

COMMUNICATIVE RELEVANCE AND MANIPULATION OF COGNITIVE ENVIRONMENT IN PRESIDENT TRUMP'S BLAME OF CHINA ON COVID-19

Salisu Muhammad Raj & Adamu Usman

Department of English, Nasarawa State University, Keffi, Nasarawa State -
Department of Languages, Nigerian Army University Biu, Borno State - Nigeria

Abstract

This research looks at two aspects of Relevance Theory to investigate the discourse of the novel COVID - 19 that has put the whole world on a standstill. The study examines a corpus obtained from series of the press conferences President Donald Trump of the United States conveyed in relation to the pandemic of COVID-19. The specific corpus was the conversation of the conference he had on the 19th of March, 2020. It was so selected because of the choice of words of the interlocutors which the researchers found suitable for analyzing the linguistic/pragmatic aspects chosen for this study. The research, thus, chose some aspects of Relevance Theory, namely; Informative Intention and Communicative Intention. These models are found suitable for analyzing the data because they communicate the speaker's intention and the relevance of such intentions in the audience aimed at bringing out communicative relevance in the conversational situation. The analysis was carried out using a descriptive approach, exploring pragmatic factors that expose how the speaker manipulates the cognitive environment to achieve communicative relevance. The result of the findings, however, shows that, in exerting his informative intention, the speaker seemed to rely on the position of authority he enjoys which, instead of making his information explicit by providing enough evidence for his claims, in relation to the assumptions he shares with the audience, his communicative behavior portrayed an imposition of his thinking/authority in the audience. But because they did not share the same cognitive environment with him, the addressees could not recognize his intention as objective which will bring about communicative relevance. They seemed to have different perceptions; that his intention underbellies more serious diplomatic issues than the pandemic he will want the world to believe. This betrayed the speaker's informative intention which failed to have the desired cognitive effects he would have loved to market to the whole world.

Key Words: Relevance Theory, Communicative Relevance, Informative Intention, Cognitive Environment, Covid-19 Discourse.

1.1 Introduction

In December, 2019, the whole world was greeted with a pandemic of a corona virus code-named COVID-19 which origin was reported to be Wuhan in China. This had adverse effects on health and socio-economic lives of the global citizens. The novel virus brought to the fore issues of racism, stereotypes and many more that culminated to conspiracy theories, blames and counter-blames on the origin of the virus, its global spread and other incendiary issues that sparked disaffections amongst individuals, communities and nations.

Language, as the most viable means of communication, was being systematically employed while exchanging information about the virus. This ignited interests among language researchers who applied various linguistic theories and models to interrogate such issues of language use in the discourse of COVID – 19. This paper is also an attempt to lend a voice to

the role language played in understanding multifaceted issues that surround the evolution of the virus. The research, thus, is aimed at analyzing the discourse of the press briefing President Donald Trump of the United States held on the 19th of March, 2020. The main objective is to examine how certain utterances by Trump, hereby referred to as Informative Intention, portrayed some feelings of stereotype which were viewed by journalists (of different races) present at the conference as a demonstration of the *War of Might* long going on between America and China. The effect such utterances have on the audience is the Communicative Relevance which this research is investigating. The major interest of this paper is, therefore, to, first, find out how the speaker manipulates the cognitive environment to drive home his point and, second, to evaluate how the addressee(s) process the information to derive optimal relevance. This is to determine how language functions in human

cognition in relation to different assumptions which the speakers hold.

1.2 Literature Review

1.2.1 Conceptual/Theoretical Review

Language, according to Geoffrey Leech (1983), performs two functions. The first is transmission of message by a speaker and the second function is the interpretation of the message by the addressee. Most times, speakers, resulting from their different experience of the world which form their perceptions of socio-cultural issues, interpret utterances or statements made by fellow speakers based on the assumptions they hold on certain issues or on one another. In this circumstance, language is processed for optimal relevance to individuals, to the context of utterance and to the phenomenon that instigates the utterance. Relevance, derived from the concept of Relevance Theory, is “the cornerstone to communication and cognition” according to Jacob Mey (2000:82). This is so because cognition provides the basis for understanding communication as interlocutors subsume into their consciousness assumptions or background knowledge they hold that trigger their conversational behaviors. This is more so that, according to Francis Yus Rumos (1998:306), human deductive system is central to the production of meaning in communication as it plays a prominent role in his mental processing ability to be able to identify the speaker’s intention.

Sperber and Wilson, the proponents of Relevance Theory, proposed that:

Utterances raise expectations of relevance not because speakers are expected to obey a cooperative principle and maxims or some other communicative conventions, but because the search for relevance is a basic feature of human cognition, which communicators may exploit. Every act of ostensive communication communicates its own optimal relevance... which is intuitively to an individual when it connects with the background information he has available to yield

conclusions that matter to him (Sperber and Wilson 1995).

Because every interlocutor has different background information about an issue, this affects his conceptualization of the speaker’s utterance. In this regard, his understanding of what is said will be acutely subsumed into what Sperber and Wilson (1996) call ‘contextualization process’ from where he picks the meaning of the utterance of his fellow interlocutor. In this case, what is relevant to him is his conceptualization of the background information from which he derives his meaning. So, central to the theory of Relevance is the perception (also referred to as cognitive process) where relevance seeks to improve human cognition by providing different kinds of cognitive effects through combination of inferences and existing assumptions to arrive at new conclusions. This is what Robert Carston calls ‘contextual implications’ which could either be strengthening existing beliefs or assumptions interlocutors hold about a particular issue or contradicting or eliminating already-held background information. Such cognitive effects may either increase or decrease the accuracy of individual’s perceptual strength which may make or mar human mind to access information (Carston 2002: 2).

Relevance Theory, as an off-shoot of Communicative Principles, is an inferential theory of communication which aims to explain the speaker’s intention, what he implies by what he said and his attitudes towards what was implied (Wilson 1994). It is a combination of the content, the context, speakers’ intention and his attitudes. In a broader perspective, RT seeks to explain how the hearer interprets the speaker’s implicit and explicit meaning. All these are rooted in human cognition as the basis for understanding of communication or communicative relevance. This is why, according to Sperber and Wilson (1995) “An input is relevant to an individual when its processing in a context of available assumptions yields a positive cognitive effect”.

In such kind of communication, the RT proposes two types of intentions. The first is Informative Intention while the second is the Communicative Intention or Relevance.

Informative Intention is the ability of the speaker to make his intention manifest. In doing so, he strives, either through coding or inferences, to give evidence of his intention, ostensibly to enforce in the audience/addressee an inducement to arrive at certain predetermined conclusion (Sperber and Wilson 1995). According to the duo, the “communicator’s informative intention is better described as an intention to modify directly not the thoughts but the cognitive environment of the audience” (Sperber and Wilson 1983: 58-59). However, it is to be argued that such intentions are only successful or would have positive communicative relevance on the audience if the speaker stands at some vantage position of authority which gives him an advantage to manipulate the cognitive environment of the audience.

Communicative Intention (relevance), on the other hand, is realized if the addressee recognizes and arrives at the intended assumptions of the speaker. Communicative intention or relevance, which dwells on how an utterance is understood, is, according to Strawson (1994), the most important part of communication. This is because it accounts for how the addressee perceives and interprets the speaker’s intention. The basic argument here is that the speaker should make his intentions manifest such that the addressee grasps and recognizes them intuitively, not based on his (speaker’s) ostensive manipulation of the cognitive environment. By implication, the speaker should be explicit to enable the addressee form corresponding assumptions, what Schiffer (1972) calls “mutually known” assumptions.

Related to both informative and communicative intentions is the cognitive environment, which, according to Sperber and Wilson (1995: 39), is a set of assumptions, experience, memories, perceptions and knowledge an individual possesses that enables him to know more about certain information and, of course, the informative intention of the speaker. It includes the interlocutors’ physical environment, memorized information; what they referred to as “epistemological facts” which are subsumed into individual addressees’ cognitive abilities to bring out the mental representation

that will enable them decipher the communicative intention and its relevance to them. It is important, therefore, to state that, in understanding communicative relevance, there should be a reconciliation between the speaker’s informative intention and whether or not the interlocutors share cognitive environment. This is cardinal because the speaker’s informative intention, whether through ostensive communication (inference) or verbal proposition, is meant to focus the attention of the addressee on a particular information that the speaker considers relevant (Sperber and Wilson 1996: 60).

It is, thus, arguable that the speaker’s informative intention will most likely fail to achieve positive cognitive effects if the addressees do not share the same cognitive environments with the speaker. In this scenario, the communication will lose its relevance, taking a dimension that may result to unhealthy conclusion. This is more so if the speaker tries to modify (manipulate) their shared cognitive environment, if at all they share any. If, on the other hand, the audience shares the speaker’s assumptions, his informative intention will achieve what Sperber and Wilson (1996: 62) call “mutual manifest”. If they refuse to accept or recognize his proposition, then it implies that his informative intention has failed, hence, a backlash on the relevance of the communication. This is what the duo also refer to as “contextual implication” – a situation where new information (in this case, the speaker’s informative intention) fails to provide enough evidence that will strengthen the old assumptions of the audience (Sperber and Wilson 1996: 109).

For example, the statement “Government is playing politics with COVID-19” presents a verbal proposition of the speaker’s informative intention meant to induce the addressee to accept the proposition. However, such will have positive effects on the addressee if the former provides enough evidence that is in tandem with what is relevant to the addressee in relation to his cognitive environment; his assumptions, his experience, his memories and perceptions. This, needless to say, is only realizable if the intention resonates with what is

relevant to him, the addressee, as he focuses on the information that is most relevant to his cognitive environment. This is what Sperber and Wilson mean when they incline that “humans pay attention to some phenomena rather than others; they represent the phenomena to themselves in one way rather than the other; they process those representations in one context rather than another” (1987: 27). This is the only way the informative intention of the speaker will justify the essence of communication which denotes sharing of information.

Sperber and Wilson emphasized that, in deriving such information shared, we construct “mental representation of it” and what is relevant to us, therefore, is what in the information, coincides with the mental representation we construct. This is so because “we do not all construct the same (mental) representations, because of differences in our narrower physical environments on the one hand, and in our cognitive abilities, on the other” (Sperber and Wilson 1996: 38). This is also owing to the fact that our individual cognition, conceptual and perceptual experiences, socio-cultural differences, different memory retention and epistemological facts play significant roles in the kind of mental representation we construct. This explains why it is difficult for two individuals to share absolute cognitive environments. And, even if they do, they differ in their cognitive abilities. Sperber and Wilson say that “Since physical environments are never strictly identical, and since cognitive abilities are affected by previously memorized information, and thus differ in many respects from one person to another, people never share their total cognitive environments” (Sperber and Wilson 1996: 41).

So, if a speaker makes the utterance “Government is playing politics with COVID-19”, there are a number of possibilities. First, is that he shares this assumption with the addressee because of their physical and cognitive environments and, probably, ‘epistemological facts’ they may also share. In this regard, the speaker’s informative intention is likely to produce the desired mental representation and, thus, communicative relevance in the addressee. The second possibility is that the speaker only

shares his cognitive environment with a third person and echoes such assumptions with the second person/addressee who may not necessarily share the same assumptions. He does so with the aim of enforcing on the addressee a predetermined ‘clue’ or conclusion. In this case, the statement “Government is playing politics with COVID-19” might not achieve its purpose since he does not share his cognitive environment with the addressee. If, peradventure, he succeeds in manipulating the cognitive environment, that is probably because he enjoys some position of authority which enforces on the addressee an inclination to arrive at a conclusion predetermined by him, the speaker. In this context, communicative relevance was not achieved. The speaker only achieved his intent to modify or manipulate, not the thoughts, but the cognitive environment of the addressee, as suggested by Sperber and Wilson (1983: 58-59). What brings about communicative relevance is when the addressee convincingly adds new information to his (old) assumptions. This could be done when the new information succeeded in giving strong evidence that either strengthens or weakens his already-held assumptions such that they are either “forgotten or stored in their separate location in the hearer’s encyclopedic memory” (Sperber and Wilson 1996: 108-124). This is the only way the communication could be said to have achieved its relevance.

It goes to suggest, therefore, that there are interwoven factors that bring about communicative relevance in a naturally-occurring language situation. First, is the degree of contextual effects which are activities that involve mental processing - when the brain expends energy in order to reconcile the hearer’s assumptions with those of the speaker. Greater relevance is, thus, achieved if the addressee does not have to overstretch his brain in processing the information; to subsume the new information into his already-held assumptions. In other words, the speaker should be able to simplify his informative intention for easy mental processing to achieve greater communicative relevance. As Sperber and Wilson put it, “the greater the processing efforts, the lower the relevance. . . the less accessible the context, the greater the effort in accessing it”

(1996: 124 and 142). What this implies is that there is a link between understanding the context of communication and the relevance such communication could make to the audience. If he, the addressee, is able to access the context easily, it means he expends little efforts in processing the information. By implication, the context and, by extension, the entire communication, becomes more relevant to him. This is why Susan Foster defines communicative relevance as “proportional to the processing effort required to recover amount of contextual effects and, inversely, proportional to the processing effort required to recover these effects” (Susan Foster 19889: 5). All this implies that if the communicative intention of the speaker is not explicit, especially if he does not share the cognitive environment with the addressee, that is likely to weaken the speaker’s informative intention and that will set the audience on wild assumptions. Communicative relevance is, therefore, so pivotal to human communication that it underlies human cognition and human communicative behavior (Sperber and Wilson 1998).

1.3 Research Methodology

1.4 Data Presentation and Analysis

1.4.1 Data Presentation

1. **President Trump:** I would like to begin by announcing some important developments in our war against the Chinese virus.
2. **Reporter 1:** why do you keep calling this ‘the Chinese virus’? There are reports of dozens of incidents of bias against Chinese-Americans in this country. Your own aide, Secretary Azar says he does not use this term. He says ethnicity does not cause the virus. Why do you keep using this? A lot of people say it’s racist.
3. **President Trump:** because it comes from China. It’s not racist at all, no. not at all. It comes from China. That’s why. It comes from china. I want to be accurate.
4. **Reporter 1:** You have no concerns about Chinese-a-Americans in this country... (OVERLAPPED)
5. **President Trump:** Yeah, please, John. Please. (OVERLAPPED)
6. **Reporter 1:** Are you comfortable with this...
7. **President Trump:** I have great love for all of the people from our country. But as you know, China tried to say at one point maybe they stopped now...that it was caused by American soldiers. That can’t happen. It’s not going to happen. Not as long as I’m president. It comes from China.
8. **Reporter 2:** you’ve been very clear about who [YOU] think is to blame or where the origin to blame for this virus is...
9. **President Trump:** No no, not ‘think’. No, no. I don’t ‘think’.
10. **Reporter 2:** Right
11. **President Trump:** I know who where it came from. I don’t know if you’d say China is to blame. Certainly, we didn’t get an early run on it. It would have been helpful if we knew about it earlier. But it comes from [CHINA] and it’s not a question about it. Nobody is questioning that.

The corpus, which formed the primary source for this study, was obtained from series of the press conferences President Donald Trump of the United States conveyed in relation to the pandemic of COVID-19. Specifically, the research selected the conversation of the conference he had on the 19th of March, 2020 because of the choice of words of the interlocutors which the researchers found suitable for analyzing the linguistic/pragmatic aspects chosen for this study. The secondary sources are literature materials such as text books and journals on the theory/aspects chosen as the theoretical framework for the research which are some aspects of Relevance Theory, namely; Informative Intention and Communicative Intention. These models are found suitable for analyzing the data because they communicate the speaker’s intention and the relevance of such intentions in the audience. This is to bring out communicative relevance in the conversational situation. The analysis was carried out using a descriptive approach, exploring pragmatic factors that expose how the speaker manipulates the cognitive environment to achieve communicative relevance

12. **Reporter 3 (Undisclosed facial representation):** So, Senator Cotton is saying that they should be punished in so many words for inflicting this on the American people. Do you feel that way about it?
13. **President Trump:** well, I have a lot of respect for Tom Cotton and uhh. I know exactly what he's been saying. And there are those people that say that. So, we'll see what happens. Thank you.
14. **Reporter 4:** there are some... at least one White House official who used the term 'Kung-flu' referring to the fact that this virus started in china. Is that acceptable? Is it wrong? Are you worried that having this virus be talked about as a Chinese virus, that that might be talked about as a Chinese virus, that might...
15. **President Trump:** I wonder who said that. Do you know who said that?
16. **Reporter:** I'm not sure of the person's name but would you condemn the fact... that Kung flu...
17. **President Trump:** Say the term again.
18. **Reporter:** A person at the white house used the term 'kung-flu'.
19. **President Trump:** nods...'kung flu'?
20. **Reporter:** My question is... do you think, that's wrong? 'kung-flu'. And do you think, using the term 'Chinese virus' that puts Asian-Americans at risk...
21. **President Trump:** uhhh
22. **Reporter:** that people might target them?
23. **President Trump:** nooo, not at all. I think they probably would agree with it 100%. It comes from China.

1.4.2 Data Analysis

In analyzing the data, effort is made to relate the speaker's informative intention with the effects of such intentions on the audience, termed communicative relevance. The discussion will, thus, relate the linguistic exploration with the context of utterance, i. e. the pandemic of COVID-19 and how that exposes the unwholesome relationship between the United States and China. This is to underscore the notion expressed by Geoffrey Leech that utterances are a reflection of the speaker's thoughts and how he intends to influence those thoughts on the audience (Leech 1983: 56-57). It is noteworthy that the aim of a press conference is to pass a message meant for the public. Such a message could be to make policy statement, to debunk a notion or warn against certain happening.

For example, President Trump says in his opening statement;
"I would like to begin by announcing some important developments in our war against the Chinese virus".

Here, in his characteristic bluntness, Trump did not mince words to tell the press and, indeed, the whole world, that the novel COVID-19 was invented by China, thus, his last phrase "the Chinese virus". His informative intention here, as would be revealed in his subsequent utterances, was to curry public sympathy with the aim of painting China, a long time American rival

super power, black. Unfortunately, he seemed to be disappointed. His informative intention did not get the desired corresponding communicative relevance from the audience as he was fired back immediately by a reporter who asked;

"Why do you keep calling this 'the Chinese virus'?"

It could be argued here that he failed to enforce his intention into the mind of this addressee because they do not share the same cognitive environment. Not only this reporter, almost all of them were critical of his claim that the virus was a Chinese invention. This fact was exposed as the conversation ensued. Trump tried further, albeit in vain, to push his informative intention into the audience. That is why he kept repeating "it comes from China", which was, as Sperber and Wilson (1983: 58-59) said, to modify (manipulate) the cognitive environment to make them accept his proposition. As argued earlier, in exerting his informative intention, he seemed to rely on the position of authority he enjoys which, instead of making his information explicit by providing enough evidence for his claims, in relation to the assumptions he shares with the audience, his communicative behavior portrayed an imposition of his thinking in the audience.

But because they did not share the same cognitive environment with him, the addressees could not recognize his intention as objective which will bring about communicative relevance.

They seemed to have different perceptions; that his intention underbellies more serious diplomatic issues than the pandemic he will want the world to believe. Some of the reporters saw his propositions as his usual purvey of racism which became his trademark since he became the President of the United States. This was the background information with which they went to the communication ground. That was why whatever he said had to be subsumed into these assumptions to produce the meaning of his utterances. One of the reporters pointed out; “You have no concerns about Chinese - Americans in this country...”, suggestive of the fact that he was being racist and that was affecting the Chinese-Americans in the country. This assertion and others that followed in the conversation seemed to betray his informative intention which failed to have the desired cognitive effects he would have loved to market to the whole world. Apart from classification of his utterances as racist, they also brought to the fore, another insinuation. It is no longer news that America and China have long been fighting a cold war of supremacy for economic might. It is not surprise, therefore, that any such context of communication provides an opportunity to purvey their diplomatic war. So, when he says;

“I think they probably would agree with it 100%. It comes from China”, it exacerbates this conspiracy theory that they, both America and China, always try to undue each other to occupy the number one economic position in the world. Because of this notion which some of the journalists had before the conference, they found it hard to accept his informative intention. This was because Trump’s repeated “it came from China” could not add any new information which Sperber and Wilson said could either strengthen or weaken their already-held assumptions such that they are either “forgotten or stored in their separate location in the hearer’s encyclopedic memory” (Sperber and Wilson 1996: 108-124).

Conclusion

From the foregoing analysis, the research found out that the informative intention of the speaker fails to provide enough evidence which could have communicative effects in the audience, hence, achieving the desired communicative relevance. The reason, as the analysis shows, is because the speaker does not share the same cognitive environment with the audience. This was why his ostensive utterances were seen as an attempt to manipulate the cognitive environment, thereby foisting in the audience, his predetermined 'clue'.

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