

## **Relevance and Irrelevance**

# **Age of Access? Grundfragen der Informationsgesellschaft**

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## **Volume 9**

# Relevance and Irrelevance

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Theories, Factors and Challenges

Edited by  
Jan Strassheim and Hisashi Nasu

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# Preface

“Relevance” has been proposed as a key concept within disciplines ranging from philosophy, sociology, linguistics and semiotics to rhetoric, from library and information science, psychology and education to cognitive science. Models and theories of relevance have appeared repeatedly at least since the 1920s. Since many of the approaches are unrelated to each other, a discussion between them seems to be overdue. This volume is an attempt to contribute to a greater exchange between the different viewpoints.

A convergence of independent theoretical outlooks on the notion of “relevance” is surprising in itself. What it suggests is that relevance is a fundamental problem shared across fields of research. While this convergence on relevance has received growing attention in recent years, there is still some way to go before an interdisciplinary field of “relevance studies” might be recognized. Also, despite the broad and enduring interest in relevance, an interdisciplinary book-length treatment of the topic has not yet been undertaken. The following collection of original essays is meant to fill this gap and to invite further research on relevance which crosses disciplinary borders.

Accessibility of information, the theme of the book series *Age of Access*, includes the capacity to make use of information for one’s own ends. The concept of relevance is connected with that of utility but reaches beyond – and below – it. Relevance influences our access to information not only in the sense of motivating and guiding it, but also in the way we construe and interpret the information we access. In contrast to most approaches, this book will focus not only on relevance, but also on *irrelevance*, which is of equal importance to life in an “information society” and to our chances of making well-informed decisions and understanding others, but which has so far been neglected on a conceptual level.

The researchers who contributed to the present volume represent seven disciplines and nine countries across North and South America, Asia and Europe. They testify to the reach and variety of work on relevance and irrelevance and to the promise of further productive discussion. The contributions are arranged in three sections:

- (1) “Theories”: The chapters in the first section shine a spotlight on the idea of relevance/irrelevance. The authors critically discuss and compare concepts and theories of relevance and some of the implications for notions of irrelevance.
- (2) “Factors”: The chapters in this section investigate the background and finer detail needed to understand, interpret and apply concepts of relevance/irrelevance. The authors analyze factors, conditions and manifestations of relevance and irrelevance in concrete settings.

- (3) “Challenges”: The chapters in the third section elucidate practical, ethical or political aspects related to relevance/irrelevance. The authors set out technical goals and applications as well as social challenges implied by relevance and irrelevance as something we co-produce and impose upon each other.

We would like to briefly introduce the essays in the order of their appearance. Each contribution will be preceded by an abstract of its own.

*Jan Strassheim* gives a brief overview of concepts of relevance and irrelevance as to their roles and mutual relation with respect to different approaches in sections on Alfred Schutz and Aron Gurwitsch; Paul Grice, Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson; library and information science; signs and language; and epistemology and logic.

## Section “Theories”

*Göran Sonesson* examines different ideas of relevance within semiotics and in approaches including that of Schutz, Gurwitsch, Grice and Sperber/Wilson. Discussing the complex dynamics and levels involved, he asks whether there is a general phenomenon behind the word “relevance”. His discussion critically relates our lifeworld and naturalistic approaches to it.

*Michael Barber* traces a convergence between Sperber’s and Wilson’s analysis of communication and Schutz’s wider theoretical framework. The different “realities” which make up our lifeworld, he argues, are part of the context for communication. Therefore, communication often follows complex practical relevances, but sometimes it follows theoretical or aesthetic relevances instead.

*Brian Larson* aims to bridge pragmatics and rhetoric, two fields of language use in context usually treated apart, by building critically on Sperber and Wilson. Within a cognitive-science framework, he suggests widening the scope of relevance theory to reflect the important role of goals and emotions and presents sample analyses.

*Denisa Butnaru* investigates the fundamental role of the body in our everyday actions, our interactions with others and in the production of a social world. Her critical re-evaluation of Schutz’s relevance theory is informed by conceptions of corporeality found in Maurice Merleau-Ponty and in recent approaches in phenomenology and sociology.

## Section “Factors”

*Francisco Yus* investigates how various types of online identity are managed through internet-mediated communication. To this end, he argues, the operative concept of relevance in Sperber’s and Wilson’s theory should be extended beyond propositional contents communicated to include a (dis-)satisfaction based on a range of emotional, motivational and interface-related factors.

*David Rapp* and *Matthew McCrudden* introduce and analyze empirical research into the process of reading. Relevances related to readers’ tasks in an educational setting are shown to influence comprehension and memory not only as they read, but even before and after. The analysis could generalize to other discourse experiences and has practical implications.

*Nozomi Ikeya* and *William Sharrock* study how librarians classify books according to their subject matter. The continuous process of adapting and applying the classification scheme, they argue, reflects both the ongoing development of subject areas and what is seen as library users’ interests, but also the librarians’ own practical relevances given limited resources.

*Ana Horta* and *Matthias Gross* present and analyze their empirical observations of dog owners who fail to clean up their pets’ feces in public spaces despite legal sanctions. The relevance or irrelevance of the event, they argue, is negotiated through embodied routines and face-saving interactions, resulting in forms of “nonknowledge” based on irrelevance.

## Section “Challenges”

*Ilja Srubar* analyzes the pragmatic relevances shaping cultural worlds on various levels of action and communication. While such an apparatus selects only certain possibilities as relevant and therefore as real, he argues, the possibilities excluded as irrelevant do not disappear, but remain part of the social order at its fringes.

*Dagobert Soergel* and *Catherine Dillon* classify a variety of types and levels of topical relevance in concrete examples of problem-solving and decision-making tasks. Shedding light on the relevances that arise with different stages, courses and contexts of a problem-solving process, they build a basis for information systems designed to assist in such processes.

*Hermílio Santos* examines the construction of identity through internet-mediated communication from a biographical, process-oriented viewpoint. Pointing to

formal parallels between face-to-face and online interaction, he critically analyzes mechanisms of exclusion inherent in a dialectics between group and self which frustrate hopes for the internet to become a space of emancipation.

*Jan Strassheim* assesses the relationship between relevance and irrelevance with reference to the law as a theoretical model and as a practice. The maintenance of social order and its change through criticism, he suggests, equally depend on (ir-)relevance as a dynamic of selectivity which organizes our experience and action.

We would like to thank all the authors who have contributed to this inspiring discussion on relevance and irrelevance. We are also grateful to the editors of the series *Age of Access* and to the editorial team at *De Gruyter*.

Jan Strassheim  
Hisashi Nasu



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Jan Strassheim

# Relevance and Irrelevance

**Abstract:** Relevance and irrelevance, it is argued, are constitutive to our access to “information objects” on three interconnected levels: (1) access to the information object itself, (2) the information gained from it, (3) the use of that information. Relevance selectively shapes our experience and action, but the “irrelevance” of what is left out is not simply the opposite or absence of relevance. The complex relation between relevance and irrelevance expresses itself in different shades of knowledge and ignorance, and in a fuzzy border between information we do not *want* to access and information we *cannot* access. This implies both chances and risks for communication as a process of producing and exchanging information objects. In a second step, previous research on relevance and irrelevance is sketched with respect to different traditions and approaches: (1) Alfred Schutz and Aron Gurwitsch; (2) Paul Grice, Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson; (3) library and information science; (4) signs and language; and (5) epistemology and logic. Finally, the role of the word “relevance”, which is not found in all languages, is briefly considered after distinguishing the explicit reflection of relevance from the constitutive role of relevance, which often remains implicit.

## 1 Why “relevance”? Why “irrelevance”?

Why should scholars and scientists talk about “relevance”? One might start with the following list of reasons:

- (1) Investigators of perception or cognition will naturally come to ask why our attention or interest focuses on certain objects or thoughts while ignoring many others.

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**Note:** I would like to thank Hisashi Nasu for his insightful mentorship on all matters “relevant”. Also, I am grateful to the members of the “*Nasu sem*” and the Waseda Schutz Archive for their warm acceptance and advice. I am much obliged to Benjamin Stuck for his comments on an earlier version of this essay and for many invaluable phenomenological discussions. Last but not least, I would like to thank André Schüller-Zwierlein for suggesting a volume on relevance as part of the series *Age of Access* and for his support and advice in the project.

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Jan Strassheim, Keio University

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- (2) Research concerned with the ways we make sense of ourselves and the world around us will come to ask how background and context, knowledge and bias favor a certain understanding rather than another.
- (3) What guides us in our actions and our interactions with others? How do we reach decisions? Such questions arise for any study of action as well as for sciences which aim at practical or technological solutions.

Relevance works at multiple levels. This can be exemplified with reference to the contemporary problem of *access* (cf. Rifkin 2000). If ours is an age in which access to information has become a crucial resource, problems of accessibility arise: Who has access to what information? Should all information be made accessible to everyone and everywhere? The problem of relevance and irrelevance is most obviously connected with questions about what we *want* or *need* to access. Digital technology in particular grants us access to information of every kind and from any source and potentially connects us with every person in over half of the world's population. But how to select from this near infinite pool? What should we look for and what should we ignore? As a first approximation, one might say that what we need or want is *useful* information. "Useful" information is related to our needs or interests in such a way that it helps us make plans, perform tasks and take decisions, develop our knowledge and skills, or simply enjoy ourselves. In order to gain useful information, we usually need to access "information objects" (Ingwersen/Järvelin 2005) – for instance, texts, gestures, spoken words, pictures or videos – which convey (express, embody, activate, etc.) this information to us. In other words, three levels are involved: (1) the information object accessed, (2) the information it conveys, (3) and the usefulness of that information. Relevance is a constitutive element on each level:

- (1) Before we access an information object, it must have entered our field of perception and, within that field, it must have caught our attention among other objects present at the same time. Even more fundamentally, certain aspects must have stood out within our experience which made up this object as an object for us and marked it off from its surroundings. As phenomenologists have argued (Schutz 2011 [1951]; Gurwitsch 1964 [1957]; Waldenfels 1996; see also sec. 2.1 below), all of these processes are based on relevance. Hence, the identity, properties and boundaries of any information object depend on relevance. This can become an eminently practical problem, e.g. when professionals aim to preserve information objects over years or even centuries and, in order to do so, have to define which aspects are part of the object in question and which are not (Schüller-Zwierlein 2014).

- (2) But even once the information object has been identified, the same object may convey different information, depending on how it is interpreted by different individuals, in different settings, or at different points in time. It has become clear in recent decades that this contextuality affects all layers of “meaning”, even seemingly unequivocal ones. What information we gain from any object is a matter of relevance. This can be shown for information objects such as pictures (Sonesson 1988), which “say more than a thousand words”, but it is true of texts too. Depending on the situation, the same sentence will express almost any number of meanings. This is because linguistic communication relies on relevance to fill in elements of meaning which are not given by the rules of a language alone; moreover, relevance may even override or suspend linguistic rules, as it does in ironical or figurative uses (Bühler 2011 [1934]; Grice 1989; Wilson/Sperber 2012).
- (3) Finally, whether the information gained is “useful” depends on how a user (a person, a group, or perhaps a machine) wants or needs to use the information. In the numerous models of relevance proposed by library and information scientists, concepts such as “usefulness”, “utility” or “need” have often taken center stage. Research on relevance (especially in the field of information retrieval) is often connected to notions of usefulness fleshed out in various ways, e.g. with reference to inner motivational states of a user, to user types, to types of complex tasks such as “writing an undergraduate research paper”, or to the string of words typed into a search engine which indicates the topic the user is interested in (Mizzaro 1997; Saracevic 2007; Schamber et al. 1990; Huang/Soergel 2013; see also sec. 2.3 below).

These three levels are interconnected. The elements selected at each level – (1) an information object, (2) the information gained from it, and (3) the usefulness of that information – build upon each other, each presupposing the previous one. Accordingly, their selection may proceed in the same order. But the kinds of relevance involved at each level may also build on each other in different orders. Which object I singled out in a certain way (1) was bound up from the start with the way I usually understand such objects (2). In turn, both my attention to this object and my interpretation of it was influenced by (3) the goal which prompted my search in the first place. Where the object is a text, for instance, readers with different goals may not gather the same information from it (McCrudden et al. 2011). But even before that, the goal of the search may itself have been prompted by an interpretational need (perhaps I failed to understand a word in a Latin quotation and am now trying to find its basic form through a search engine) or by a thematic interest (a strange insect in my kitchen has caught my attention, and I am now searching the internet for images of similar insects).

The distinction between these three levels is similar to that between three types of relevance – “thematic”, “interpretational”, and “motivational” relevance – which interrelate in ways that prevent us from taking one of them as primary (Schutz 1966 [1957]).

*Irrelevance* has received less attention than relevance, but this does not make it any less important. Relevance has to do with a “selectivity” (Schutz 2011 [1951]) which helps shape our experience and action. That is, relevance has to do with what makes us “select” certain themes, interpretations and courses of action rather than others. As the phrase “rather than others” implies, certain other possibilities are *not* selected. Hence, relevance is bound up from the outset with irrelevance.<sup>1</sup>

Relevance and irrelevance are not only academic topics. In our daily lives, we often reflect on what is relevant in a given situation. We may ask questions like these: Which aspect of a seemingly innocuous remark offended this person so much? How can I tell whether an insect is a honeybee or a bumblebee? Is professional success more important in life than leisure time, or helping others? Faced with such questions, we think or talk about different possibilities and then discard some of them as “irrelevant” or “not relevant enough”.

Even more often, however, relevance guides us *without* such reflection. “Looking to the relevances” tends to be the exception, while simply “living in the relevances”<sup>2</sup> is the rule (Schutz/Luckmann 1973/89, vol. 1, 182). For example, relevance structures the way we talk to others and the way we interpret what others say, but “[c]ommunicators and audience need no more know the principle of relevance to communicate than they need to know the principles of genetics to reproduce.” (Sperber/Wilson 1986/95, 162). Search engines aim at what is relevant to humans and rely on it even where both their programmers and their users lack an explicit concept of relevance: “[...] while the hand of relevance is invisible, it is governing” (Saracevic 2007, 1916). Whatever is *not* selected as relevant in such situations is “irrelevant” not in the sense that we explicitly discard it, but in the sense that it never entered our consideration in the first place.

As a result, if relevance contributes to how we acquire, store and articulate *knowledge* (see also sec. 2.5 below), irrelevance is related to various kinds of *ignorance* (Gross/McGoey 2015): There are things we deliberately ignore; but there are also things we ignore without knowing it, because they are irrelevant in the sense

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<sup>1</sup> For the sake of simplicity, I treat relevance and irrelevance as an “either/or” alternative here. In reality, the problem is more complicated as it has been indicated that the difference is a matter of degree (e.g. Schutz 1964 [1946]; Sperber/Wilson 1986/95; Borlund 2003).

<sup>2</sup> I follow the usage of Schutz in using “relevance” in the singular to refer to a general phenomenon or structure of selectivity and “relevances” in the plural to refer to those aspects or patterns selected as relevant in a given case.

of never entering our mind. In the psychology of visual perception, this latter type of ignorance can take the striking form of “irrelevance blindness” (Eitam et al. 2013). I said earlier that relevance is most obviously connected with questions about which information, within the infinite pool of information accessible to us, we *want* or *need* to access. But the kind of irrelevance which is bound up with ignorance can make potentially accessible – and even potentially relevant – information de facto inaccessible to us. Within the world of information which is “not relevant” to me here and now, there is thus a fuzzy border between information I do not *want* to access and information I *cannot* access.<sup>3</sup>

This relation between relevance and irrelevance has obvious risks: we may neglect aspects which are important to us or to others without ever noticing that we neglect them. Are we then forever trapped in our own relevances? Not necessarily, because (1) what is relevant to us can change over time and (2) different things are relevant to different people (Schutz 2011 [1951]; Sperber/Wilson 1986/95; Saracevic 2007). Thanks to the dynamic and individual variability of relevance, we can learn and unlearn what is relevant and what is not, and, importantly, we can learn this from the experience of others. This adds a fundamentally *social* dimension to relevance and irrelevance. Communication is a chief medium for the development of relevances. This includes such seemingly lonely activities as reading a book or browsing a website; information objects such as books or websites are usually produced by *people* who had their own relevances and irrelevances at the time (Hjørland 2010).

This role of communication, in turn, highlights the role of relevance in communication itself. Communication involves selections on all three levels mentioned before. That is, the act of making useful information accessible to others requires for its success that these others will (1) notice the informational object and perceive it in a certain way, (2) interpret the object in a certain way, and (3) find the information gained useful in a certain way. This process becomes easier to the extent that both parties share the same relevances. But the point of communication as a medium for the development of relevances is that at least some of the relevances initially *differ* between the communicators. Such difference is a challenge where what is currently relevant to the audience might keep them from accessing the information offered. Communication, therefore, tends to involve an interplay of shared and differing relevances (see secs. 2.2 and 2.4 below).

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<sup>3</sup> This complex relation is one reason why it is preferable to use “irrelevance” instead of other terms sometimes opposed to “relevance”, such as “redundancy” or “contingency”, which not only obscure the mutual dependence of relevance and irrelevance, but which also tend to narrow relevance down to more specific features such as novelty or necessity.

Yet communication has risks of its own. One is of course the risk of misunderstanding. But even where we understand each other, there is no guarantee that we will stop neglecting what is important to us, because the others may be mistaken too. Copying their relevances will not help us in this case. Still, it is something we often do, as the spread of rumors and “relevance bubbles” in social networks remind us. Surprisingly, we even tend to rely on inaccurate information from others when we *know* the information to be false (Rapp/Braasch 2014). As a result, communication may reinforce shared relevances which make us neglect what is important. “Irrelevance blindness” can occur at the social scale (Zerubavel 2015), with possibly devastating consequences. For example, entire societies may fail to notice the environmental damage they do (Ollinaho 2016).

Against this background, it is only natural that questions arise about what is *really* relevant as opposed to what only *seems* relevant. Are there timeless relevances as opposed to what is relevant at a given point in life or history? Are there universal relevances as opposed to what is relevant to myself, my class, or my culture? Are certain relevances more objective or valid than others, making it possible to tell true knowledge from ignorance? Some expect positive answers to such questions from science or philosophy (see sec. 2.5 below). Others challenge academics to make their research more relevant to society (see Flinders 2013; Savransky 2016), which raises the question what it means to be relevant “to society” and who decides what is relevant and what is not.

## 2 Research on relevance: traditions and approaches

I would like to outline briefly (and ordered by fields rather than chronologically) some traditions or more individual approaches in research on relevance. I only include approaches here which use the word “relevance” (on this word, see also sec. 4 below). The hope is that once the problems of relevance become clearer, other approaches can be identified which treat the same problems without necessarily using the same terms.

### 2.1 Schutz and Gurwitsch

The first tradition took off at the interface between philosophy and sociology. In the 1920s, Alfred Schutz (or Schütz) began his project of providing a philosophical foundation for “interpretive sociology” (as introduced by Max Weber), using the



tools of phenomenology. From early on, Schutz saw relevance as a key concept for his project and even declared relevance “the central concept of sociology and of the cultural sciences [*Geisteswissenschaften*]” (Schutz 1996 [1929], 3). By “relevance”, Schutz refers to a selectivity which fundamentally shapes our experience and action. As we encounter the world through our relevances, relevance also shapes the objects of our experience and action. In this sense, relevance is not simply an attribute we bestow upon ready-made objects, but it helps constitute those objects and their meaning for us in the first place.

According to Schutz, Relevance governs dynamic processes in our experience and action. It underlies the typical patterns which make up our knowledge and our personality, but it also motivates us to question and change these same typical patterns, especially when we encounter problematic situations. Due to its complex dynamic, relevance allows us to interact with others through shared patterns of experience and action while at the same time it allows each person to take a uniquely individual stance within the shared lifeworld (Srubar 1988).

While the problem of relevance pervades all of Schutz’s work, his most dedicated attempts at a theory of relevance can be found in an extended manuscript written between 1947 and 1951 (Schutz 2011) and an article written in 1957 (Schutz 1966), in which he outlines his three types of relevance (“thematic” or “topical”; “interpretational”; “motivational”) and their interplay. Schutz’s overall theory remained unfinished. A second book summarizing the progress made since his first monograph published in 1932 could not be finished before Schutz passed away in 1959. Thomas Luckmann, a former student of Schutz’s, took it upon himself to finish the book (Schutz/Luckmann 1973/89). Schutz’s concept of relevance remains a core area of his approach to be expanded and developed by further research (Nasu 2008).

Schutz’s ideas influenced a variety of approaches in sociology focusing on the social construction, framing and negotiation of what is relevant or irrelevant (Goffman 1974; Garfinkel 1967; Berger/Luckmann 1966). In philosophy, Schutz’s work highlighted the precarious status of what is relevant to an individual person with respect to what is treated as relevant in a social group (Natanson 1986; Barber 1988) and to principles of relevance argued to be more universally valid than that (Cox 1978; Waldenfels 1996). Other researchers have traced tensions, within relevance itself, between more closed routines and patterns of action and experience on the one hand and more open processes of imagination and spontaneity on the other (Butnaru 2009; Knoblauch 2014; Nasu 2014; Strassheim 2016). An online bibliography of literature referring to Schutz is kept at Waseda University (The Waseda Schutz Archive 2018).

Aron Gurwitsch developed his own theory of relevance at the same time as Schutz and against the background of a decades-long exchange between the two

friends about the concept of relevance (Gurwitsch 1964 [1957]; Schutz/Gurwitsch 2011). Gurwitsch makes a point of remaining within the paradigm of Husserl's transcendental phenomenology, which Schutz had left in favor of a phenomenology of the social world. Therefore, "relevance" in Gurwitsch refers to a formal structure of thematic coherence which is valid for every possible consciousness and, in this sense, represents an ontological principle for the unity of topics and objects. "Irrelevant" phenomena are also present in consciousness, but they stand at the "margin" of its current theme. While Gurwitsch's theory of relevance and irrelevance continues to provide a reference point for critiques of Schutz, the two theories may ultimately be compatible with each other (Embree 2015).

## 2.2 Grice and Sperber/Wilson

Another, more recent tradition which explicitly reflects on problems of "relevance" is connected with the names of cognitive scientists and linguists Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson and mainly related to the field of pragmatics.<sup>4</sup>

Sperber and Wilson base their analysis of communication on a critical reading of Paul Grice's philosophy of language. According to Grice, we often imply meaning beyond what we overtly say. The meaning we imply is sometimes the whole point of our utterance, but unlike the explicit meaning of what we say, it strongly depends on the context. To explain why we nevertheless succeed in communicating implicit meanings, Grice suggested that as rational communicators, we follow a "Cooperative Principle". Grice spelled out this principle in several maxims, one of which was "Be relevant" (Grice 1989, 27).

In their critique of Grice (Sperber/Wilson 1981), Wilson and Sperber argue for a greater role of relevance: It is relevance, not necessarily cooperation, which governs our communicative behavior. Also, the context-dependence governed by relevance affects not only implicit meanings, but the core meaning of what we explicitly say. Depending on what is relevant in the context, the meaning of every word may be wider or narrower than what the dictionary would have us expect, and it may even be a different, "ad hoc" meaning altogether (Wilson/Sperber 2012). Communication therefore cannot be explained by referring only to a shared system of rules, a "code", as they understand it. Where shared rules exist (as in the grammar and semantics of a language), we rely on relevance to supple-

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<sup>4</sup> Pragmatics, the study of the use of language in context, is not to be confused with the philosophical tradition of pragmatism.

ment and often override these rules in order to reconstruct the core meaning of the words used on a given occasion.

The concept of “relevance” at the center of Sperber’s and Wilson’s theory has two sides: For an individual person at a given time, those phenomena or thoughts which balance (a) a maximum of “positive cognitive effects” to be gained from these phenomena or thoughts with (b) a minimum of “cognitive effort” needed to process them are the most relevant to this person at this time. Their analysis of communication rests on the general claim that human cognition is geared towards maximizing “relevance” in this sense. A communicator will aim, in her own interest, to shape their communicative behavior in such a way that its intended interpretation will be the most relevant to their audience. For if a communicator fails to do so, their behavior will be interpreted differently or even go unnoticed. Since this condition is common knowledge, communicative behavior *as such* raises the expectation that it will indeed be relevant to an audience. An important qualification concerns the communicator’s perceived “abilities and preferences” (Wilson/Sperber 2012, 7), which are related to different interpretation strategies on the audience’s part (Sperber 1994).

Wilson and Sperber have become eponymous with “relevance theory” since their widely read 1986 book and its revised 1995 second edition (Sperber/Wilson 1986/95). They followed up with influential articles applying their theory to problems ranging from semantics to developmental psychology or the philosophy of mind. Some of these articles were collected in a second book (Wilson/Sperber 2012). A recent overview is given in Wilson 2017. Their proposal of a unified theory for analyzing a number of seemingly unrelated phenomena sparked a critical discussion not only about the role of relevance in explaining communication, but also about the scope and foundations of the concept of relevance (e.g. Levinson 1989; Gorayska/Lindsay 1993; Recanati 2003; Burton-Roberts 2007). Research inspired by their approach has crossed discipline borders, including the divide between natural sciences and humanities. An extensive online bibliography is kept at the University of Alicante (Yus 2018).

## 2.3 Library and information science

A third tradition of explicit reflection on problems of relevance relates to the search and retrieval of information within dedicated information systems. This tradition can be traced back to around 1930, when the process of searching for scientific articles on a given topic was investigated with the help of mathematical models. What had begun with subject indices in libraries expanded to electronic databases used by experts and later to online applications such as the search

engines familiar today. Through all these variations, the focus was on a situation in which a system (be it a library or an algorithm) is supposed to help its user find relevant information objects rather than irrelevant ones. This makes relevance a chief measure for designing and evaluating the systems in question. But the main point of the discussion remained: What does “relevant” mean? How can the notion of relevance be explained and operationalized? How do we judge what is relevant and what is not, and from whose point of view?

After information science was established as a discipline, relevance became “its fundamental and central concept” (Schamber et al. 1990, 755), a position which has often been reaffirmed (e.g. Froehlich 1994, 124; Huang/Soergel 2013, 31; Saracevic 2016, 143). Numerous factors contributing to relevance have been described; different types, dimensions and levels of relevance have been defined; overarching models and frameworks of relevance have been built ever since. At certain intervals, the various ideas were collated and analyzed in review articles which often set new trends for further research (Saracevic 1975; Schamber et al. 1990; Mizzaro 1997; Saracevic 2007).

The type of relevance to be described first, later called “topical relevance”, refers to the relation between an information object (such as a document) and a given topic, or subject area. For many, this has remained a core type of relevance in the information sciences, which also connects them with traditional librarianship. However, while the discussion until the 1970s focused on topical relevance, later relevance research went increasingly beyond it to discover other kinds and aspects of relevance. A recurring theme in the discussion has been the interplay of “system” relevance and “user” relevance, which developed more and more into a tension. An algorithm, based on what the system treats as relevant to the user’s query, can supply data which the user finds *irrelevant*. Mismatches of this kind (which we continue to experience with search engines and social networking services today) had sparked discussions about relevance, or rather irrelevance, in the early 1950s (Saracevic 2007). Against this background, later research has tended to follow two different strategies:

- (a) One strategy is to focus on the “system” side (the so-called “Cranfield paradigm” going back to 1957), using standardized experiments and formalized relevance assessments by experts, in order to eliminate “subjective” factors and to refine the technical and conceptual state of the art.
- (b) Another strategy, which gained additional momentum around 1990, is to focus on “real users”, stressing the dynamic and contextual character of relevance as primary and exploring the role of relevance in human “information behavior” (Schamber et al. 1990) beyond topical relevance, e.g. goal-related, cognitive, or affective relevance.

In addition to these two strategies, various efforts have been made to bridge the gap between the two side. Others have argued that the tension may have been overstated in the first place, as systems and users co-evolve in a knowledge ecology (Hjørland 2010): The “user” isolated from his or her social context (which includes state-of-the-art information systems and the specialized knowledge implied in them) is as much an abstraction as the “system” isolated from its social context (which includes programmers, content managers, companies and of course the users themselves). According to this view, it is an oversimplification to call one side “objective” and the other “subjective”. On the system side, systems are made, updated and evaluated by people. On the users’ side, some relevances may be more robust than others, for example those of experts on the topic in question (Hjørland 2010), or those related to the user’s overall task as opposed to their momentary satisfaction (Soergel 1976).

Relevance research in library and information science offers perhaps the greatest wealth of characterizations of relevance and of concrete factors involved in it. The sheer range of different aspects of relevance has made it difficult, but need not make it impossible, to find a consensus about what relevance is (Borlund 2003). This may also be a reason why information science has not yet produced a homegrown *theory* of relevance over and above the various models (Saracevic 2016). Instead, information scientists have referred in detail to relevance theories from other disciplines, including those of Schutz (e.g. Saracevic 1975; Wilson 2003) and Sperber/Wilson (e.g. Harter 1992).

## 2.4 Approaches to signs and language

In several treatments of language and non-linguistic signs (other than those of Grice and Sperber/Wilson), “relevance” has been employed as a notion crucial both to the constitution of signs and to their use in context.

Nikolai Trubetzkoy (Trubetzkoy 1969 [1939]) lays out a constitutive role of relevance in the sound system of a language. When we hear the same word spoken on different occasions, what happens acoustically are quite different sounds every time. It is the sound structure of our language which makes only certain properties of these sounds “relevant” to us and thus enables us to hear them as “the same word”, while other properties of the sounds are abstracted away. Trubetzkoy connects the identity of the sounds relevant in a language to a system of differences. Only those aspects of a complex sound which enable us to distinguish meaningful words from each other are relevant to the sound system of the language. For instance, the length of the vowel *a* is the only difference between the Japanese words *obasan* (“aunt”) and *obāsan* (“grandmother”). People whose ear is trained

to the relevances of another system of meaningful sounds will perceive the same event differently. To an unwitting German, *obasan* and *obāsan*, if uttered by a speaker of Japanese, sound like a repetition the same word, as pure vowel duration is not systematically relevant in the German language. Trubetzkoy's analysis thus connects the purely material level of a spoken language with the level of meaningful words. This is a linguistic example of how relevance links the sensual perception of an information object with its interpretation and use.

The role of relevance as described by Trubetzkoy was later generalized by Luis Prieto (Prieto 1975). All levels of sign use, from the material level to concepts and even knowledge, are structured by relevance (*pertinence* in French). This is true not only for, e. g., the native users of a language, but also for semioticians and linguists who study that language. In each case, relevance is not simply found in nature, but it is relative to a "practice" established among a group at a given time. This observation would seem to hold not only for the structuralist semiotics which Trubetzkoy and Prieto represent, but also for approaches to language more strongly inspired by the natural sciences. For instance, Noam Chomsky stresses that his theory of "Universal Grammar" abstracts away from numerous conditions and features of the linguistic "performance" which are "grammatically irrelevant" (Chomsky 1965, 3).

Karl Bühler, in his theory of signs (Bühler 2011 [1934]), used the concept of relevance inspired by Trubetzkoy to stress the context dependence of meaning and use. His "principle of abstractive relevance" states that our use of words or other signs is highly selective: any sign has an indefinite wealth of properties, but only some of these are relevant when we use it as a sign in a concrete context. This "selectivity" is dynamic. What we mean by words on different occasions and in different combinations is both less and more than what we would expect if meaning were ideally constant. However, the identity of a sign over time is equally based on the "principle of abstractive relevance", as Trubetzkoy's phonology had shown. In sum then, not only deviations from the rules, but even the rules themselves are structured by relevance.

The constitutive and contextual role of relevance has been investigated in various kinds of information objects besides words, for example in pictures (Sonesson 1988) and in artworks and artistic performances (Döhl et al. 2013; Kimura 2014).

## 2.5 Approaches in epistemology and logic

A final strand of research to be mentioned here employs concepts of relevance to justify or to criticize claims to valid knowledge.

Relevance is related to knowledge (Schutz 1966 [1957]; Prieto 1975; Hjørland 2010) on all three levels mentioned in sec. 1 above: (1) We pay attention only to relevant objects and events and perceive them in ways which are relevant to us. (2) We interpret ourselves and the world in ways we typically find relevant, and relevance shapes the very concepts through which we attain, express and share knowledge. Even “natural kinds” could therefore more aptly be called “relevant kinds” (Goodman 1978, 10). (3) Finally, relevance determines which bits of knowledge we find useful and how we apply our knowledge in practice.

This pervasive role in knowledge makes relevance crucial for attempts to justify our knowledge. For instance, A. J. Ayer and Rudolf Carnap stress the criterion of empirical testability. Empty speculation, they argue, should be excluded by allowing as candidates for valid knowledge only those hypotheses or concepts to which at least some empirical observations are “relevant” (Dascal 1971). Isaiah Berlin objected that the criterion fails to meet the ideals of logical empiricism it was supposed to hold up “because the word [relevance] is used to convey an essentially vague idea” (Berlin 1938, 233). Nevertheless, Carnap went on to develop a theory of relevance as the formal relation between a piece of evidence and a hypothesis which is made more or less probable by that evidence (Carnap 1950). More refined efforts to analyze epistemic or causal “relevance” on a logical basis have been made ever since (see e.g. Floridi 2008; Yablo forthcoming).

Logic is traditionally seen as a medium for testing the validity of claims and for deriving other valid claims by way of implication. But classical deductive logic validates inferences which can offend our intuition. Sometimes, conclusions may seem unrelated to their premises; they do not seem to “follow” from them.<sup>5</sup> “Relevance logic” has become the title for an ongoing tradition of non-classical systems of logic (the best-known being Anderson/Belnap 1975) which aim to exclude such inferences by building concepts of relevance into the logical apparatus itself. In this sense, relevance logic may be seen as an attempt to bring pure logic closer to what we know (Read 1988; Mares 2004).

Nevertheless, the pervasive role of relevance in knowledge makes it clear that the knowledge we rely upon and the knowledge we acquire is highly *selective*. In other words, there will always be many things that we do *not* know. More problematically still, among the things we do not know there might be some which would render our present state of knowledge dubious or which would even prove us wrong. The problem of relevance therefore implies that of skepticism (Schutz 2011 [1951]).

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<sup>5</sup> For instance, “If bananas are sad spirits, then Tokyo is in Japan” or “Two plus two is five; therefore, Tokyo is in Germany” are both valid inferences in classical logic. The first is an example of the principle known as *ex quodlibet verum*, the second is an example of *ex falso quodlibet*.

Schutz uses the idea of relevance to argue (in the tradition of pragmatist philosophers) that it is “reasonable” for us to stop questioning further when what we know satisfies our theoretical or practical purposes. At the same time, he stresses that our knowledge can only be valid “until further notice”, that is, until it is drawn into question by things we did not know before. Any serious attempt to reach a “reasonably” founded opinion therefore requires a constant readiness to go beyond what has been relevant to us so far (Schutz 1964 [1946]).

Since the 1970s, a more radical skepticism has reentered the discussion which claims that we do not *know* anything because we can never exclude all possibilities of error. In the most extreme scenario, we might be “brains in a vat” without a body who live in a perfectly simulated reality – a possibility which nothing in our knowledge rules out. “Relevant alternatives” approaches, the best-known being Fred Dretske’s (Cohen 1991), have been developed to counter this argument. In order for our beliefs to count as “knowledge”, it is argued, we only need to exclude the *relevant* possibilities of error. The “brains in a vat” scenario is too “far-fetched”, it is excluded because it is irrelevant. The concept of “relevance” involved has been spelled out in various ways, e.g. in terms of the situational context of a knowledge claim, of “possible worlds” ordered as to their similarity to each other, or of relevance logic (Holliday 2012; Hawke 2016).

### 3 A note on the words “relevance” and “irrelevance”

I have tried to sketch only some ideas proposed in different fields and disciplines which are loosely connected by their use of the word “relevance”, hoping that these ideas will come together in a discussion about similar problems.

However, even the *word* “relevance”, let alone the word “irrelevance”, is by no means universal. In English, “relevant” comes into general use only after 1800; its German cousin with the same spelling does so only after 1950 and has retained the sound of a technical, learned word. While other Germanic and Romance languages have adjectives based on the same Latin root, the French adjective *relevant* has conspicuously disappeared and was by and large replaced by modern French *pertinent*. But many other languages simply do not have a word which is coextensive with “relevant”. Japanese, for instance, offers a number of items which split into different aspects what we would call “relevant”. Some examples are *kankei suru* (“related”), *jūyō* (“important”), *yūimi* (“significant”) or *tekisetsu* (“appropriate”). Hence, when a text about “relevance” is translated into Japanese, the translator needs to make a decision based on what the author says about relevance.



As a result, traditions connected by the word “relevance” seem to drift apart in Japanese: texts in information science tend to be about *tekigōsei* (“compatibility”), whereas Sperber’s and Wilson’s becomes a theory of *kanrensei* (“relatedness”). The key term in Schutz’s relevance theory was translated in different ways (depending on how his theory was interpreted) before the loan word *rerivansu* was coined.

A consideration of the nontechnical uses of the word “relevance” or of similar expressions in everyday life should alert us to the possible historical and cultural variety of the related concepts, as well as to the variety of aspects which the word “relevance” may bundle together without further analyzing them.

Nevertheless, this is not necessarily an argument against attempts to build a unified theory or model of relevance. Talking about relevance involves a reflective attitude. But this specific attitude is not required for relevance to do its work in our everyday lives (cf. sec. 1 above). We can attend to certain themes, favor certain interpretations and act on certain motives without thinking about relevance or having a general concept of it. If anything, it is the other way around: The successful use of a language, including the use of a word like “relevance”, presupposes the silent work of relevance, and the even more silent work of irrelevance. And often, what is most relevant need not be made explicit, precisely because it is evident and undisputed; it would be to “state the obvious”. Stating the obvious – and the not so obvious – is a task for relevance researchers.

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## Theories



Göran Sonesson

# New Reflections on the Problem(s) of Relevance(s). The Return of the Phenomena

**Abstract:** “Relevance” is an ordinary language word, which has been put to sundry scholarly uses. Nowadays, the term most commonly evokes the work, along the lines of speech act theory, of Paul Grice and, more in particular, of Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson. Starting out from these theories, Jean-Louis Dessalles has suggested that relevance may account for the evolutionary origin of language. Among those following the phenomenological tradition, the same term rather calls to mind the work of Alfred Schütz, and perhaps, more rarely, some remarks made by Aron Gurwitsch. For linguists, who still remember something about linguistics before Chomsky, the term suggests the structuralist theories of the Prague school, as applied to phonology. In fact, while Schütz talks about relevance *systems*, the point of the whole endeavour initiated by Sperber/Wilson is to reduce meaning to *contingent* factors of the given situation. While Schütz as well as Sperber/Wilson treat relevance as something *given* in the situation, Dessalles presents it as *new* information. The linguistic definition is often nowadays taken to involve the features *exclusively attended to*, while at least Schütz clearly thinks of relevance as a kind of *thematic adumbration*. The question then becomes: do all these different uses have anything in common, beyond the employment of the same common sense word? To investigate this, we have to go beyond ordinary language to our common lifeworld, asking which of the three conceptions, if any, accounts for the real phenomenon, if this is actually more or less the same thing in all traditions.

Human existence as well manifests itself in the emergence of novel experiences not related to the sum total of my actual and anticipated knowledge of my lifeworld. (Schütz 1970, 135)

At the beginning of this paper, I cannot help being reminded of the practice initiated by the semiotician A.J. Greimas, leader of the Paris school of semiotics, who was the supervisor of my doctorate dissertation, and who stipulated that all analysis should start out from the dictionary definition. Let me commence this paper in a true Greimasean style, citing, not *Le Petit Robert*, as Greimas would have done, but the *Oxford Dictionary* (sampling several editions): relevance, or relevancy, has to do with something which is closely connected with the situation you are in, or with what is currently happening, being discussed, done, etc. Greimas would have proceeded from here, making relevance into a technical term of Paris school semiotics, but, as

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Göran Sonesson, Division of Cognitive Semiotics, Lund University

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it happens, such a procedure appears already to have been accomplished several times over, more or less independently, with reference to the term of our interest. Therefore, it will not be enough to apply our hermeneutic scrutiny to dictionaries, but we will have to consult several theoretical works, which all pretend, not only to make relevance into a technical term, but also (contrary, I think, to the Paris school exercises) to fill the term with a much more specific meaning. Indeed, if the problem for the Paris school approach, normally starting out from very basic terms of ordinary language, is to reduce the ambiguity of the term found in the dictionary, here the task is rather to fill a very abstract term with some plenitude of meaning.

Nevertheless, since we are not really starting out from the dictionary, but from the several ways in which this (not so) ordinary language term has been amplified within different theoretical approaches, the onus of the present approach may in the end turn out to be to search for a common denominator, if it exists, to all these different construals of the notion. In the following, we will basically be concerned with, on the one hand, the Gricean tradition of relevance, which was radically changed, in some respects, by Sperber/Wilson, and, on the other hand, with the phenomenological tradition stemming from Schütz and Gurwitsch, including its antecedents in Husserl's works.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, we will be involved with three issues: first, whether the notion of relevance justifies the idea of meaning-making being entirely a question of peremptory decision being made at a particular time and place, or whether there is something like a system of relevancies, entrenched on the typical structure of the world taken for granted (Section 1). Second, whether (scarce) empirical facts justify the claim for relevance being the result of the operation of an innate module in the human brain, or whether it may more plausibly be considered a kind of socially distributed cognition (Section 2.1). And third, whether the contribution of relevance consists in presenting something new, or rather in offering the ground-work on which that which is new may emerge, i.e. the presuppositional structure, or perhaps both (Section 2.2).

## 1 Relevance between contingency and system

The present section will begin with the consideration of some tentative definitions of relevance, due to Paul Grice, on the one hand, and to Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson,

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<sup>1</sup> When I first made this comparison explicit in Sonesson (2012), I was unaware of this having been done in more systematic a manner by Straßheim (2010). This is also why I chose to write the present paper, before reading Straßheim (2010; 2016), noting similarities and differences only in the final version. Section 2.2, nevertheless, was largely rewritten as a reaction to Straßheim (2016).