explain the structure and organization of such interpretations. By analyzing interpretations and their consequences, in the case of either understanding or breakdown, for example, we may gain insight into the role of language in efforts to achieve political peace and settlement in Northern Ireland.

As we note below, there is sometimes a tendency to treat linguistic analyses of communication issues, political or otherwise, as telling us either what we already know, or could have worked out in other ways. As we will argue, however, there are a number of problems with this position. Not least of which is that language is frequently central to conflict. We will suggest that understanding where the linguistic issues are is important not only for our overall understanding of issues of conflict, but also for learning how to avoid such conflicts.

### **PRAGMATICS, RELEVANCE THEORY, AND COMMUNICATION**

In the last quarter of a century there has been an explicit recognition that certain aspects of natural language meaning are not easily represented within a formal semantics. This recognition led to the development of a new area which took account of the effect of context on meaning, i.e., pragmatics. Pragmatics, may be very generally defined as "the study of meaning in context." It is now a vast area of analysis and any detailed discussion of this discipline is beyond the scope of this article.<sup>2</sup> Pragmatics is concerned with the study of linguistic meaning in context, in particular the inferential construction of meaning. Inferences may be defined as aspects of meaning which are derived from the interaction of the surface form of a linguistic expression with the general context of its production. This includes aspects of both the linguistic context (the form and structure of the utterance, and available previous utterances) and various dimensions of the general context: which would incorporate, among other things, shared and general knowledge; sociocultural information; and general reasoning capacities.

Most influential on general pragmatic theory has been the work of Paul Grice.<sup>3</sup> Grice argued that in everyday communication certain inference processes were required if we were to make sense of the construction of meaning. He pointed out that meanings are frequently implied rather than stated, and he indicated ways in which these inferences, which he called "implicatures," could be calculated, or worked out. There have been various developments of Grice's work since his original suggestion.<sup>4</sup> One of the most significant and far reaching of these is Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory.<sup>5</sup> Relevance Theory proposes that communicators process language with a standing assumption that communicated information is relevant to them in very specific ways. Sperber and Wilson refer to this assumption as the guarantee or Principle of Relevance. However, since many different aspects of a message might be relevant in a variety of ways, Sperber and Wilson indicate the constraints under which relevance must operate. The basic claim of Relevance Theory is that in processing language people try to achieve the greatest possible cognitive effect for the smallest possible amount of processing cost. One consequence of this is that when one has to put more cognitive effort into understanding an utterance than would have been required by a simple literal interpretation the reward is often extra information.<sup>6</sup>

For example, consider the following exchange:

A. Do you know where John is?

B. The pubs are open.

In general terms, if speaker B is following Relevance Theory we assume that they have provided us with input relevant to our question, i.e., that the utterance has been produced with the standing assumption of its relevance as an answer. Basically, Sperber and Wilson claim that every act of ostensive communication carries the presumption of its own optimal relevance. This means that (a) the speaker wishes to make manifest to the audience a set of assumptions relevant enough to them to make it worth their while processing the utterance; and (b) that the utterance is the most relevant one the speaker could have used to communicate these assumptions. In the example above we predict that by processing B's response in an appropriate context A will gain access to relevant information which will serve to answer the original question. We can assume that if we combine the information "the pubs are open" with a suitable context we will achieve relevance. In this case if we imagine that A's knowledge of John includes that he likes beer, and that he has a drink every night as soon as the pubs open, and further that this knowledge is mutually manifest, i.e., also available to B, then A may combine this information with B's response to infer that it is highly likely, but not guaranteed, that John is in the pub.

But why didn't B simply say "John is in the pub?" The answer is that B does not, in fact, know this to be the case; although he may infer it from information he holds. Well, then, why didn't B just say "I don't know?" This would, in one sense, also be incorrect. B has strong evidence to believe that John is in the pub, but not direct proof. In this context B produces an utterance which he can expect A to process in the mutually manifest context suggested above, and, therefore, provides A with the best response he can at that moment.

A, in return, gains from B's strategy in a way that would not have been available from a simple "I don't know" response. Thus, the extra processing that has been required of A has a pay off. A not only learns about B's strong belief of John's location, but he understands the basis of this belief, and, further, that it is only a belief and not a factual claim. This balancing of processing effort and informational gain is central to relevance theory, and the foundation of the principle of relevance.

Following the principle of relevance does not, in itself, guarantee successful communication, however. Conflicts of interpretation frequently arise because the same information is processed by different parties within different contexts. The term "context" is used here in the sense of Sperber and Wilson, where a context is taken to be a psychological construct, a subset of the hearers, assumptions or background knowledge about the world. A crucial step in processing an utterance is to combine it with an adequately selected set of background assumptions which then constitutes the context. Sperber and Wilson refer to such contexts as "cognitive environments." The notion of relevance makes it possible to characterize which assumptions manifest in a cognitive environment are actually involved in interpreting a particular utterance. A speaker must expect the hearer to be able to provide a context which will enable them to interpret the utterance as the speaker intended (as in our example above). Such a context is referred to as a "mutual cognitive environment."

Assumptions may be shared by communicators in which case they are said to be "mutually manifest." Relevance Theory claims that hearers do not have to ensure that assumptions present in their contexts belong to the common ground, or mutual cognitive environment they share with speakers. This is particularly prevalent in a political discourse scenario in which parties will often hold dramatically opposed views which may not be shared nor even be manifest between parties. If certain assumptions become mutually manifest, and are included in a person's cognitive environment, then certain inferences can be made from them. Potentially, therefore, there are two levels on which communication may break down:

1. Communicators have the same base of manifest assumptions but the inferences which are drawn from it are different;
2. Communicators do not have the same base of manifest assumptions but believe that they do.

But what is the relevance of this for the study of peace and conflict? We would argue that politics, and for us political output in terms of political language, has a major role to play. In this sense any study of the role of political language within contexts of conflict could play an important part in understanding what is taking place. If this is accepted, and if we wish to understand the role language plays within political speeches, negotiations, documentation, interviews etc., then some awareness of meaning as it is constructed in general, and in context in particular, would be useful. This assumes of course that anyone interested in politics, from whatever angle, would be interested, at some level, in what

politicians say, and I think we could at least agree on that. The question is how much attention are we willing to give the linguistic dimensions of political output?

While there is a wealth of research which considers political behavior from such perspectives as sociology, history, peace studies and psychology, there is a surprising lack of work which has looked at the language of politics. Studies which have focused on language have often been generally descriptive and concentrated on general aspects of political language such as power and control.<sup>7</sup> Our point is that some more formal and technical information gleaned from pragmatics, in general, and in this article specifically from Relevance Theory, may enhance our understanding of political language, and selected aspects of peace and conflict in particular.<sup>8</sup>

In the complex world of political communication where one is frequently speaking "on line," operating with particular motivations, and most importantly operating without any sensitivity to pragmatic issues, many subtle variations may go unnoticed. If we do not know what to look for among the vast bulk of incoming messages, common sense alone will be a poor guide. It is for this reason that we suggest some consideration of pragmatics in general, and in this article Relevance Theory in particular, is useful in considering the problems which surrounded (and continue to surround) the Anglo-Irish Agreement.

## **RELEVANCE THEORY AND THE ANGLO-IRISH AGREEMENT**

The Anglo-Irish Agreement was signed by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and Irish Taoiseach Dr. Garret FitzGerald on 15 November 1985. The Agreement was one of the most far-reaching and controversial political events in Northern Ireland's (NI) brief history because it brought into question the future of NI within the United Kingdom and involved the Irish government in the affairs of NI. This involvement was to take the form of Irish government representation in an InterGovernmental Conference of British and Irish Ministers, which would discuss a wide range of political, legal, and social matters concerning NI.

The need for such an agreement emerged from the continuing failure to move forward the political impasse in Northern Ireland. Dr. Garret FitzGerald, the Irish Prime Minister, argued that many citizens in Northern Ireland felt no affinity with direct British rule in the North, and that continued violence could erupt in chaos. Such suggestions, along with the collapse of the Northern Ireland Assembly following the Social and Democratic Labour Party's (SDLP) withdrawal, concentrated Mrs. Thatcher's mind on the need to improve security, and of the need to involve the Southern government in this process. She set in train speedy and high level negotiations which led to what was to emerge as the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Central to this process was the aim of providing structures which at once recognized and reflected nationalist concerns in the North, and at the same time addressed the core problem of the security situation, in particular the role of the Dublin government on security.

The Anglo-Irish Agreement (AIA) is an international agreement lodged at the United Nations and Article 1 reads as follows:

The two governments:

- (a) affirm that any change in the status of Northern Ireland would only come about with the consent of the majority of people in Northern Ireland;
- (b) recognise that the present wish of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland is for no change in the status of Northern Ireland;
- (c) declare that, if in the future a majority of the people of Northern Ireland clearly wish for and formally consent to the establishment of a united Ireland, they will introduce and support in the respective parliaments legislation to give effect to that wish.

Article 2 of the Agreement established an InterGovernmental conference where both sides could discuss and make recommendations and make "determined efforts . . . to resolve any differences." Article 4 establishes a commitment on behalf of both governments to the advancement of a devolved government based on the "co-operation of constitutional representatives of both traditions," which would "provide widespread acceptance throughout the community"<sup>9</sup>

Twelve years on, the issues raised by the Anglo-Irish Agreement remain at the forefront of politics in NI. In particular, the Irish Republic's involvement in NI's affairs continues to be a contentious issue. The Irish Republic's government has been involved in all political initiatives since the Agreement, such as the Brooke and Mayhew Talks processes, the Downing Street Declaration of December 1993, and more recently the framework document and the forum negotiations. Obviously, the Irish government is allowed to make a substantial contribution to what is now termed the "peace process." However, the definition of Dublin's role, and particularly the language used to define that role, remain a "political minefield." There were thirteen articles in total in the Anglo-Irish Agreement, but the controversy which was to follow may be reduced to some general political issues, and, in turn, their connection to the pragmatics of particular linguistic choices. Through a pragmatic consideration of the language used to define Dublin's role in the Anglo-Irish Agreement insights can be gained into two key areas: first, how each party interpreted that role; and second, by considering varying interpretations, how communication failed to proceed.

This article uses Relevance Theory's framework concerning the nature and role of background knowledge in communication to demonstrate how certain political groups produced different knowledge representations from the same linguistic input. It offers one type of theoretical description of how this representation of knowledge led to each party bringing a different context to the Agreement, and in turn led to differing interpretations of the Agreement. Consider the following quotes:<sup>10</sup>

- a. The Anglo Irish Agreement 'copper fastens partition.'
- b. The Anglo Irish Agreement 'rode to victory on the back of IRA terrorism.'
- c. We have signed an agreement in which the prime minister of Ireland . . . has . . . accepted that for all practical purposes and unto perpetuity that will not be a United Ireland.
- d. In the Anglo Irish Agreement the British have conceded sovereignty over Northern Ireland to the Irish Republic.
- e. We cannot accept, however, the abandonment of our claim to Irish Unity or the recognition of British Sovereignty over the North of Ireland.<sup>11</sup>

As is clear, the very same agreement is interpreted as ceding sovereignty of Northern Ireland to the Republic of Ireland, and at the same time guaranteeing partition between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, i.e., guaranteeing that there will not be a United Ireland. How can such conflicting interpretations arise from the same linguistic input? It is not enough to say that each political group brings their own bias to a particular message, this is both obvious and unhelpful. Perhaps worse, it suggests a nihilistic context for all negotiations where parties have specific interests or biases (and that is basically all negotiations). Further, such a simple view does not quite fall out as we might expect in this case. For example, and as we shall discuss in more detail in a moment, the interpretation of the Agreement as maintaining the Union was agreed on by the British government, Sinn Féin, and the Irish government opposition (see e. above), while the view that the agreement gave power over Northern Ireland to the Republic of Ireland was agreed on by the Unionists and the Irish government. In other words, and at only one level of interpretation, the Agreement created strange bedfellows; i.e., Sinn Féin and the British government on one side and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and the Irish government on the other. What we need to explain is how the same input can be processed to achieve such varying outcomes. To do this we will apply Relevance Theory to two core examples: first, Article One itself; and second, the use of the term "consultation" to describe the role of the Irish government in Northern Irish Affairs.

## **RELEVANCE THEORY AND ARTICLE ONE OF THE AGREEMENT**

The clauses articulated within Article 1 of the Agreement (see above) serve as an input for processing by differing audience groups. The first thing to note in this process is the formal structure and relationship between (a) and (b). As Sperber and Wilson<sup>12</sup> point out, for communicators involved in knowledge processing information may be either representationally or computationally assessed. Representations are similar to what Sperber and Wilson call "encyclopaedic assumptions," while computation refers to the way in which logical entries undergo deductive processes in relation to those concepts which may appear as part of a set of assumptions. Sperber and Wilson argue that when we process information we have access to a deductive device with a series of logical and formal operations, specifically a limited form of elimination rules.

Consider again B's response to A given in the example above, i.e., "The pubs are open." This statement generates a number of simple assumptions such as :

1. Public Houses are places which sell alcohol.
2. Such places open and close at particular points in time.
3. At this point in time the pubs are open.

Now when we combine these general assumptions with a context for John we have further assumptions:

4. John likes to go to pubs.
5. John likes to drink.
6. John has a drink every night when the pubs are open.

All of these assumptions may be said to be representationally considered as propositions, each of which has a meaning in its own right, and may be assessed as true or false. We may also assess this information computationally, in the sense that from the set of assumptions 1-6 certain other conclusions may be drawn. For example:

- (i) The pubs are open.
- (ii) If the pubs are open John is having a drink.
- (iii) John is having a drink.

This is a formal example of what logicians call Modus ponendo ponens, and which Sperber and Wilson see as explained by elimination rules.

Modus ponendo ponens

input:

- (i) P
- (ii) (If P then Q)

output:

- (iii) Q

Sperber and Wilson suggest that such formal processes operate on propositions generated as a set of assumptions. They reject the standard informal use of deduction found in

general pragmatics (as in Grice noted above). Such informal systems leave an important part of the comprehension process unexplained. Formal systems, on the other hand, do not leave parts of the deductive process unspecified, nothing is left to the intuition of the user and all information necessary for a deduction is fully specified.<sup>13</sup> Sperber and Wilson envisage a deductive system with a memory and the ability to read, write and erase logical forms, compare them, hold them in memory, and access the deductive rules contained in the logical entries for concepts. They conclude that the only deductive rules available to the human device are elimination rules and that this device yields only non trivial conclusions.<sup>14</sup> The human deductive device is therefore a system which takes as input a set of assumptions and systematically deduces all the conclusions it can from them.

The assumptions left over in the memory of the deductive device from the immediately preceding deductive process constitute an immediately given context in which the next item of information may be deductively processed.<sup>15</sup> Sperber and Wilson argue that this "initial context" may be expanded in three different directions. First, the context can be extended by going back and accessing assumptions from a previous deductive process. The fact that such assumptions are readily accessible leads Sperber and Wilson to claim the existence of another short-term memory store. Second, the initial context may have added to it the encyclopedic entries of concepts already present in the initial context, or the entries of concepts present in the assumption currently being processed. Such extensions cannot practically occur with every concept in every assumption, but rather encyclopedic entries of concepts are only accessed when they appear to be required. Third, the initial context can be extended by adding information concerning the observable physical environment. The processing of deictic expressions, such as "this," "here" or "there" for example, will require the addition of environmental information to the context.

Focusing now on (a) and (b) of Article 1, we may note these clauses stand in relation to each other in a specifically formal manner:

(a) any change in the status of Northern Ireland would only come about with the consent of the majority of people in Northern Ireland;

(b) the present wish of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland is for no change in the status of Northern Ireland;

If we treat (a) and (b) as an input to a logical device then we would have as output something like the following conclusion: there will be no change in the status of Northern Ireland.

As we will see presently, much was made of this conclusion by the British government in the debates that were to follow. Basically, then, with (a) and (b) we have an input/output relationship as follows:

Input:



(i) P

(ii) (If P then Q)

(iii) not-Q

Output: Not-P

Any change in the status of Northern Ireland (P) would only come about with the consent of the majority of the people of Northern Ireland (Q).

The majority have not consented to any change (not-Q).

Therefore there will be no change to the status of Northern Ireland (not-P).

In formal terms we have a case here of what is referred to as Modus Tollens (denying the consequent). The formal and logical link between (a) and (b) is clearly intentional. It is presented as a guarantee to the Unionists regarding the position of Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom, and further, it is claimed that since the Southern government have signed themselves to this agreement, for the first time the Republic recognizes the status of Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom. This was an issue highlighted in the parliamentary debates which followed the agreement:

The Irish government have affirmed in a binding international agreement that the status of Northern Ireland will remain unchanged so long as that is the wish of the majority of its people. They have also recognised that the present wish of a majority is to remain part of the United Kingdom. This is the most formal commitment to the principle of consent made by the Irish government.<sup>16</sup>

Is the Prime Minister aware that we regard two of the principles on which the agreement is based as especially important? These are, first the reassertion by the Dublin Government of their acceptance that a change in Northern Ireland status could not come about without the consent of the people of Northern Ireland, and second, the acknowledgment by the British Government of what was described in a previous summit as the all-Irish dimension.<sup>17</sup>

The agreement recognises that there will be no change in the status of Northern Ireland except with the consent of the majority of the people of Northern Ireland. Anyone who is trying to undermine that is only trying to raise fears which do not exist.<sup>18</sup>

Various such responses occurred again and again against a backdrop of complaints from Unionists, and supporters, particularly in the Conservative party, that the agreement was an attack on the Union and the present status of Northern Ireland. If the logic of (a) and (b) is as clear as we suggest, why should anyone doubt the maintenance of the Union? The problem is, and as Sperber and Wilson point out, the deductive device available to

communicators processes a range of aspects of the input, and the Unionists not only have available to them clauses (a) and (b), but also clause (c). Processing clauses (a) and (b) within the context of (c) leads to different results.

The first thing to note is that clause (c) would seem to be a conditional statement in its own right:

If in the future a majority of the people of Northern Ireland clearly wish for and formally consent to the establishment of a united Ireland (P), they [the two governments] will introduce and support in the respective parliaments legislation to give effect to that wish (Q).

Once again, this looks like a form of "If P then Q." However, there is a problem here. If we assume, as seems legitimate for our formal argument, that a United Ireland equals a change in status, then (P), in this case, has already been negated by clause (b) (the majority do not wish a change in status: where a United Ireland = a change in status). Further, clause (a) in conjunction with (b) affirms that there will no action on status without positive (P) (i.e., majority consent). In one sense, then, clause (c) is puzzling, since in formal terms it says nothing more than we have already been given in the conjunction of (a) and (b) (see above). We noted earlier that a change in status was directly linked to majority consent, clause (b) provides the premise that there is not majority consent, and this in conjunction with clause (a) gives us the conclusion that there will be no change in the present status of Northern Ireland. Clause (c) has, however, set up a counterfactual context where majority consent exists in some future possible world, and in such a world a change of status would go hand in hand with a United Ireland. The question is, then, why has this counterfactual world been introduced, a fact commented on by Unionists? Consider the following statement by the Rev Martin Smyth, MP along with Margaret Thatcher's response.

The prime Minister said that status has been recognised and that the peoples place has been protected. Why does article 1 state that a formal change would take place if the people of Northern Ireland decided that they wanted a United Ireland? They want something else.<sup>19</sup>

Article 1 of the agreement makes it abundantly clear that there is no threat whatsoever to Unionists heartfelt desire to remain part of the United Kingdom. It provides, in a formally binding international accord, a recognition by the Irish Government that the status of Northern Ireland will remain unchanged as long as that is the wish of majority of people of Northern Ireland. It recognises also that the present wish of a majority is for no change in that status.<sup>20</sup>

Martin Smyth's comment is a recognition that if there will be no change in the status of Northern Ireland, because the majority do not wish that change, why is there any need, therefore, to talk of any future or other counterfactual state. Mrs Thatcher does not answer this point, but, instead, reiterates clauses (a) and (b), which, when taken together,

do have a strong logical form leading to the conclusion that there will be no change in the present status of Northern Ireland. This, however, is affected by clause (c).

While humans may make use of the deductive device as Sperber and Wilson suggest, they are also affected directly by the principle of relevance itself, and the question for those who read and process Article 1 is what does (c) provide that (a) and (b) do not? For communicators processing Article 1 what relevance does (c) have in the context of interpreting this Article?

For the Unionists one might argue that (c) adds nothing directly to their interpretation of Article 1, since it is clauses (a) and (b) which, when processed within a Unionist context, give as output information central to the Unionist position (i.e., no change in status). In this case there is a sense in which (c) is not directed at the Unionists at all, but rather at Nationalists, Republicans, and the Irish government. The possible world in which the majority of the people of Northern Ireland wish to become part of a United Ireland is the one they seek.

This fact is clear enough in itself, and the structures of Article 1 have a specific audience design dimension wherein similar logical forms are used to communicate present and future circumstances. The problem is that each alternate audience has access to all the clauses (a, b and c) and in the case of the Unionists clause (c) is irrelevant. Equally, and alternatively, we discover that for Republicans, and indeed the opposition party in the South of Ireland, clauses (a) and (b) were unacceptable.

The problem in this case is that from the viewpoint of the British and Irish governments Article one was merely meant to be descriptive, a reflection of the needs of the politics of the time. Clauses (a) and (b) reflect Thatcher's Unionist credentials, while (c) is there for the Irish government to argue (in the opposite direction from the British government) that the British government now recognize Nationalist aspirations. Our point is that interpretation is relevance driven, and communicators seek out the most relevant interpretation which is in line with least processing effort. Given Nationalist and Unionist perspectives Article 1 gives both groups inconsistent information which they must reconcile within a selected context. For the Unionists they can only reconcile clause (c) by assuming some dubiety toward the Union on behalf of the British government (a similar position being taken, to some extent, by the Irish government). On the other hand, Republicans can only reconcile clause (c) with clauses (a) and (b) by assuming that nothing has changed from the British perspective, i.e., they continue to guarantee the Unionist veto (an interpretation accepted by the British government). We can see, therefore, that Article I was bound to fail given the nature of human communication processes.

Relevance Theory is not the only way of accessing such facts, but it does make clear how they arise, and suggests, in terms of the normal process of human communication, that they were a predictable, and perhaps inevitable outcome. This being the case Relevance Theory also suggests, therefore, a way of testing messages before they are released to audiences. Perhaps if those who framed the Agreement had considered Relevance Theory

they could have modeled alternative outcomes within differing audience environments.<sup>21</sup> This is not to suggest a way of solving all the communication problems within Northern Ireland (or any other situation of conflict); Sperber and Wilson accept that you cannot completely control idiosyncratic processing. Nevertheless, we should not ignore our obligations as communicators to provide the best input relevant to the outcomes we seek, and in order to do this some consideration of pragmatics, in particular Relevance Theory, might be helpful.

## **Consultation and Interpretation**

As a second example of the problems facing the Anglo-Irish Agreement we will explore the controversy which surrounded the role of the Irish government in Northern Irish affairs. To do this we will focus on Unionist reaction, since it is here that the problems are most centered.

The Agreement produced fervent rejection from the Unionist community in NI, who were incensed by the involvement of the Irish government in the affairs of NI. The claims and the counter-claims of the Unionists regarding the Agreement led to an apparent political stalemate in the wake of the Agreement. This stalemate represented a breakdown in communication between the British government and the Northern Irish Unionists. They mistrust the British government because they fear the government will desert NI and eventually allow a United Ireland. They are also suspicious that the Irish government will always be working to achieve a United Ireland. The Unionists' behavior and their specific reading of intentions in comprehension are easily predicted by the Principle of Relevance on the simple additional assumption that for them propositions about this fear constitute an inordinately rich and easily accessible potential context. It is an area to which Unionists are constantly attending and which therefore always provides a possible extension of the context. It will be appealed to and exploited whenever there is an opportunity. The Unionists will select the most relevant interpretation of political utterances for them, that is, the one whose main implications relate to this fear.

To explain the effects of this process we will focus on the way in which Unionists pragmatically encoded their own contextually driven interpretation of the concept of "consultation." The example case we will focus on relates to assumptions held by Unionists and the British government concerning the role of the Republic in the InterGovernmental Conference which was set up by the Agreement. As a data-base this article will consider the speeches of various politicians made in the House of Commons debate on the Anglo-Irish Agreement.<sup>22</sup>

The British government frequently attempted to persuade Unionists that the role of the Republic within the Conference was to be "merely consultative" and they continually stressed that the Irish government had no executive power in NI.

Prime Minister Thatcher: . . . We, the United Kingdom Government, accountable to Parliament, remain responsible for the Government of Northern Ireland. Yes, we will listen to the views of the Irish Government. Yes, we will make

determined efforts to resolve differences. But at the end of the day decisions north of the border will continue to be made by the United Kingdom Government and south of the border by the Irish Government. This is a fundamental point. There can be no misunderstanding.<sup>23</sup>

Sir Frederick Bennett MP: I dislike the second article, about a structured consultative role, as much as anyone, but I am aware from the intolerable arguments that I have had during the past 18 months with my Irish counterparts at Strasbourg that no agreement is possible on any subject or aspect of our relations that does not give some sort of consultative role to the Irish Republic regarding the minority. We must face the fact that Garret FitzGerald would never have got his agreement through the Dail last week without that article.<sup>24</sup>

Many Unionist MPs expressed their belief that the role was to be more than consultative and that in reality the Agreement created a form of joint authority between the British and Irish governments over NI. Perhaps the most significant speech of the debate on the new role of the Irish government and its consequences came from Unionist MP Harold McCusker.

Hon. Members can rest assured of this. I shall never have to explain to my constituents again why the Prime Minister believes that they are as British as the people of Finchley. I shall never have to listen to people telling me that Northern Ireland is an integral part of the United Kingdom. We shall never hear those words. They will be removed from the political dictionary of Northern Ireland. This is where we come to the crunch, because it is where misrepresentation will occur. In return, a commitment has been given to the Irish Government that they can interfere with every aspect of life in Northern Ireland.

Tom King indicated dissent

The right hon. Gentleman need not shake his head. This is more than a consultative role. He said that. If he wants to deny it, he can intervene. He said that on a BBC radio programme. When pushed to say why it was more than a consultative role, he said, It has to be more than a consultative role, because if it was not Dr. FitzGerald would have no power. Oh sorry, I did not mean to use that word. [Interruption ] We can get out the transcript and look at it. I challenge the right hon. Gentleman to say that. Garrett FitzGerald says that it is a more than consultative role. The right hon. Gentleman also said it.<sup>25</sup>

The Unionists and the British government clearly differed in their interpretation of the role of the Irish government within the newly created InterGovernmental Conference. The starting point may have been the same in that it was mutually manifest that the role was to be "consultative." However, both parties had a different view of what it meant to consult a third party, and this led to differing interpretations of the role of the Irish government (see below).

The cause of disagreement came from the meaning each group held over the term "consultation" and the implications of having a "consultative role." The term "consultation" suggests that person A talks to person B about some matter X. Person B who is being consulted may put forward their opinion about matter X to person A. However, the key point is to consider what influence person B's opinions will have on person A's future decisions, or course of action related to matter X. The term "consultation" suggests that the views of person B will be listened to and will affect person A. This is, however, not a semantic fact, since X may consult with Y without this having any impact on the behavior of X: X consulted Y about P but did not do anything about it. At the pragmatic level, however, the word "consult" is normally linked to such issues as status, knowledge and power. For example, the use of the word "consultant" conjures an image of expertise and knowledge. There is an expectation that when one consults an expert there is some impact. In the case of a doctor or lawyer, for example, it is the normal expectation that one consults these figures with a view to acting on what they say. In this sense while consultants might be seen as providing advice, to consult someone seems to be different from seeking advice from someone, and the difference is one of the potential outcomes. In consulting someone there is a stronger expectation of impact than with advice. It is true that there is no guarantee that one will act on the outcome of a consultation, anymore than one may act on advice, there is merely a stronger inference that consultation will have an impact. In this sense we might say that "consult" has two readings: a strict semantic reading and a pragmatic reading.

semantic: X seeks information I on Z from Y

pragmatic: (i) X seeks information I on Z from Y

(ii) Effect (Y gives I on Z to X)

(iii) Expect (X act on I)

The pragmatic representation introduces both the concept of "Effect," and expectation, "Expect." "Expect" indicates that any information provided as a result of the consultation will be acted on. "Effect" is meant to capture a generic set of possible influences from the consultation; these may be linked to status, authority, respect, power, superior knowledge or whatever. The net result is the same, i.e., pragmatically we consult those whose advice we expect will affect us, or have an influence upon us, and the outcome of this influence is displayed in those actions which result from the consultation.

Consider a classic doctor-patient scenario. The patient consults the doctor who prescribes a certain medication. The patient obtains the medicine but still retains "decision-making powers" as to whether they take the medicine. The doctor cannot force the patient to take the medicine, and yet it is still fairly likely that the patient will take it, as he respects the doctor's superior wisdom on medical matters and recognizes the doctor's authority in this field (indicated, in part, by seeking the consultation in the first place). In this sense the pragmatic "script" or "schema"<sup>26</sup> for the process of consultation will contain assumptions

about the status or influence of those consulted, and further, an assumption that actions will be contingent upon the outcomes of the consultation.

As a result, if one runs the word "consult" within a pragmatic environment the outcomes may be radically different from running the form in a semantic environment. To put it in Sperber and Wilson's terms, let us imagine that the pragmatic reading forms the cognitive environment of an individual A, while the semantic reading forms the cognitive environment of an individual B; then the same word used in a communicative context involving A and B may lead both individuals to generate different interpretations and inferences based on the interaction of the word "consult" within these differing cognitive environments. For B the word merely indicates that X is seeking information I from Y on Z, with no further implications or inferences following. For A, however, not only is information on Z being sought, but there is an assumption that Y has some recognized position in providing information I, and that X will be expected to act on, or at least be influenced by, the information I provided by Y.

Now, let us extend this into the situation surrounding the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Bearing in mind the attitude of the Ulster Unionists to the Agreement, and their view that it gives Dublin a say in Ulster's affairs, it seems feasible that the British government have chosen the word "consultative" very carefully. If the term is taken with its strict semantic reading then no influence is guaranteed; indeed, as the description above suggests, there is not even necessarily a suggestion of status or authority since these are not part of the semantic reading but are located within the pragmatic reading. This argument is further supported by the British government's use of the adverbial modifier "merely," which attempts to downplay any possible pragmatic reading of the term "consult." The selection of the word "merely" seems directed at attempting to confirm, from the British viewpoint, the way they wish the word "consult" to be interpreted, i.e., within a semantic frame.

The attitude of the Ulster Unionists, however, suggests that they are not running the term "consult" in a semantic environment, and their pronouncements clearly suggest the processing of the word "consult" in a pragmatic environment. Let us look at this in Relevance Theory terms. Relevance Theory can account for the pragmatic interpretation of consultation by assuming that the hearer has conceptual representations for the term "consultation" in long-term memory. The presence of consultation in an utterance will give the hearer access to these conceptual representations which are held as encyclopedic entries for the term consultation. These entries will be retrieved from memory and added to working memory as implicated contextual assumptions. One implicated assumption may be that consultation involves the giving of advice. A contextual implication may be deduced that Dublin gives its advice to the InterGovernmental Conference. Another implicated assumption concerning consultation may be that the advice of a consultant is influential. If this contextual assumption is recovered then the contextual implication is that Dublin's advice will have influence. These contextual implications would be relevant to Unionists and their interpretation of Dublin's consultative role would be likely to contain such contextual effects. Now consider these implications in relation to our general pragmatic definition of consult.

Britain is consulting Dublin about NI

(i) X (Britain) seek information I on Z (NI) from Y (Dublin)

(ii) Effect (Y (Dublin) gives I on Z (NI) to X (Britain))

(iii) Expect X (Britain act on I )

And we might add here further legitimate implications, i.e., that if Britain acts on I, then there is an impact on Z (NI), which means that Y (Dublin) has affected, or had an impact on Z (NI). This is exactly the logic the Unionists are operating with.

Reference to "logic" here is significant since it is the logic of the government's statement relative to the above which the Unionists wish to trace. Consider the following statement from Unionist MP Ken Maginnis:

. . . I should draw attention to the phrase 'views and proposals' that is in the agreement. The Irish Government are to be allowed to put forward to the conference their 'views and proposals.' The phrase appears again and again. Let us assume that 'views' relates to consultations. What then, does the word 'proposals' suggest? It does not strike me as something that is merely consultative when I read in article 2(b):

'Determined efforts shall be made through conference to resolve any differences.'

Surely that means that a reasonable number of proposals from the Government of the Irish Republic will have to be accepted. An analogy can be drawn with a coalition.<sup>27</sup>

. . . Thus, through conference, in a thinly disguised way, the Irish Republic has been given an executive role in Ulster's affairs. I do not see any great rush to reassure me, but in case there is I ask hon. Members to consider what other meaning there could be and why Garrett FitzGerald agrees with me that his Government have a role which is 'more than consultative.'

Mr. Maginnis refers to the phrase "views and proposals." He regards the term "views" as being consistent with the government's claim of "mere" consultation or simple discussion the Dublin government may give their "view" on a particular issue but there is no assumption that their view will affect any decision of the Conference. Mr. Maginnis is more suspicious of the term "proposal." By signing the Agreement the British government has committed itself to accepting that the Irish government may make proposals on NI affairs. The term "proposal" implies some sort of suggestion or recommendation regarding future action. Such suggestions or recommendations would be put forward by the Dublin government during the Conference. It can be assumed that the British government will have to accept at least some of the "proposals" of the Irish government otherwise there is no point in the Irish government being involved in the



Conference. If the Conference accepts a proposal of the Irish government and this proposal is adopted by the Conference then here is a case of Dublin's influence as claimed by Unionists. The term "proposal" appears consistent with the pragmatic interpretation of Dublin's consultative role adopted by Unionists. This point is further supported, although interestingly not taken up in debate, by the fact that the Agreement talks of "determined efforts" to reach agreement on proposals. Although such agreement would not of itself result in influence, it is still the term "consult" which drives the main concerns.

The implications highlighted are legitimate and are recoverable from the very basic entries which are tied to the word "consultation." It would appear that they were likely to have been manifest to Unionists. The government may have intended to limit the extent of Dublin's role but they allow the recovery of implications which entail that Dublin has an influence. Such implications are highly relevant to Unionists and produce further contextual implications and other contextual effects.

But why does the British government not simply adjust its language to remove any inferences of influence in relation to the Dublin government? The problem is that the British government faces a very specific dilemma because it had to present the Agreement to differing audiences, i.e., the Ulster Unionists and the Irish government. The dilemma involved wording the Agreement in such a way that the Irish government could see something in it for them. The Irish government clearly saw its consultative role within a pragmatic interpretation, and in fact it is doubtful whether the British government could have persuaded the Irish to sign the Agreement if this had not been the case, i.e., they could not have sold the Agreement to the Irish government if it was made clear that they would only be able to "discuss" matters relating to NI. Such an interpretation of their consultative role was expressed explicitly by several Irish government ministers (including the Taoiseach, Deputy Taoiseach and the Minister for Justice) as well as accidentally by Tom King, the NI minister responsible at that time. At the same time, Unionists had to be convinced by the Agreement that there was to be nothing in it for Dublin. However, Unionists derived the same interpretation of "consultation" as the Irish government and therefore they saw the influential consultative role of Dublin as allowing it to "interfere" in the affairs of NI.

To sum up, the Unionists and the British government differed in their interpretation of the role of the Irish government. The starting point may have been the same, in that it was mutually manifest that the role was to be consultative. However, both parties had a different view of what it meant to consult a third party and this led to differing interpretations of the role of the Irish government. The British government presented the role as being "merely consultative" and without executive power while the Unionists, and the Irish government, saw the role as one that allowed the Republic's government influence on decisions and recommendations made to Parliament by the InterGovernmental Conference. Unionists also appeared to assume that these recommendations would be passed into law by Parliament. David McKittrick<sup>28</sup> notes that after the signing of the Agreement every single decision of government would be open to the interpretation that its impetus came not from London but from Dublin, and the

Unionists could find continuing confirmation for their fear that they were being ruled jointly by Britain and the Republic.

## **RELEVANCE THEORY AND THE ANGLO-IRISH AGREEMENT: CONCLUSION**

We noted above the multiple and conflicting interpretations which various parties gave to the Anglo-Irish Agreement. We have explored general reactions to Article 1 of the Agreement, and specifically the Unionist response to any suggested role for the Irish government in Northern Irish affairs. We have shown only some of the possible ways in which Relevance Theory highlights particular difficulties in processing political messages, but these have been instructive in both a descriptive and analytic sense, and raise questions about the way in which political documents are framed in contexts of multi-audience interpretation. Now, some might claim that the interpretations we have explored were to be expected. For example, given the Unionists' general political stance we could predict they would not want the Southern government involved in anything to do with Northern Ireland. But on the same logic we might expect Republicans and Irish parliamentarians to be supportive of the role of the Irish government as interpreted by the Unionists. Yet, as we noted from quotes above, Republicans and the Irish opposition interpreted "consultation" in the same way as the British government, i.e., as suggesting no real involvement and no change. The question is not whether the Irish government are consulted or not, it is whether they have impact or not. The choice of the term "consultation" allows options either way, and it is this linguistic choice, not simply Republican or Unionist biases in their own right although clearly they have a role to play since they form a legitimate context of interpretation which opens the way for communication difficulties. It is here that the value of Relevance Theory can be seen.

The same factors apply to our analysis of Article 1. The three core clauses and their linguistic structure allow, once again, for selectional reading and attention. If ostensive communication is produced with a presumption of relevance then each clause must have a role, not simply on its own, but in relation to other available clauses. While the British and Irish governments may have felt they had produced a form of wording sensitive to everyone's needs, they did not allow for the fact that assumptions constructed in processing take account of the available communicative context. In this case Unionists must reconcile clauses (a) and (b) with clause (c), while Republicans must reconcile clause (c) with clauses (a) and (b). Seen in this way, and given that there was no prior consultation with the parties in Northern Ireland, the article and the Agreement was unlikely to receive acceptance. So why was it produced?

The answer to this question is simply that both governments thought that by recognizing both the present context of the Union and the aspiration of a United Ireland they would keep both sides happy. A relevance analysis would have revealed the difficulties of achieving this with the present structure of Article 1. This highlights one potential value of the relevance approach. One in which messages are first explored in terms of processing in differing contexts to achieve the best possible selection of available linguistic choices.

But Relevance Theory is also useful in helping us further describe the detail of why particular positions were adopted, and how they were justified, not simply in terms of political goals, but in terms of how these goals were used as a basis for arriving at selected interpretations. The role of language and pragmatics is central in such a process. This fact is informally acknowledged by Coughlan when he says of the Anglo-Irish Agreement:<sup>29</sup>

Henceforth in Ulster reality was to be imaginary and the imaginary was to be the real. Words were to mean the opposite of what they said. Loyalty was to mean rebellion, sovereignty was to mean sharing responsibility with foreign governments, consent was to mean what the politicians decided it would mean and talk about peace was to hasten preparation for civil war. Truly a statesman like achievement, concocted by the most creative political minds of Britain and Ireland.

In terms of our analysis we could add: agreement was to mean no change in status and, at the same time, a future United Ireland; and consultation was to mean both listening and ignoring, and listening and acting.

In such a context of linguistic confusion and obfuscation, methods for discussing, understanding, and debating linguistic choices in an analytic as opposed to interpretative fashion must be important. Relevance Theory allows us to explain potential Orwellian manipulations, as much as the legitimate contextual and multiple interpretations of forms such as "consultation." The centrality and need for such pragmatic methods is continually before us. Consider, for example, the political machinations over the IRA ceasefire statement of 1994.

Despite the momentous nature of the event against the backdrop of 25 years of conflict, there followed a series of arguments about whether in fact the IRA's use of the word "complete" meant there would be a "permanent" end to violence. The British government and Unionist politicians within Northern Ireland called on the IRA to clarify whether their statement meant there was now a permanent end to violence, and urged the IRA and Sinn Féin (the political wing of the IRA) to make use of the word permanent.

The general Nationalist reaction to such calls is summarized in the following extract from the Irish News:<sup>30</sup>

Complete, the word used in the IRA document is an absolute statement. It means entire. There is no room for ambiguity and those who look for that are in danger of putting pedantry above peoples lives . . . The presence or otherwise of the word permanent should not be a problem for the British government, for unionists or, for that matter the IRA. The bluff should be called on those who have latched onto this word in an attempt to block progress.

The phrase ". . . putting pedantry above peoples lives" is particularly strong, but as debate raged back and forth on the use or non use of the word "permanent" the issue did begin to

look like a purely academic argument in the midst of a major historical and political event. Despite this, various linguistic experts appeared in print and on TV arguing about the semantic nature of "complete vs permanent." The authors of this article were called upon to make comment. In this context common sense alone does not reflect what the problem actually is, nor indeed does the semantic analysis proffered by some scholars, because the issue is one of pragmatics.

On an assumption of relevance the choice of "complete cessation" should be the choice most likely to allow the hearer to recover the intended assumptions. But Relevance Theory does not guarantee communication, nor that it will always be successful, nor indeed that it may not be manipulated. The term "complete" may be durational in referring to specific events or actions, and this suggests that it is not in opposition to "permanent," nor can one say, as the leader of the SDLP, John Hume, did that both mean the same thing. It seems perfectly acceptable to say "there will be a complete but not permanent cessation of violence." And recent history validates this grammatical claim.

There is more that could be said about this example, but that is for future research. It is highlighted here to indicate the continuing and significant role of language meaning in the context of the Northern Ireland conflict, and to reiterate once again, that the model of Relevance Theory, designed as it is to explain the general process of human communication, should be considered as a potential tool for the analysis of contexts of conflict. Relevance provides not only analytic and interpretative descriptions of events in support of other political arguments, but it can also highlight the underlying dimensions of disagreement in relation to different or similar linguistic inputs.

## **Endnotes**

1. Work on this article has been supported by a European Social Research Council Grant R00221355. The authors would like to acknowledge the support provided by the ESRC.
2. Stephen Levinson, *Pragmatics* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1983); J. May, *Pragmatics: An Introduction* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1993).
3. Paul Grice, "Logic and Conversation," in P. Cole and J. Morgan, eds., *Syntax and Semantics 3: Speech Acts* (New York: Academic Press), pp. 41-58.
4. Kent Bach and Robert Harnish, *Linguistic Communication and Speech Acts* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1979); Gillian Brown and George Yule, *Discourse Analysis* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Gerald Gazdar, *Pragmatics: Implicature, Presupposition and Logical Form* (New York: Academic Press, 1979); M. Georgia, Green, *Pragmatics and Natural Language Understanding* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1989); Lawrence Horn, "Metalinguistic Negation and Pragmatic Ambiguity," *Language*, 61 (1985), pp. 121-74; Ruth Kempson, *Presupposition and the Delimitation of Semantics* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

5. Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1986).

6. See John Wilson, *Politically Speaking* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1990), chap. 4.

7. William Connolly, *The Terms of Political Discourse* (Oxford, UK: Martin Robertson, 1983); C. Corcoran, *Political Language and Rhetoric* (Queensland, Australia: University of Queensland Press, 1979); Murray Edleman, *Political Language: Words that Succeed and Policies that Fail* (New York: Academic Press, 1977); Kenneth Hudson, *The Language of Modern Politics* (London: Macmillan); M. Shapiro, ed., *Language and Politics* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1984).

8. Wilson, *Politically Speaking*, chap. 1.

9. Brendan O'Leary and John McGarry, *The Politics of Antagonism: Understanding Northern Ireland* (London: Athlone, 1993), pp. 221-25.

10. Cited in O'Leary and McGarry, *The Politics of Antagonism*, p. 220.

a. Gerry Adams, President of Sinn Féin, December 1995.

b. Ian Paisley, Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), 1986.

c. Tom King, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, December 1985.

d. Harold McCusker, Deputy Leader of the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), February 1986.

11. Dail Eireann Parliamentary Papers (1985), p. 2582.

12. Sperber and Wilson, *Relevance*, pp. 71-117.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 94-95.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 97.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 139.

16. Margaret Thatcher, Hansard, November 1985, p. 19.

17. Roy Hattersley, Hansard, November 1985, p. 20.

18. Margaret Thatcher, Hansard, November 1985, p. 28.

19. Rev. Martin Smyth, Hansard, November 1985, p. 31.

20. Margaret Thatcher, Hansard, November 1985, p. 748.

21. See, for example, computer programmes such as POLITICS. J.G. Carbonell, "Automated ideological reasoning," *Cognitive Science*, 2, pp. 71-51.
22. See Hansard, 26-27 November 1985.
23. Hansard, 26 November 1985, p. 750.
24. Hansard, 27 November 1985, p. 932.
25. *Ibid.*, pp. 915-16.
26. See Roger Schank and Roger Abelson, *Scripts, Plans Goals and Understanding* (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1977).
27. Hansard, 26 November 1985, p. 809.
28. David McKittrick, *Despatches From Belfast* (Belfast, NI: Blackstaff, 1989).
29. Cited in Arthur Aughey, *Under Siege. Ulster Unionism and the Anglo-Irish Agreement* (London: Hurst, 1989).
30. *Irish News*, 1 September 1994, p. 1.