COVERT COMMUNICATION. A RELEVANCE-BASED APPROACH

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Resumen

El objetivo fundamental de este trabajo es ofrecer un análisis de la noción de comunicación encubierta desde el marco teórico de la Teoría de la Pertinencia. Se examinan diferentes mecanismos de encubrimiento en función del tipo de estímulo empleado, ostensivo o no-ostensivo, y los diferentes tipos de proceso interpretativo que estos generan.

Palabras clave: comunicación encubierta, teoría de la pertinencia, enunciados retroactivos.

Abstract

The main aim of this paper is to offer an analysis of the notion of covert communication within the framework of Relevance Theory. We examine different mechanisms of covert information transmission in terms of the kind of stimulus employed, ostensive or non-ostensive, and the different interpretative processes they bring about.

Key words: Covert communication, Relevance theory, garden-path utterances.

Résumé

L'objectif fondamental de ce travail consiste en une analyse de la notion de sous-entendu dans la communication dans le cadre de la Théorie de la Pertinence. Différents mécanismes de sous-entendus sont étudiés en fonction du type de stimulation employée, ostensible ou non-ostensible ainsi que les différents types de processus interprétatifs que ceux-ci génèrent.

Mots clés: Sous-entendus dans la communication, Théorie de la pertinence, énoncés rétroactifs.

Sumario

1. Introduction

When people engage in communication they do so with the intention of achieving some goal. Most of the time, in what we call overt communication, those goals are *public* in the sense that they are openly recognized by the participants in the exchange. However, on some occasions, speakers are moved by *private* goals, that is, by goals which sometimes must remain hidden , because they would affect negatively the speaker's relationship with others if they became public.[1]

Not all goals are achieved through the same type of communication. Goals which are public and as such, out in the open, are accomplished by means of the several mechanisms that overt communication offers. If Rob wants to inform Alison of how beautiful she looks in her new dress, he will do it in an open, clear way, putting forward his intentions in producing the utterance. In contrast, goals which are private are best realized by means of different communicative devices which allow the speaker to keep his intentions concealed from the addressee. Thus, if Rob wants to informa Alison of the fact that the kitchen needs cleaning, and that it is her turn to do it, he will make use of some covert strategy trying to avoid the negative effects that a direct confrontation could have on their relationship. One such way could be increasing the amount of dirty plates in the sink for her to see and act accordingly. Or maybe, he could say something like (1), hoping the addressee will establish the necessary connections:

(1) Oh! By the way! I have invited a few friends for dinner tomorrow night.

Covert communicative strategies are abundant in daily communicative exchanges. In this paper we offer an analysis of covertness from a Relevance-theoretic point of view. In the first two sections we present some of the basic theoretical notions on which Sperber and Wilson (1995) base their analysis of overt communication and argue that they can be used in a characterization of covertness. In the third section we examine the peculiarities of those cases of covert information transmission in which the communicator makes use of an ostensive stimulus. Finally, in the last section, we deal with covert garden-path utterances, a special case of covert information transmission in which the covert assumptions are conveyed as part of the same process of ostensive-inferential communication.

2. Overt communication and mutual manifestness

For many years philosophers have concentrated their efforts on the elaboration of an adequate definition of *communication* which captures the set of conditions that must converge for communication to take place. Specific definitions of covert communication are rare in the literature. There is agreement, however, on the idea that cases of covertness are not cases of genuine communication which must be necessarily overt. This requisite of overtness in communication was tried to be secured by means of an indefinite number of intentions that had to be recognised or mutually known by speaker and hearer. Once the psychological

1 See Clark (1996).

inadequacy of this analysis has been proved, Sperber and Wilson (1995) argue in favour of a characterisation of overt intentions in terms of the notion of mutual manifestness.[2]

It is a fact that all human beings share information, and that sometimes that information varies from individual to individual depending on social or cultural factors. Besides, the way in which a stimulus is perceived, processed, mentally represented and stored in memory will vary depending on the specific perceptual and cognitive capacities of each individual. To explain how human beings share information, Sperber and Wilson (1995:39) introduce the notion of *cognitive environment* which they define as follows: "A cognitive environment of an individual is a set of facts that are manifest to him". Something is *manifest* if it can be perceived or inferred: "A fact is manifest to an individual at a given time if and only if he is capable at that time of representing it mentally and accepting its representation as true or probably true" (Sperber and Wilson 1995:39). In this way, the cognitive environment of an individual is formed, not only by the information that he consciously owns, but also by all that which, at a given time, can become a conscious assumption because it can be perceived in a more or less immediate environment or because it can be inferred from other assumptions the individual already has.

If a number of facts or assumptions are manifest in the cognitive environments of several individuals, these cognitive environments will coincide in a section of them. This section is what Sperber and Wilson (1995:41-42) call *mutual cognitive environment* and those facts or assumptions which are manifest in this mutual cognitive environment are *mutually manifest*:

> Any shared cognitive environment in which it is manifest which people share is what we will call a *mutual cognitive environment*. In a mutual cognitive environment, for every manifest assumption, the fact that it is manifest to the people who share this environment is itself manifest. In other words, in a mutual cognitive environment, every manifest assumption is what we will call *mutually manifest*.

Sperber and Wilson claim that human cognition is relevance-oriented. Most of the cognitive tasks individuals perform are aimed at improving the quality, quantity and organization of their system of knowledge, that is, their cognitive environments, with a minimum processing cost. This is why humans pay attention to that information they consider to be relevant to the fulfilment of this aim.

When a speaker presents his audience with a specific stimulus he is requesting attention by means of an act of *ostension*: "We will call such behaviour –behaviour which makes manifest an intention to make something manifest- ostensive behaviour or simply ostension" (Sperber and Wilson 1995:49). Every act of ostension presupposes the relevance of the information the speaker intends to communicate. In an act of ostension, the speaker has two intentions which must be recovered by the audience if communication is to take place successfully: an *informative intention*, which is "the intention to make manifest or more manifest to the audience a set of assumptions

2 For a detailed exposition of the different proposals see Strawson (1964), Grice (1969), Schiffer (1972), Bach and Harnish (1979), (1987), Blackburn (1984), Sperber and Wilson (1982), (1987), (1990), (1995).

{I}" (Sperber and Wilson 1995:58) and a *communicative intention*, that is, "to make it mutually manifest to audience and communicator that the communicator has this informative intention" (Sperber and Wilson 1995:61).

It is the communicative intention that guarantees the transparency of communication as it establishes as a necessary condition that the speaker's informative intention be not only manifest to speaker and audience, but also mutually manifest. Genuine communication alters the mutual cognitive environment of speaker and audience, and for this change to take place, the speaker's informative intention must be mutually manifest. Thus, according to Sperber and Wilson (1995:63), genuine communication is *ostensive-inferential communication*:

> *Ostensive-inferential communication*: the communicator produces a stimulus which makes it mutually manifest to communicator and audience that the communicator intends, by means of this stimulus, to make manifest or more manifest to the audience a set of assumptions {I}.

3. Characterizing covert information transmission

In the preceding section, we have explained how Sperber and Wilson (1987:739) propose to characterise the transparency of intentions in terms of mutual manifestness: "The right way, we suggest, is to say that an informative intention is overt if and only if it is mutually manifest". Then, how could the notion of covertness be characterised in terms of mutual manifestness?

One way of doing it could be arguing that when the speaker's informative intention does not become mutually manifest, then we can say that it is a covert intention. This is the conclusion Tanaka (1989, 1994) arrives at after analysing covertness in advertisements. One of the examples she (1989:168; 1994:76) deals with is the following Japanese advertisement for *All Nippon Airlines*:

(2) Oo KIi NAa Wah

Tanaka explains that if we only pay attention to capital letters, the utterance says "Okinawa", which is the name of the islands, destination of the flights. However, if we consider all the characters there is a second reading: "How big! Wow!".[3] According to Tanaka, the problem of interpretation arises when the reader tries to identify the reference of *big*, as there are at least two candidates: Okinawa islands and the big breasts of the girl who appears in the picture. Tanaka (1989:169) argues that, with regard to the second interpretation, "How big! Wow!", the non-mutual manifestness of the speaker's informative intention is guaranteed on the basis of its sexual nature, as it could give rise to unwanted consequences for the speaker and hearer's social relationship. This is a case of covert communication, which she (1989:179) defines as follows:

3 Tanaka (1994:76) explains that in Japanese *ookii* means 'big', *naa* is an exclamative particle, and *wah* is an exclamation similar to the English *wow*.

> A set of assumptions {I} become manifest to the hearer, the speaker's informative intention may become manifest, too, but it does not become mutually manifest to the hearer and the speaker. [...] I shall call these forms of communication 'covert communication', as opposed to ostensive communication.

Tanaka's definition raises a number of questions that should be investigated in depth. Firstly, if communication must be wholly overt, would it be right to catalogue cases of covertness as cases of communication? Secondly, is the non-mutual manifestness of the speaker's informative intention a necessary and sufficient condition for covertness? Are there any common aspects between cases of ostensive-inferential communication and cases of covertness? If this is so, could Relevance theory, which is a theory about genuine overt communication, explain how covertness works?

Sperber and Wilson (1995:30), among a number of authors, argue that genuine communication, which is wholly overt, should be distinguished from other forms of information transmission which present some element of covertness:

> One tends to think of communication as something done overtly; either your behaviour makes it clear that you are communicating, or else you are not truly communicating at all. In other words, communication should be distinguished from covert forms of information transmission.

Thus, unless the speaker has the communicative intention of making mutually manifest his informative intention, he is not truly communicating at all, but simply conveying information in a subtle, covert way. Sperber and Wilson (1995:30) propose the following example:

> Suppose, for instance, that Mary wants Peter to mend her broken hair-drier, but does not want to ask him openly. What she does is begin to take her hair-drier to pieces and leave the pieces lying around as if she were in the process of mending it. She does not expect Peter to be taken in by this staging; in fact, if he really believed that she was in the process of mending her hair-drier herself, he would probably not interfere. She does expect him to be clever enough to work out that this is a staging intended to inform him of the fact that she needs some help with her hair-drier. However, she does not expect him to be clever enough to work out that she expected him to reason just along these lines. Since she is not really asking, if Peter fails to help, it will not really count as a refusal either.

According to Sperber and Wilson, Mary does intend Peter to be informed of her need by recognising her intention to inform him of it. However, it could not be said that Mary *meant* that she wanted Peter to help her. Then, this is not a case of genuine communication as, although Mary wants Peter to recognise her informative intention, she does not want this informative intention to become mutually manifest to both of them. It would be a case of *covert information transmission* characterized by the fact that the speaker's informative intention does not become mutually manifest to speaker and audience.

Regarding the non-mutual manifestness of the speaker's informative intention we find necessary to make a precision that Tanaka seems to ignore in her definition of covert communication. The informative intention not becoming mutually manifest is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for covert information transmission to take place. There are several reasons why an informative intention could not become mutually manifest without it implying that we are dealing with a case of covertness. Firstly, the speaker's informative intention could not become mutually manifest because there is not an informative intention at all:

(3) Alison and Rob are driving home. Alison coughs. Rob thinks about Alison's health, about the possibility of Alison having a cold, about the possibility of Alison wanting him to wind the window up, etc.

Alison did not have any intention to make manifest those assumptions to Rob: she had neither an informative intention nor a communicative intention. It is simply a case of accidental information transmission.

Secondly, the speaker's informative intention could not become mutually manifest due to a misunderstanding on the audience's part. Alison and Rob are talking about a girlfriend they saw the night before kissing and hugging with John, a common friend, while her boyfriend Tony was away on a business trip:

(4) Rob: You shouldn't have called him!
Alison: I did not! He saw me by chance.
Rob: I don't mean John. What I'm saying is that you shouldn't have phoned Tony to tell him what happened.

In this example, Rob has the informative intention to make manifest a set of assumptions {I} and the communicative intention to make that specific informative intention mutually manifest. However, the wrong set of assumptions becomes manifest to Alison, while Rob's true informative intention does not become manifest or mutually manifest to her.

Thirdly, it could also happen that the hearer is not able to identify the speaker's informative intention, for instance, because he does not understand what the speaker said or because he thinks that what was said is ambiguous (intentionally or not) and he cannot decide among the possibilities. In this case, although it is clear to the hearer that the speaker wants to make him manifest a set of assumptions {I}, that specific set does not become mutually manifest. As well as in the previous case, this happens due to a failure in the process of identification of the intended set of assumptions, which leads to a breakdown in the communicative process.

None of these three possibilities could be catalogued as cases of covert information transmission. This is due to the fact that an essential difference exists between these examples and cases of covertness: the speaker does have a second-order intention: namely that the first-order intention, that is, the informative intention, does not become mutually manifest. In other words, in covert information transmission the non-mutual manifestness of the informative intention is a circumstance deliberately intended and planned by the speaker. To allow for this precision, we believe it necessary to modify Tanaka's definition and we propose to define covert information transmission as follows:

> Covert Information Transmission
> The communicator produces a stimulus *x*
> (a) with the intention to make manifest to the audience a set of assumptions {I}
> (b) with the covert intention that intention (a) not be mutually manifest

Thus, non-mutual manifestness of the covert intention is a necessary and sufficient condition for covertness as long as we admit that it forms part of the speaker's intentions in the process.

Another important feature of covert information transmission has to do with the consequences of not making the speaker's informative intention mutually manifest: that is, that the mutual cognitive environment of speaker and hearer is not modified in any way. In covert exchanges, the speaker's aim is to modify only the cognitive environment of the hearer, trying in this way not to alter the relationship, mainly social, that he has with him. As Sperber and Wilson claim (1995:61-62):

> Mutual manifestness may be of little cognitive importance, but it is of crucial social importance. A change in the mutual cognitive environment of two people is a change in their possibilities of interaction (and, in particular, in their possibilities of further communication).

Thus, in the hair-drier example previously commented, Mary does not want to make mutually manifest her informative intention because this would compromise Peter with its fulfilment, that is, the mending of the hair-drier. By not making her informative intention mutually manifest, Mary makes sure that the cognitive environment they share will not be altered in case of a negative on Peter's side to fulfil her informative intention. In this way she avoids any possible complication or deterioration with regard to their possibilities of social interaction in the future.

Besides preserving social relations, there is another reason which may encourage the speaker to communicate in a covert way. On some occasions, depending on the sort of relationship between speaker and hearer, or the nature of the assumption the speaker is trying to convey, not making mutually manifest an intention may be the best way of fulfilling it. Covertness is then a useful strategy. Let's consider the following example.

(5) Alison and Rob are sitting at home, watching television. Suddenly, Alison remembers she forgot to take the rubbish out. It is late and Alison does not feel like doing it. However, she does not want to ask Rob to do it, as taking the rubbish out is her job. So, Alison decides to leave it in a strategic place hoping that Rob will see it and will decide to take it out, but being careful that he does not recognize this arrangement as intentional.

In this case, Alison holds more possibilities of having her informative intention fulfilled (that is, that Rob takes the rubbish out) if it only becomes manifest to Rob. If it became mutually manifest, this would be a good reason for the hearer to refuse to fulfil the speaker's informative intention. As Sperber and Wilson (1995:62) claim, when the speaker's

informative intention is mutually manifest, it is clear that "the fulfilment of her informative intention is in the hands of the audience". If Alison's intention only becomes manifest to Rob, he will not attribute her this intention, and there is a possibility that he will fulfil it without affecting their mutual cognitive environment. If he does not, their mutual cognitive environment will not be affected either.

Finally, the transmission of information in a covert way invests the speaker with the possibility of deniability.[4] Consider the following example:

(6) Alison and Rob are sitting in a restaurant, ready to have dinner. Rob lights up a cigarette. Alison, who does not like smoking, coughs in order to make Rob notice that the smoke disturbs her and hoping that he will put the cigarette out. But Alison does not want Rob notice that she coughed with that intention. What she really intends is that the cough sounds spontaneous and natural, and that the previous information becomes manifest to Rob without attributing it to her.

If the hearer suspected about the intention behind the cough and he asked Alison she could always deny the evidence arguing that she has a bit of a cold, for instance. This is one of the advantages for a speaker who chooses covertness as a form of interaction with other individuals.

4. The role of ostensive stimuli in covert information transmission

In the preceding section we have focussed on the characterization of covert information transmission with non-linguistic stimuli. However, covert conveyance of information may also be carried out via linguistic stimuli. In this section we examine the sort of consequences that this possibility could have for our previous definition of covert information transmission.

When a speaker intentionally produces an utterance in order to make manifest a certain set of assumptions {I} he is performing an act of ostensive communication. The utterance being used can make manifest to the audience a variety of assumptions. Some of them will be part of the speaker's communicative intention and, as such, communicated ostensively, but others may be not:

(7) *(the speaker is a car salesman who has just met the hearer)*
Have you decided what kind of car you're interested in, Billy?

According to Žegarac and Clark (1999:342) the speaker is overtly communicating that information about the hearer's intention of buying a car is relevant to him. However, by using the hearer's first name, the speaker is also making manifest, although not mutually manifest, assumptions about the social relationship between him and his customer: how well he gets on with him, that the customer should trust him as he would trust a friend, and so on. In terms of relevance, these assumptions are being covertly conveyed, as they are part of the speaker's informative intention, but there is not a communicative intention of making them mutually manifest.

4 See Weiser (1975), Bach and Harnish (1979), Tanaka (1989), (1994).

What are the differences between this kind of example and cases in which the stimulus is non-linguistic? To start with, an utterance such as (7) constitutes a call for attention, that is, an ostensive stimulus which carries in itself a guarantee of the relevance of the information communicated in that way: "Ostensive stimuli arouse definite expectations of relevance, of relevance achievable once the communicator's informative intention is recognised" (Sperber and Wilson 1995:154). Thus, when the speaker openly requests the hearer's attention with an utterance, it is because he intends to make mutually manifest his intention to communicate something. In the previous example, contrary to what happened in the non-linguistic covert cases, the car salesman performs an act of ostension and, consequently, he makes mutually manifest his intention to communicate a set of assumptions {I}. Does this mean that the speaker also meant to make mutually manifest his intention to convey the covert assumptions? Obviously, the answer is no. The apparent contradiction that this sort of example presents, in which overt communication and covertness co-exist, is easily sorted out postulating that in this case the speaker has a *double informative intention* but only one of them has a related communicative intention. The first informative intention corresponds to those assumptions communicated ostensively by the stimulus, and the second, to those assumptions covertly conveyed, that is, made manifest but not mutually manifest in the same act of ostension.

We can also add that one of the advantages for the success of conveying information covertly is that the speaker, when using an ostensive stimulus, is overtly focussing the hearer's attention on a specific set of assumptions while covertly making manifest another set. As Žegarac and Clark (1999:342-343) put it:

> The customer may tacitly accept the covertly communicated assumptions precisely because they are made more manifest to him without attracting his attention. Manipulative behaviour may not be sociable, but it is socially very important: it makes possible a certain degree of control over other's people behaviour without the speaker having to accept responsibility either for the information conveyed or for its impact on the audience.

A further issue to account for is the reason why those covertly conveyed assumptions, in spite of not being ostensively communicated, become manifest to the hearer. An advantage of ostensive communication which covertness lacks is that the speaker, by means of his communicative intention, is actively helping the hearer to recover the intended set of assumptions. However, in covert information transmission, the responsibility for recovering the assumptions made manifest by the stimulus lies solely on the audience and this means that there is always a higher risk that those assumptions do not become manifest to the hearer for different reasons. As Sperber and Wilson (1995:39) claim, manifestness is a matter of degree, that is, not all manifest assumptions are equally likely to be entertained, and this fact will determine which of them are more manifest than others. At the same time, which assumptions are more manifest to an individual at a given time directly depends on his physical environment and his cognitive abilities. Certain visual and acoustic phenomena (a fire, a loud noise, etc) pre-empt attention and automatically make manifest a specific range of assumptions. Similarly, an utterance alters an individual's cognitive environment by making certain assumptions more manifest so that he may use them in

later deductive processes to derive further assumptions. For all these reasons, a speaker who wants to convey certain information in a covert way must carefully design his utterance in such a way as to ensure, as far as possible, that the intended assumption will be entertained by the hearer without him being aware of the intention behind this process.

The increase in the manifestness of certain assumptions can be explained in terms of two factors. On the one hand, the speaker's calculation of the design, that is, the organization of the hearer's (or hearers') system of knowledge. On the other hand, the use of a specific trigger which acts on those assumptions the speaker intends to make manifest. This trigger could be of a non-linguistic nature, as in (a) and (c), or of a linguistic nature, as in (b):

a) the uttering of certain words, in a given tone of voice, with a given intonation. This is the case in (7), in which it is not the meaning of the words being used, but the fact that a familiar address term with a restricted social use was employed that triggers certain assumptions. Or in the following example proposed by Wilson (994:37):

(8) A certain politician –call her Margaret- is speaking to us on television. [...] Like many politicians, Margaret, as she speaks to us, is doing her best to appear more intelligent, more sympathetic, more knowledgeable than she really is.

Margaret can make manifest those assumptions by using certain expressions, by smiling in a special way, by speaking in a clear, paused but determined voice, etc.

b) the meaning of the words, phrases or utterance being used. A and B, her husband, were watching television late in the evening when they hear the doorbell ringing. When B opens, he finds C, a guy he met a few years ago and who he hasn't heard from since then. Obviously, A and B are very angry because they feel obliged to receive him at such inconvenient hours. While they are having something to eat, A answers a call from one of her husband's best friends. The following exchange takes place:

(9) Husband: Who was that?
Wife: It was John. He says he's coming tomorrow for lunch. (to C) You know. John is a good friend. He is single, you see. When he feels like having a decent, home-cooked meal he rings up. He knows he's always welcome!

By means of the explicit content of her utterance and its overtly intended interpretation, the wife tries, in a covert way, to make manifest a number of assumptions to C, that is, that he is not a friend, that he hasn't been polite by turning up without calling in advance and that he is not welcome for all these reasons.

c) a physical-visual stimulus present at the time of the utterance, for instance, accompanying pictures in the case of advertisements, illustrations in books, images on television, and so on. In the Okinawa example, for instance, the picture of a well-endowed girl in a bikini, makes manifest a number of assumptions and

increase the manifestness of some others without the advertiser taking responsibility for them.

Once the covertly conveyed assumptions have been made manifest to the hearer, he will use them in the actual interpretation process or in future ones in different ways. In some cases, as in examples (7) or (8), those assumptions will become part of the set of contextual assumptions being used by the hearer in the current communicative exchange (or even in future exchanges with the speaker) affecting his response or behaviour towards him in a specific way. In some other cases, those assumptions will be spontaneously used by the hearer in deductive processes others than the ones overtly intended by the speaker, giving rise to what we would like to call *side effects*. Consider the following exchange in which S, in his first intervention, tries to make manifest to G his curiosity about the person G was talking to on the phone for such a long time[5]:

(10) G: ... d'ju see me pull up?=
S: =.hhh No:.I was trying you all day.=an' the line was busy for like hours.
G: Ohh::::, ohh::::, .hhhhhh We::ll. hhh I'm gonna come over in a little while help yer brother ou:t
S: God :d
G: [.hhh 'cause I know he needs some he::lp.
S: .hh Ye:ah. Yes he'd mention' that today.=
G: = Mm hm.=
S: =.hh Uh:m, .tlk .hhh Who were you ta:lking to.

S, with this utterance, overtly intends to provide an answer to G's question. However, at the same time, if S is successful and the covertly conveyed assumption about his curiosity becomes manifest to G, there is the possibility that G uses it as a premise in an inferential process parallel to that initiated by the ostensively communicated set of assumptions. If G decided to inform S about the identity of his interlocutor and the reason for the call as S intends, those could be considered to be the side effects produced by the covertly conveyed information.

5. Conveying information covertly as part of ostensive-inferential communication

In the previous section we have explained how the explicit content or the overall interpretation of an utterance can make manifest a number of assumptions in a covert way in a process parallel to that initiated by the ostensive stimulus. However, there are occasions when the conveyance of covert assumptions takes place as part of the process of ostensive-inferential communication itself. This is usually the case when the recovery of those covert assumptions is made to coincide with the process of recovery of the propositional form of the utterance.

5 Edwards (1997:92) takes this example from Pomerantz (1980) who analyses it as a case of *fishing*, a conversational device by which a speaker may obtain information without overtly asking for it: "The device is that of citing 'limited access' to something evidently known to the recipient (such as the recipients' age, address, or recent activities), with the possible consequence that the recipient will provide further details". In the example above, the fishing is done by S's first utterance, "I was trying you all day, and the line was busy for like hours".

When a speaker produces a linguistic stimulus to communicate ostensively he does so with the intention of making manifest a set of assumptions {I}: some of those assumptions will be *explicatures* and others will be *implicatures* of the utterance. Those which are explicatures will be recovered by developing the incomplete logical form encoded by the utterance into a full determinate proposition, which may optionally be embedded under a higher-level description (which may be a speech-act description or a propositional attitude description).[6] These explicatures, although explicitly communicated, cannot be said to be recovered by decoding only; an inferential process of hypothesis formation and confirmation also intervenes.[7] Thus, in identifying the right propositional form, that is, the one intended by the speaker, the hearer may have to perform a number of inferential sub-tasks such as disambiguation, reference assignment, enrichment of semantically underdetermined expressions and restoration of ellided constituents, if it was necessary.

As Sperber and Wilson (1995:60) claim one of the advantages of verbal communication is that it is the strongest form of communication in that "it enables the hearer to pin down the speaker's intentions about the explicit content of her utterance to a single, strongly manifest candidate, with no alternative worth considering at all". However, this is not always the case and, on occasions, the process of identification of the propositional form of the utterance is complicated due to the fact that more than one possible line of interpretation exists.

Tanaka (1994) points out this possibility in what she calls *covert puns*, that is, utterances that suggest an initial interpretation which must be later rejected, but which contributes to the configuration of the final interpretation in different ways. According to Tanaka, covert puns allow the advertiser to convey certain pieces of information he could not communicate in a overt, ostensive way, especially when they have to do with taboo subjects such as sex. This is what happens in following example, an advertisement for a travel agency which organizes honeymoon holidays in exotic destinations:[8]

(11) After you get married, kiss your wife in places she's never been kissed before.

The utterance, as it is built, allows the advertiser to communicate two things he could not have said explicitly:

(12) a After you get married, kiss your wife on parts of her body where she's never been kissed before.
b After you get married, go on honeymoon and kiss your wife in locations where she's never been kissed before.

Tanaka (1994:78) claims that, in this example, (12.a) gets activated "as part of comprehension process of overt communication", that is, it is communicated ostensively.

6 See Carston (1988), Wilson and Sperber (1993), Sperber and Wilson (1995).

7 Sperber and Wilson (1995:182): An explicature is a combination of linguistically encoded and contextually inferred conceptual features. The smaller the relative contribution of the contextual features, the more explicit the explicature will be, and inversely.

8 Example taken from Tanaka (1994:78).

In spite of this, this interpretation is rejected and substituted by a second interpretation, (12.b). Tanaka (1994:76), in what follows, explains how she considers the Okinawa example, previously commented, to be different to this example:

> This example [the Okinawa example] may be regarded as a case of deliberate equivocation, or unresolvable ambiguity. There is an element of covertness here, for the advertiser does not intend to convey (....) on the basis of making his intention mutually manifest. The pun may be chiefly an attention-getting device, with the 'space' interpretation being the only one ostensively communicated. Additional contextual effects about the sort of desirable girls holiday-makers will find in Okinawa are more or less covertly communicated.

Thus, from Tanaka's point of view, the "What big breasts! Wow!" interpretation in the Okinawa example is covertly communicated because the speaker does not intend to make mutually manifest his informative intention. By contrast, in example (11), interpretation (12.a), which is initially recovered and later rejected, is communicated ostensively.

From our point of view, the above analysis is unsustainable, as it develops from a differentiation that does not exist. Before going further we would like to specify that rather than puns, both examples are cases of garden-path or retroactive utterances.[9] In both cases, the assumptions made manifest in the first interpretation intent are wrongly identified as explicatures of the utterance, in particular, as the propositional forms of the utterances. Let's consider two new examples: the first is an advertisement for dishwashers Miele, and the second promotes the great acceleration power of the new MG car. In this last example, the picture that accompanies the utterance shows the new MG car parked outside a magnificent Tudor mansion; in the background, a young couple walks away into the garden with their arms around each other:

(13) Expecting a dirty weekend....
Then, turn over....
Built with 2001 in mind. MIELE.
(*Cosmopolitan*, January 1992)

(14) You can do it in an MG.[10]

In example (13), the covert assumptions are made manifest via a process of disambiguation while in (14) this is done via a process of reference assignment. Both are cases of ostensive-inferential communication and this means that, once the ostensive nature of the stimulus is mutually manifest to communicator and audience, it is also mutually manifest that the communicator intends to make manifest a set of assumptions {I}. To

9 Traditionally, the term *pun* has been applied indiscriminately to any utterance which gave rise to more than one interpretation without accounting for essential differences between different cases. We prefer the term *retroactive* or *garden-path utterance* to refer to those utterances in which the initial interpretation constructed by the hearer is later rejected and substituted by a second and final interpretation.

10 Example taken from Williamson (1978:121).

identify this set of assumptions, the addressee counts with the guidance of the *presumption of optimal relevance*, which Sperber and Wilson (1995:164) define as follows:

Presumption of optimal relevance

(a) The set of assumptions **I** which the communicator intends to make manifest to the addressee is relevant enough to make it worth the addressee's while to process the ostensive stimulus.
(b) The ostensive stimulus is the most relevant one the communicator could have used to communicate I.

Thus, according to Sperber and Wilson, to identify the speaker's informative intention, the addressee must discover first for which set {I} the speaker thought the presumption of optimal relevance would be confirmed. As the first step, the addressee will decode the logical form or logical forms of the utterance, (15.a and b) in the case of (13) and (16) in the case of (14):

(15) a Logical form 1:
_____ expect a $dirty_1$ weekend _____
(Ellided subject and auxiliary of *expecting*) (At or under a set of conditions X)

(15) b Logical form 2:
_____ expect a $dirty_2$ weekend _____
(Ellided subject and auxiliary of *expecting*) (At or under a set of conditions X)
($dirty_1$ = sexually clandestine)
($dirty_2$ = not clean)

(16) Logical form:
_____ can do _____ in an MG _____
(Referent of *you*) (Referent of *it*) (At or under a set of conditions X)

Once the linguistic input module has facilitated these incomplete schemas the central inferential mechanisms come into play, selecting one of the possibilities in terms of the presumption of optimal relevance and contextual information. As the central system begins its computations before the input system has completed the decoding phase, we can also assume that, at the time when the selection is performed, the processor will have available some but not all of the necessary contextual information. This means that those assumptions made initially manifest by the stimulus will be the ones on the basis of which the tentative selection will be made. In example (13) the meaning 'sexually clandestine' enjoys a special saliency as many other assumptions having to do with socially or personally controversial or taboo subjects. The same happens with the set of assumptions the picture accompanying utterance (14) can make manifest: some of them, especially those having to do with sex, will be more manifest than others.

The addressee, on the basis of these assumptions, will develop the incomplete logical forms into fully propositional forms, (17) in the case of (13) and (18) in (14):

(17) The reader x is expecting a sexually clandestine weekend....
(18) The reader X can have sex in an MG.

As the processing goes on, the building of a context also does so and new contextual assumptions become available to the processor for them to be added to the initial context.[11] It is then when the constructed propositional forms turn out to be inconsistent with the presumption of optimal relevance for one of two reasons: they do not give rise to positive cognitive effects when processed in the actual context or the effects they seem to produce cannot be attributed to the speaker's intentions. These results will force the addressee to consider a second and final propositional form as the one consistent with the principle of relevance, that is, the one the speaker intended to communicate:

(19) Are you expecting a weekend with lots of dirty plates? Then turn this page over. Miele dishwasher.

(20) The reader X can accelerate in a few seconds in the new MG car.

Although the initial propositional forms and the assumptions they gave access to are rejected by the addressee as the ones the communicator intended to communicate, the fact is that they have been considered long enough to be transferred to the encyclopaedic memory of the addressee. In this way they will be used by the individual in further deductive processes to derive side effects which, although not ostensively intended by the speaker, will affect the cognitive environment of the addressee.

6. Conclusion

We can distinguish two ways of covertly transmitting information depending on whether the speaker makes use or not of an ostensive stimulus in the process. Thus, in the first place, there are cases of *non-ostensive covert information transmission*, characterized by the fact that the speaker does not make mutually manifest any set of assumptions: they are simply manifest to the audience:

Non-ostensive covert information transmission
The communicator produces a stimulus
- a) with an informative intention, that is, the intention to make manifest to the audience a set of assumptions {I}
- b) and a counter-communicative intention, that is, the covert intention not to make mutually manifest to audience and communicator that the communicator has this informative intention.

In the second place, there are cases of *pseudo-ostensive covert information transmission* in which the communicator, by means of a single ostensive stimulus performs two acts: one act of ostensive-inferential communication and a second act of covert

11 Later words in the utterance or subsequent utterances can make available new assumptions which will be added to the context in which the utterance is being processed. New assumptions will also be considered when the processor feels the need to extend the initial context, extension that according to Sperber and Wilson (1987:703) could be carried out in one of three directions:

[...] by adding to it assumptions used or derived in preceding deductions, by adding to it chunks of information taken from the encyclopaedic entries already present in the context or in the assumption being processed, and by adding information about the perceptual environment.

information transmission. In the first act, the speaker has the intention of making mutually manifest a set of assumptions $\{I\}_1$, while in the second he only intends to make manifest a set of assumptions $\{I\}_2$. We propose to characterise pseudo-ostensive covert information transmission as follows:

Pseudo-ostensive covert information transmission
The communicator produces a stimulus:

a) with a double informative intention, that is, the intention to make manifest to the audience:
   a.1) a set of assumptions $\{I\}_1$.
   a.2) a set of assumptions $\{I\}_2$.
b) a communicative intention by which the communicator has the intention of making mutually manifest to the audience and communicator that the communicator has the informative intention (a.1).
c) a counter-communicative intention, that is, the covert intention not to make mutually manifest to audience and communicator that the communicator has the informative intention (a.2).

Thus, while in non-ostensive covertness the communicator has a single informative intention with a counter-communicative intention, in pseudo-ostensive covertness the communicator has two informative intentions, but only one of them has a related communicative intention. At the same time, in pseudo-ostensive covert information transmission, covert assumption can be made manifest in two ways: they can be made manifest in a process parallel to that of the interpretation of the ostensive stimulus, or they can become manifest in the same process of interpretation of the ostensive stimulus.

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