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INDETERMINACY IN VERBAL COMMUNICATION: A RELEVANCE-THEORETIC ANALYSIS OF APHORISMS

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Abstract

Indeterminacy of meaning, which has to do with vagueness of the underlying speaker's intention, is a pervasive phenomenon in human communication, but researchers hardly ever address the issue, as it is notoriously difficult to account for. The relevance-theoretic notion of weak communication offers a viable explanation of how this phenomenon can be approached. This paper argues that weak communication and its satellite, that is, poetic effects, prove particularly useful to account for how aphorisms work. The focus is on showing that the process of aphorism comprehension, underlain by meaning indeterminacy, and certain intrinsic characteristics of the genre find a reasonable and comprehensive explanation when looked at through the lens of Relevance Theory.

1. Introduction

It is one of the important strengths of Relevance Theory (RT) that it enables a unitary account of communication that aims at conveying fully determinate and very precise meanings as well as communication the results of which are transparently indeterminate. While most pragmatic frameworks focus on relatively straightforward and tangible effects of communication, RT predicts that there may be an element of vagueness inherently involved in the meaning that communicators intend to convey (Sperber, Wilson 1986/95: 56), so – unlike other models – it does not idealize away these aspects of human communication and language use which are difficult to handle (Sperber, Wilson 2005, 2015). Instead, it attempts to penetrate their nature and puts forth a plausible, coherent and explicit explanation of what may be involved.

Thus RT offers a theoretical approach that makes it possible to adequately explain vaguer aspects of communication in a fairly precise way.

A relevance-theoretic analysis of aphorisms, whose meaning tends to be quite elusive, will be carried out here. The major focus will be on showing how indeterminate meanings of aphorisms can be explained in the relevance-theoretic approach. It will be argued that modelling the interpretation of aphorisms in terms of weak communication, a concept unique to RT, elucidates the subjective side of aphorism comprehension, helps to delineate the inferential paths that recipients may take in processing verbal input of this type, and explains why interpreters find it notoriously difficult (if not impossible) to explicate how they understand an aphorism. After a brief characterisation of aphorisms and a preliminary discussion of the underlying indeterminacy of what they mean is presented in Section 1, in Section 2, I outline the relevance-theoretic account of meaning indeterminacy, introducing the notion of weak communication as pivotal to explain vaguer aspects of verbal comprehension. In Section 3, the examples of aphorisms introduced in Section 2 are re-analysed along the relevance-theoretic lines. I argue that the nature of aphorisms and the cognitive effects they create can be fruitfully explored and adequately accounted for on this approach. Section 4 offers concluding comments.

2. Aphorisms

Aphorisms have been chosen for the analysis here, because it is widely recognised that what they convey is quite difficult, if not impossible, to specify, so their meaning appears, *par excellence*, indeterminate. As Morson (2003: 423) aptly puts it, “[t]hey gesture beyond themselves, and the white space that follows seems a part of them. They are momentary probes, or flashes that die out before we have quite made out what they reveal.” Before a relevance-theoretic analysis of how the interpretation process of aphorisms might proceed is embarked on, it seems useful to define the term “aphorism” and characterise the effects that aphorisms evoke.¹

As is often the case with literary genres, aphorisms are notoriously difficult to define. Drawing up a borderline between aphorisms and other similar short forms like proverbs, maxims, wellerisms, etc., is virtually impossible (Ángel-Lara 2011; Geary 2005). To quote Morson (2012: 4), “there is no agreed-upon definition of terms such as ‘aphorism’, ‘saying’, ‘apothegm’, or ‘maxim’. Aphorisms sometimes include all short works, sometimes just those examples that have an author, and sometimes only a small subset that may be variously identified either by tone, form, or idea. One man’s aphorism is another man’s maxim.”

In effect, depending on the research perspective adopted and specific objectives pursued, various scholars focus on different characteristics of the aphorism. Since the present discussion is concerned mainly with describing the “ticking mechanism”

¹ In fact, the suggestion that I should begin with this was made by one of the reviewers of the paper.

of aphorisms along relevance-theoretic lines, a rather informal definition of the notion will be adopted. Aphorisms will be defined here as pithy mini-texts, usually confined to one sentence or clause, through which the author comments on some universal truths or important aspects of human existence (cf., among others, Geary 2005; Gross 1983; Kuźniak 2005; Stephenson 1980; Wolf 1994). This definition highlights the most significant structural (that is, related to form) and functional (that is, linked to the philosophical and anthropocentric meaning) characteristics of aphorisms. Being mini-texts, they constitute autonomous, self-contained textual units. This appears quite essential here, in that all the contextual information needed to understand an aphorism is contained in its text itself. Therefore, while an aphorism may be embedded in a larger discourse, and, for instance, be a part of a novel, a play, or a conversation, it *stands out* from whatever precedes and follows it, so it can be (and frequently is) easily isolated, cited as such and will make full sense when extracted from a larger body of text.

Here is a small random selection of aphorisms chosen for the present analyses from a collection by an eminent Polish poet and satirist Stanisław Jerzy Lec, who is widely recognised as the virtuoso of the genre:²

- (1) No snowflake in an avalanche ever feels responsible.
- (2) Cannibals prefer men who have no spines.
- (3) An Achilles' heel is often hidden in the jackboot of a tyrant.
- (4) Most of the sighs we hear have been edited.
- (5) In the beginning was the word, silence was created later.

These wise sayings appear fertile with meaning and it is quite a tall order to clarify what each conveys. However, a brief informal survey among my English native-speaker friends reveals that, when challenged to spell out how they understand what a given aphorism means, people tend to interpret (1)–(5) to deliver (roughly) the following (for each aphorism, a conceivable intuitive reading of the overall meaning is presented in square brackets):

- (1) No snowflake in an avalanche ever feels responsible.
[When involved in some collective action, an individual hardly ever feels responsible for the outcomes, especially when they are disastrous]
- (2) Cannibals prefer men who have no spines.
[People who have no strict values and moral standards that they adhere to are easy to exploit]
- (3) An Achilles' heel is often hidden in the jackboot of a tyrant.
[People tend to hide their weaknesses by appearing strong, uncompromising, even brutal]

² All the examples come from an English translation of Lec's collection entitled *More Unkempt Thoughts* (1968, translated by Jacek Gałązka) available at <https://www.tsbvi.edu/braille/books/moreunkempt1.brf> (last access: December 2015).

- (4) Most of the sighs we hear have been edited.
[The emotions that people express are hardly ever spontaneous; they are usually intended to achieve premeditated goals]
- (5) In the beginning was the word, silence was created later.
[Words are powerful and can provide salvation, but so can silence: divine and sacred]³

Needless to say, the meanings listed above should not be viewed as shared by (or even acceptable to) all potential interpreters reading the aphorisms under scrutiny. As hinted at earlier, only an approximation to the interpretations that readers may come up with can be provided. Full, carefully thought out interpretations will certainly go beyond the suggestions above and may embrace more content. After all, as Morson (2003: 413) judiciously remarks, “[t]he aphorism, like the god’s sign, does not contain but points beyond itself, step by potentially endless step. It is a mystery.” Aphoristic meanings inevitably tend to be obscure. Besides, grasping what the aphorist is communicating and spelling it out in black and white are two different things: the richness of meaning that the reader is exposed to may have to do with a peculiar kind of cognitive overload effect (see Section 4), and in consequence, the intellectual outcome appears ineffable. It thus appears that an aphorism’s meaning can sometimes be captured, but it cannot be easily expressed in words. Apart from the elusiveness of meaning and problems with expressing what one has managed to make out, undeniably there will also be differences across various individuals trying to make sense of the sayings, with some interpretations for (1)–(5) probably departing significantly from what is proposed above: one of the essential features of aphoristic sentences is that they generate very subjective responses.

All this raises a number of questions that should be answered by a pragmatic theory that seeks to explain vaguer forms of verbal communication in general, and to describe the anatomy of aphorisms in particular. How can the unparaphrasability of aphorisms be accounted for? How does it happen that aphorisms convey so much by saying so little?⁴ How can the fact that they may yield dissimilar and divergent interpretations across different speakers be explained? Most pragmatic models appear to shun questions and problems that go beyond relatively straightforward and determinate meanings that are communicated, so they can hardly be appealed to. RT is a notable exception in this respect. As I will attempt to demonstrate in what follows, the theory predicts that sometimes the meaning intended by the communicator may be (more or less) indeterminate and provides tools to elucidate the underlying mechanisms, which can be fruitfully applied to account for the nature and interpretation of aphorisms.

³ For reasons that will become more obvious later on, this interpretation is most problematic.

⁴ Even though Lec’s aphorisms focused on in this paper can be seen as very artistic, traditional or folk aphorisms will not be much different as far as the richness of interpretations afforded is concerned. I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing it out to me.

3. The relevance-theoretic account of meaning indeterminacy

RT is designed to be a model of ostensive-inferential communication, that is, the type of communication involving an overt manifestation of the intention to communicate something to the audience by producing an ostensive stimulus, on the basis of which the addressee infers the intended meaning (Sperber, Wilson 1986/95, 1987, 2002, 2015; Wilson, Sperber 2004). An ostensive stimulus, for instance an utterance, is taken to make manifest to the recipient a set of assumptions, which on this approach constitute the content of the communicator's informative intention. The set of assumptions that fall under the informative intention need not consist of a list of specific assumptions entertained by the speaker and replicated in the hearer's mind as a result of utterance processing. As Sperber and Wilson (1986/95: 58) point out, "to have a representation of a set of assumptions it is not necessary to have a representation of each assumption in the set. Any individuating description may do." This means that whereas sometimes what is communicated can be identified as a single proposition or a small set of easily recognised propositions, there are situations in which speaker's intention is not fully transparent and the range of assumptions backed by this intention is not easy to delineate. In such cases, "what the communicator intends to make manifest is partly precise and partly vague" (Sperber, Wilson 1986/95: 59), that is why in effect, there are potentially a few viable hypotheses about the intended meaning and the interpreter is not expected to choose a specific one, because there is none to be singled out (Carston 2002: 20–21). Since human communication is thus claimed to result in more precise or less precise cognitive effects, which affects its strength, in RT communication is taken to be a matter of degree, as it can be stronger or weaker (Sperber, Wilson 1986/95, 2008, 2015; Wilson, Sperber 2004).

How is utterance interpretation hypothesised to proceed in RT? How are the cognitive effects recovered? Assuming that human cognition is attuned to maximising relevance of incoming information (as the *Cognitive Principle of Relevance* posits) and that the utterance (or any other ostensive stimulus) comes with a guarantee that it is worth the audience's processing effort and is the most relevant one compatible with the communicator's abilities and preferences (the *presumption of optimal relevance*), Wilson and Sperber (2004) formulate the relevance-guided comprehension heuristic (first suggested in Sperber, Cara, Girotto 1995). This heuristic is claimed to underlie utterance interpretation and explain how the hearer arrives at the speaker-intended meaning. It instructs the interpreter to "[f]ollow a path of least effort in computing cognitive effects, test[ing] interpretive hypotheses (disambiguations, reference resolutions, implicatures, etc.) in order of accessibility" and to stop as soon as his expectations of relevance are fulfilled (Wilson, Sperber 2004: 613; Sperber, Wilson 2012: 7). In order to illustrate what is actually involved, let us look at a brief exchange in (6):

- (6) a. Peter: Was the meeting long?
 b. Mary: Yes, it was very long.

Assuming that Peter's question is about a particular departmental meeting that took place earlier on the day when they are talking, in interpreting Mary's answer, Peter takes (6b) to mean that the meeting he asks about took very long: "it" is easily identified to refer to the meeting he manifestly has in mind. This is where the path of least effort aimed to achieve satisfying cognitive effects takes Peter: it is on this interpretation that the utterance attains optimal relevance (Sperber, Wilson 1986/95: 144–145, 156–157). As it happens, there is just one mutually manifest assumption that is communicated by Mary, so (6b) is an example of strong communication.

The situation changes if Mary answers Peter's question indirectly. Let us consider (7) now:

- (7) a. Peter: Was the meeting long?
 b. Mary: Hilda was in the chair.

As before, Mary's answer will achieve optimal relevance by providing information about whether the departmental meeting which was held on that day lasted long and is intended to be processed as such. By explicitly stating that Hilda was in the chair, Mary answers Peter's question indirectly, manifestly assuming that he will easily make out the intended interpretation. The interpretation involves recovering the implicated meaning: (7b) makes a number of background assumptions highly accessible to Peter and by processing these together with the explicit meaning of (7b), he will generate the intended implicit import of Mary's utterance. Let us stipulate, for the sake of the argument, that the background assumptions that processing (7b) makes salient in Peter's mind are similar to those in (8).

- (8) a. If Hilda is in the chair, a meeting lasts twice as long as it usually does.
 b. Hilda likes to depart from the agenda.
 c. Many people find long meetings very annoying.

By making the premise such as (8a) highly salient to Peter, Mary manifestly intends him to draw the conclusion that the departmental meeting lasted very long, much longer than on average. This is a strong implicature in this context, as without drawing it, Peter could not treat Mary's utterance as optimally relevant. At the same time, Mary encourages her interlocutor to recover some further cognitive effects, otherwise she should have replied directly and saved him some mental effort. So the answer in (7b) not only implicates that the meeting lasted very long, but also makes highly accessible to the hearer a range of further implicit conclusions to be drawn, for instance, that Hilda probably made a lot of digressions during the meeting and many people were very annoyed, etc.⁵ In fact, these further implicatures are only weakly implicated: the speaker encourages the hearer to draw some implications

⁵ As will be explained more thoroughly in the course of discussion in Section 4, it is the encyclopaedic entries attached to concepts encoded by the words used by the speaker that provide access to assumptions stored in the interpreter's memory.

of this sort, but her manifest informative intention does not endorse any specific ones to be generated. In other words, the communicator evidently wants the addressee to draw some further implications, but there is apparent indeterminacy as to which ones are intended. Therefore, it is up to the interpreter which of the implications that become manifestly salient due to his processing of the utterance in (7b) he will compute. These implicatures are assumed to be weakly communicated by Mary. Thus weak communication occurs when the speaker's informative intention is (at least partly) indeterminate.

To recapitulate, in the case of strong communication, the relevance-driven comprehension heuristic leads the interpreter to recover a determinate, specific assumption or an easily identifiable set of assumptions that are being conveyed, all manifestly endorsed by the speaker's intention. When communication is weaker, by following the path of least effort the addressee will arrive at one or two assumptions strongly backed up by the speaker's intention and a few assumptions which are not so evidently supported by the communicator but which the comprehender is encouraged to access, since the strongly communicated ones do not provide adequate gratification for the effort incurred. In cases of very weak communication, the comprehension heuristic will return a vast array of assumptions, none of which will be strongly warranted by the speaker's intention, but it will be mutually manifest to the communicator and her audience that the latter is expected to access some of them in the process of utterance interpretation so as to reach a satisfactory level of relevance. The weakest forms of communication create what Sperber and Wilson refer to as *poetic effects*. How poetic effects originate will be discussed on the basis of a relevance-theoretic analysis of aphorisms.

4. Interpreting aphorisms: a relevance-theoretic approach

A special effect created when "a wide array of weak implications which are themselves weakly implicated" are conveyed in verbal communication is called by Sperber and Wilson (2008: 100) a *poetic effect*. Aphorisms with their laconic form and rich meaning potential appear particularly suited to demonstrate how poetic effects work. Let me show how the examples of aphorisms introduced in Section 2 above, and repeated below in (9–10) for the reader's convenience, can be analysed along the relevance-theoretic lines.

- (9) No snowflake in an avalanche ever feels responsible.
- (10) Cannibals prefer men who have no spines.
- (11) An Achilles' heel is often hidden in the jackboot of a tyrant.
- (12) Most of the sighs we hear have been edited.
- (13) In the beginning was the word, silence was created later.

As indicated above, on the relevance-theoretic approach it is posited that processing each of the aphorisms in (9)–(13) will result in a number of assumptions becoming available in the recipient’s mind. This occurs because each of the concepts that are encoded by the words used in the aphorism is assumed to provide access to encyclopaedic information stored in the individual’s memory (Sperber, Wilson 1986/95: 86). The encyclopaedic entry attached to concepts is a deposit of background knowledge about entities, actions, locations, properties, etc. that the concept denotes, which includes “commonplace assumptions, scientific information, culture-specific beliefs and personal, idiosyncratic observations and experiences. Some of this information may be stored as discrete propositional representations, some of it may be in the form of integrated scripts or scenarios (...), and some may be represented in an analogue (as opposed to digital) format, perhaps as mental images of some sort” (Carston 2002: 321). It is assumptions of the encyclopaedic type enabled by the concepts encoded by the words and phrases used in the aphorism that form the basis for the interpretation of the adage.⁶

How does this mechanism work in practice? In processing (9), assumptions about SNOWFLAKES, AVALANCHES, FEELING RESPONSIBLE as well as possibly some others that cross-referencing among the encyclopaedic entries of these concepts will bring to the fore, become salient in the interpreter’s mind. In effect, a number of implications arise, possibly not unlike those in (14a)–(14e) below:

- (14) a. Snowflakes are pieces of frozen water which are microscopic and very ephemeral.
 b. An avalanche is a rapid flow of huge masses of snow at high speed.
 c. Avalanches are extremely powerful and may not only kill people, but also destroy huge trees and houses.
 d. There must be millions and millions of tiny particles of snow in an avalanche, each of them contributing to the avalanche effect.
 e. You feel responsible for something only if you know that you control the process and the outcomes.
 f. It is easy to shed responsibility if you are one of many involved.

Having access to encyclopaedic assumptions of this kind, the interpreter may infer that in the same way in which we hardly realise that the destructive power of avalanches is generated by masses of infinitesimal snowflakes, very many individuals participating in an enterprise may not feel responsible for the end result, though in fact each of them contributes to it, in the same way in which each of the indiscernible flakes of snow contributes to an avalanche. Thus expanding the initial range of background assumptions and bringing in some others, the recipient of the aphorism may conclude that being one of very many involved in doing something may give you a false impression of not being accountable for the outcomes, especially when these are negative.

⁶ A literature specialist will certainly discern elements of allegory, creative metaphor, imagery, symbolism, etc. in some of the examples in (9)–(13), but these will not be much exploited here: my major concern is to describe and elucidate general inferential processes that a naïve reader might follow.

Similarly, by exploring the assumptions that the concepts evoked by words in (10) and (11) make available, some of which may resemble those listed below in (15a)–(15e) and (16a)–(16e) for illustrative purposes, the interpreter may infer the meaning implicitly conveyed by the two aphorisms.

- (15) a. Cannibals eat the flesh of other humans.
 b. Cannibals are savage.
 c. Boneless meat is always preferable to meat with bones.
 d. People without a backbone lack courage and determination.
 e. Weak and timid people are much easier to control and manipulate.
- (16) a. Tyrants are infamous for their despotism and cruelty.
 b. Highly aggressive individuals are known to be hiding their weaknesses and frustrations.
 c. An Achilles' heel is someone's weakness.
 d. Weak individuals tend to show toughness and power to hide their weaknesses.
 e. People often pretend to be somebody else than who they are deep down.

In the case of (10), the interpretation may be that people who are weak in character and easy to manipulate are often an easy prey to vicious and violent individuals. The aphorism in (11) may be taken to mean that tyrants hide the weaknesses that they have by acting aggressively and cruelly. Whatever it is, this kind of overall meaning emerges from the set of background assumptions made manifest to the reader. The crucial thing is that what the interpretation amounts to will invariably depend on the encyclopaedic information stored under the concepts evoked, which – as remarked on earlier – may be very different for different individuals. Importantly, those assumptions that contribute to the recovery of positive cognitive effects essential to attain the desired level of relevance will be necessarily accessed (hence, for example, (15c), which secures access to (15d) and (15e) contributing to overall relevance, features in the interpretation of (10)). It may also be that quite a vast array of assumptions become at one time manifest in the interpreter's mind creating a special type of cognitive effect, referred to above as cognitive overload. This is a state of mind (and possibly a brain-state) in which a large number of assumptions become suddenly manifest or more manifest to the individual, with only some of them (and sometimes none of them) developing into full mental representations. In their totality they create a potent kind of cognitive impact (for a more thorough discussion on the cognitive overload effect, see Jodłowiec 2015.)

With reference to aphorism (12), if a range of assumptions close to those in (17a)–(17e) become salient to the reader, then he may be led to think that, according to the aphorist, quite often by sighing people deliberately and purposefully, albeit not straightforwardly, communicate their emotions, frequently in order to achieve a calculated effect.

- (17) a. Sighs are audible breaths.
 b. Sighs may express relief, tiredness, sadness, and other, usually negative, emotions.
 c. Sighs are usually emitted automatically, spontaneously and unintentionally.

- d. If something is edited, it is purposefully presented in a certain way.
- e. Texts or materials are edited for specific audiences to achieve particular goals.

In the same manner, there are a number of assumptions that become accessible to someone processing the aphorism in (13). This time they are, on the one hand, assumptions about how the word may be seen as a powerful creator of reality and how words have a rich symbolic potential, but on the other hand, assumptions concerning words generating not much more than noise, which makes silence something more important and superior. The obvious allusion to the Gospel of John 1:1 brings in intertextual considerations,⁷ and adds extra layers of depth to this aphorism, which I will not attempt to explore here: my objective is to show *how* aphorisms communicate meaning rather than explain in detail what this meaning actually is. It is important to observe that the clash in implications brought to bear on the interpretation in the case of this aphorism reveals a paradox – a device often employed by aphorists (and traceable also in the other aphorisms discussed above).

As the above discussion hopefully shows, the inherent characteristic features of the genre find a natural and plausible explanation when aphorisms are analysed along relevance-theoretic lines. In a nutshell, what aphorisms communicate is intrinsically vague and partly indeterminate, because they belong to the weak end of the strong–weak communication continuum. The phrasing of an aphorism is crucial: the words deliberately chosen by the aphorist provide access to a gamut of assumptions vital for the interpretation of an aphorism. Since the content of encyclopaedic entries in the concepts evoked is inevitably different for different people, these interpretations will tend to be idiosyncratic. The cognitive impact of an aphorism is taken to depend on the range of the assumptions brought to bear on the interpretation process and the cognitive effects that a given recipient finds satisfying.

The description of aphorism comprehension in terms of weak communication affords significant insights into how it is possible that aphorisms communicate in the way they do. The crux of the issue is that apparently all that the aphorist wants to achieve is to affect the thoughts of the audience and to drive these thoughts in a certain direction (cf. Sperber, Wilson 1986/95: 60, see also Sperber, Wilson 2015). There is an evident indeterminacy as to the underlying communicator's intention, and, as a result, there is indeterminacy as to the actual implicatures that the author endorses, with no predetermined range of implications that the recipient will be intended to generate. This suggests that weak communication is necessarily involved and the responsibility for the meaning recovered is to a large extent shared by the reader (cf. Wilson's 2011 remarks on the interpretation of literary texts).

As emphasised above, this model of aphorism interpretation predicts that the poetic effect generated when the aphorism is being processed may bring about a kind of cognitive overload in the recipient's mind: a sudden accessibility of a range of assumptions may prove relevant enough for the reader who will not go with the

⁷ I would like to thank one of the reviewers for indicating that this aspect of interpreting (13) should be emphasised.

interpretation any further. This means that an optimally relevant interpretation will sometimes be achieved as soon as a big number of assumptions, just flashing through his mind, have become manifest to the recipient with only one or two of them, or without any of them as the case may be, obtaining the status of mental representations. If this happens, the reader may not attempt to draw specific conclusions from what he is exposed to, but will be satisfied with his thoughts being stirred, so to speak. Under the circumstances, the intention of the aphorist, as relevance theorists will argue, can be thought of in terms of changing the cognitive environment of the audience, that is, “their possibilities of thinking” (Wilson 2011: 70; cf. also Sperber, Wilson 2015).

This explains the elusiveness of meaning, which, as indicated earlier, is an essential feature of the genre. By and large, the meaning of figurative language tends to be difficult to spell out, and more often than not, trying to paraphrase it is tantamount to killing the effect that the poet or playwright aims to achieve. In the same vein, even though in the analyses above an attempt was made to list some background assumptions potentially relevant to the aphorism comprehension, they have not much more than an expository role and they do not give justice to what is actually embraced. This is due to the fact that, firstly, there will be a lot of idiosyncrasy in aphorism interpretation, as emphasised more than once above. Secondly, the array of assumptions accessed is probably much vaster than what was suggested. Thirdly, and most importantly, if the interpretation results in a cognitive overload effect, very few (if any) assumptions will actually reach the status of mental representations: increased manifestness of very many assumptions will occur instead. Reflecting on the nature of aphorisms, Geary (2005: 15–16) describes this effect metaphorically like this:

Aphorisms are like particle accelerators for the mind. When high-energy particles like electrons and positrons collide inside an accelerator, new particles are created as the energy of the crash is converted into matter. The freshly minted matter spins out from the collision at incredibly high velocities and disintegrates again within about one millionth of a billionth of a billionth of a second. Trying to track the particles in this miniature big bang is like blowing up a haystack and trying to spot a needle as the debris flies past. Inside an aphorism, it is minds that collide and the new matter that spins out at the speed of thought is that elusive thing we call wisdom. Keep your eyes peeled or you'll miss it.

It does not mean though that the audience is always bound to be satisfied with fleeting and imprecise interpretations. Some people reach for books of aphorisms, because they seek solutions to problems of ontological nature, so they will be content only when they arrive at a more specific meaning. Also they are sometimes prepared to spend quite a lot of time to explore at depth what the aphorism means to them, ready to go beyond the initial context of immediately available background assumptions in order to expand and elaborate on the first recovered interpretation. Unlike in online communicative encounters, in which the comprehension process needs to be instantaneous and economical, interpreting literary texts, among them aphoristic output, may take as much time and effort as the reader is ready to invest.

So, as RT posits, processing constrained by the search for optimal relevance, which begins in a relatively small context consisting of immediately accessible background assumptions, may be gradually enlarged to embrace further assumptions enabled by concepts present in the initial set and then by the enlarged context and so on. “However, at a certain point in processing – which will vary from person to person and situation to situation – the cost of obtaining any further contextual implications will become too high, and processing will stop” (Wilson, Sperber 1991: 382). The expected and sufficient level of relevance in interpreting aphorisms may thus vary from individual to individual and/or from occasion to occasion.

5. Conclusion

The major goal of this paper is to show that a relevance-theoretic analysis of aphorisms provides interesting and significant answers to the queries about what “makes aphorisms tick” and how they are interpreted. Applying the relevance-theoretic notions of weak communication and poetic effect throws light on the general inferential mechanisms triggered in the recipient’s mind when they read (or hear) an aphorism, as I have tried to argue. Certain pivotal properties of aphorisms, such as the rich and condensed meaning that they convey, their unparaphrasability and elusiveness, and very personal and subjective interpretations that they give rise to, find a credible and motivated explanation on the relevance-theoretic account.

As the above analyses of the interpretation underlying the processing of aphorisms hopefully demonstrate, RT offers a justification and elucidation of a margin of tentativeness in verbal production and comprehension. On the one hand, this allows illuminating insights into how language use can give rise to special cognitive effects, exploited by poets, joke-tellers, aphorists, etc. On the other hand, the approach corroborates the argument advanced by a number of researchers who point out that full explicitness in verbal communication is not only unachievable but virtually undesirable (Brożek 2014; Carston 1999, 2002, 2005, 2009, 2012; Dascal 2003, Searle 1992; Wilson 2014). The relevance-theoretic model of communication predicts that its weaker forms will be highly economical and hence fairly useful and popular, since so much more can be communicated by saying less.

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