

## Producing and Evaluating Style: Discussion Paper for MLA 2026

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### Notes:

- This paper is being shared ahead of the special session on **Producing and Evaluating Style** which will be part of the 2026 Modern Language Association (MLA) Convention in Toronto, Canada.
- The session is scheduled to take place from 1.45 to 3pm on the 10th of January in room 716A of the Metro Toronto Convention Centre.
- While the special session is only open to registered attendees of the convention, this paper is open access with a Creative Commons CC BY licence (<https://creativecommons.org/share-your-work/ccllicenses/>)
- Please email Billy if you have questions or comments or would like to find out more about the project.
- This paper provides contextual background for the session as a whole and the talk within the session by Billy Clark, which is supported by the Leverhulme Trust (Major Research Fellowship MRF-2024-043)
- There is more information on the session at:  
<https://producingandevaluatingstyle.mla.hcommons.org>

### 1. Introduction

This paper outlines some of the main ideas behind a project funded by the Leverhulme Trust which will be explored in a session on 'Producing and Evaluating Style' at the MLA Convention in Toronto in 2026. The Producing and Evaluating Style project aims to develop an account of the pragmatic processes involved in producing, interpreting and evaluating communicative acts which recognises how these interact (often simultaneously) in communicative interaction. It also considers the relationship between relatively 'intuitive' inferences (unconscious processes which lead to intuitions we are aware of) and relatively 'reflective' inferences (which involve more conscious processes), based largely on ideas developed by Mercier and Sperber (2017). The ideas about pragmatics come

mainly from relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson 1986, Carston 2002, Wilson and Sperber 2004).

This paper presents some background and ideas and questions for discussion.

## 2. Pragmatics and Interpretation

Most current theories of pragmatics are at least partly based on or developed from ideas suggested by Paul Grice. His most influential ideas are about different kinds of meaning (Grice 1957) and about how linguistic expressions can be understood in different ways in different contexts (Grice 1975, 1989).<sup>1</sup> Grice did not think of himself as developing a pragmatic theory and made clear that his ideas were tentative suggestions along the lines of which fuller accounts could be developed.

Grice's ideas about meaning have been developed to help identify the kinds of communication which pragmatic theories focus on. Grice suggested distinguishing 'non-natural' meaning (or 'meaning-NN') from other kinds. For Grice, cases of non-natural meaning were ones where interpretations were derived based on the recognition of an intention to communicate something. If I hold an empty glass up while looking at the waiter in a café and he understands that I am asking for another drink, he comes to this conclusion partly because he recognises that I am intending to communicate something by my gesture. By contrast, if the waiter notices my empty glass without me indicating anything towards him, he can understand that the glass is empty (and infer that I drank its contents) without the need to recognise any intention.

Grice's most important idea about how non-natural meanings are communicated was that underlyingly rational principles are involved. With lots of hedging language, Grice suggested (as a 'first approximation') the following 'Cooperative Principle':

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<sup>1</sup> These ideas were first presented in the William James lectures Grice delivered in 1967. They were shared as typed-up photocopies ahead of the print publication, beginning in 1975 and included in Grice 1989.

(1) Cooperative Principle

Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.

(Grice 1975: 45)

He proposed a number of maxims and sub-maxims to indicate more specifically what would be needed for communicative acts to be in line with this principle. He labelled the maxims Quantity, Quality, Relation and Manner. Roughly, the idea is that we expect what people say (or more generally communicate) to be informative enough but not too informative, to be true and evidenced, to be 'relevant' (Grice acknowledged that this term would need to be defined) and to be said in an appropriate way (not unnecessarily ambiguous, not obscure, brief and orderly).

Later theories have made different proposals about the details, but the idea that some kinds of principles guide communication has been very influential. Later theories have often been seen as dividing into 'neo-Gricean' approaches (which retain the idea of maxim-like pragmatic principles) and (merely) 'post-Gricean' approaches which suggest different kinds of principles. The most well-known post-Gricean theory is relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson 1986), which assumes two principles, seen as law-like generalisations about cognition and communication, which involve a technical definition of 'relevance'. Relevance theory provides the framework for the Producing and Evaluating Style project.

Within relevance theory, relevance is defined in terms of cognitive effects and effort. Roughly, the more 'positive cognitive effects' (worthwhile adjustments to cognitive environments) a stimulus has, the more relevant it is, and the more effort involved in deriving the effects, the less relevant it is.

For example, it would be more relevant for me to see a pigeon in my hallway than in the street as more things (more positive cognitive effects) follow from it being in my house than in the street,

such as that I need to help the pigeon to get out of the house, that it might be hurt in some way, and so on. On the effort side, the more effort it takes me to work out from a stimulus that there is a pigeon in my hallway, the less relevant that stimulus is. If you are going to tell me about the pigeon, (2a) requires less effort to derive that assumption than (2b):

- (2) a. There's a pigeon in your hallway
- b. There's a pigeon in your hallway and nine times nine is eighty-one

If no positive cognitive effects follow from the statement about nine times nine, then (2a) is more relevant than (2b).

This technical definition of relevance is used in the Cognitive and Communicative Principles of Relevance:

- (3) a. Cognitive Principle of Relevance  
Human cognition tends to be geared towards the maximisation of relevance
- b. Communicative Principle of Relevance  
Every ostensive stimulus conveys a presumption of its own optimal relevance

Simplifying, what this means is that our cognition aims to access as many positive cognitive effects as possible for as little effort as possible while communicative acts give rise to different but quite precise expectations: that the communicator has in mind (a more or less clear representation of) an interpretation which gives rise to enough effects to justify the effort involved in deriving them.

From this, it follows that interpretation can follow a path of least effort until an interpretation is found which provides enough effects to justify the effort involved in deriving them. This is stated

in what has been termed the Relevance-Guided Comprehension Procedure or, sometimes, the Relevance-Guided Comprehension Heuristic:

- (4) Relevance-Guided Comprehension Procedure
  - a. Follow a path of least effort in deriving cognitive effects: test interpretive hypotheses (e.g. disambiguations, reference resolutions, implicatures, etc) in order of accessibility.
  - b. Stop when your expectations of relevance are satisfied.

(Wilson and Sperber 2004: 249)

While Grice, Sperber and Wilson, and other pragmaticists (for example, Horn 1984, 1988, 2004; Levinson 1987, 2000) have discussed the production of communication, the majority of work in pragmatics has focused on interpretation, i.e. on how addressees work out what communicators intend to communicate.

Here is one example to illustrate differences and commonalities between applying Grice's ideas and ideas from relevance theory to account for interpretation.

- (5) Adam: My pen's gone dry  
Bella: Connor's got some spare ones

Adam is likely here to see that Bella is indirectly communicating ('implicating' to use the term coined by Grice) that Adam might be able to get or borrow a pen from Connor. On a Gricean approach, this follows because Adam assumes that Bella is aiming to say something in line with the maxims, including the maxim of quantity which says that she should provide enough information. If she is implicating this, then her utterance will be seen as conforming to the maxims.

Relevance theory shares with Grice's approach the idea that pragmatic principles constrain interpretations but it differs in a number of ways, some of which are shared with other approaches. It sees pragmatic principles as being involved in working out what is directly communicated as well as indirectly communicated implicatures. Here, for example, Adam needs to infer which Connor Bella is referring to and what 'spare ones' refers to. There are, of course, other things which can be required in order to work out what a speaker is directly communicating. It also recognises far more indeterminacy than recognised by Grice (for extended discussion of indeterminacies in communication from a relevance-theoretic perspective, see Carston 2002).

Relevance theory, in common with other approaches, also recognises that pragmatics are involved in understanding nonverbal communication (for discussion, see Wharton 2009). In this context, for example, Bella might have caught Adam's eye and then gazed towards a mug full of pens on Connor's desk. From this, Adam could infer that Bella is communicating that Connor has pens he might be able to use. Importantly, looking at the pens would only be seen as communicating this intentionally if Adam recognises that Bella has the intention to communicate something.

A significant difference between relevance theory and Grice's approach is that relevance theory assumes that interpretation involves following the procedure indicated above. It is a generalisation about human behaviour that this procedure is activated whenever we recognise an intention to communicate. Adam does not follow maxim-like guidelines but simply follows a path of least effort in looking for an interpretation which Bella could have intended.

Relevance theory also sees what is communicated as more complex, more open-ended, and less determinate than suggested by Grice's approach. Bella's utterance here implicates that Adam might be able to use one of Connor's pens. It also provides evidence for other things, including that Bella wants to help Adam when he needs help, that she is a good colleague, and so on. Depending on what contextual assumptions Adam accesses, she might also be seen as communicating other things, perhaps, for example, negative implicatures about Adam not being well prepared. This could

be affected by nonverbal behaviour. Bella might, for example, sigh ostentatiously before she speaks. Relevance theory also assumes that there is not always a clear boundary between intentionally communicated assumptions and ones for which the hearer is responsible. Adam might, for example, come to a negative conclusion about himself without being sure whether Bella intended that. Relevance theory also assumes that communicators need not have a very clear representation of exactly how their communicative behaviour should be understood.

The Producing and Evaluating Style project aims to develop further the relevance-theoretic account of interpretation and also to develop fuller accounts of the pragmatic processes involved in production and evaluation.

### 3. Pragmatics and Stylistics

Stylistics has a longer history than pragmatics. Many stylisticians see its roots in ancient rhetoric. A shorter history would begin in the early twentieth century with the work of a group who became known as 'Russian formalists', with members including Mukařovský (1964) and Shklovsky (1965). One of their interests was in establishing how literary language differed from other kinds of language. Their ideas were developed and built on throughout the twentieth century, notably by members of the 'Prague school'. Key ideas were the notions of 'defamiliarisation' and 'foregrounding'. An assumption was that the use of unusual forms led to the derivation of effects which would not otherwise arise. Later, the development of a new approach to linguistics which came to be known as 'generative grammar', following the work of Noam Chomsky (1957, 1965) renewed interest in the application of ideas from linguistics in accounting for literary and other texts.

When Grice's ideas began to be circulated, they were quickly recognised as being relevant to stylistics (see, for example, van Dijk 1976; Leech and Short 1981: 231-254) and Gricean ideas have been applied in the stylistic analysis of many texts. Since the 1990s, there has been far more interest in the application of pragmatics in stylistics and a wider range of approaches to pragmatics have been applied (see, for example, Caink and Clark 2012; Chapman and Clark 2014, 2019).

Stylisticians recognise that all kinds of communication fall within the scope of stylistics and that stylistics should say something about production and evaluation. However, as with pragmatic theories, most work in stylistics has tended to focus mainly on processes of interpretation and often on literary texts. There has always been a significant amount of work in stylistics focusing on non-literary texts (as well as some on how or whether we can differentiate literary from other kinds of communication). In recent years, there has been increased interest in processes of production (see, for example, Chapman 2002, 2023; Clark 2012; Clark and Owtram 2012; Pager-McClymont and Giovanelli 2023; Scott 2023) and some work on evaluation (see, for example, Clark 2014, van Peer 2008). The next two sections of this paper briefly discuss earlier work on the production and evaluation of texts.

#### 4. Pragmatics in producing Communication

There has been significant influential research on production from the perspective of psycholinguistics. Much of this starts from ideas developed by Levelt (1989) who suggested three key stages in language production: conceptualisation (deciding what to communicate), formulation (deciding how to communicate it, including grammatical and phonological encoding), and articulation (producing utterances). He also suggests that production involves monitoring which can then lead to further conceptualisation. There has also been work on production which focuses on cognitive processes involved in writing, including work by Alamargot and Chaquoy (2001), Bereiter and Scardmalia (1987), Candlin and Hyland (1999), Flower and Hayes (1981), Hayes and Flower (1980), and Stainton (1996). Some of these approaches have indicated that there is a role for pragmatics in developing a full account of production. They have not, however, included an account of the role of pragmatic processes.

Within pragmatics, the most sustained work on production has been carried out by Kecskés (2013; Kecskés and Fhang 2009) who developed what he termed a 'socio-cognitive' approach with a 'dynamic model of meaning'. Kecskés argues that pragmatic theories should account for production

and interpretation and that this should involve the assumption of 'egocentrism' alongside broadly Gricean assumptions about underlyingly rational aspects.

From a relevance-theoretic perspective, Park (2023; Park and Clark 2022) has proposed that production involves a heuristic which shares properties with the relevance-guided comprehension heuristic (or 'procedure') mentioned above. Park and Clark summarise this idea as follows:

While the relevance-guided comprehension heuristic guides the interpretation of utterances, the production heuristic contributes to the formulation and reformulation of utterances in the light of inferences about the responses of others to possible or actual formulations.

(Park and Clark 2022: 183)

This approach builds on earlier work by Clark and Owtram (2012; Owtram 2010) which reported classroom work with undergraduate and postgraduate students on academic and creative writing. These activities encouraged communicators to consider the potential effects of particular kinds of communicative behaviour. Park also assumes this, alongside other considerations, including contextual assumptions about participants in communication, cultural assumptions, and assumptions about social status, identities and group memberships.

## 5. Evaluating Communication

As indicated above, there has not been much work which aims to account for the evaluation of texts. van Peer (2008) collects a number of essays applying ideas from linguistic theories in considering evaluation. In his introduction, van Peer (2008: 3) suggests that there has been 'over-emphasis on contextual explanations' with room for fuller accounts of how contextual factors affect evaluations. He sees the volume as addressing this imbalance by considering also the roles of texts and readers. While none of these mention pragmatic theories explicitly, some do consider how evaluation is

affected by interactions among readers, texts and contexts. There is, in fact, very little explicit discussion of the role of pragmatic processes in evaluation. An exception is Clark (2014), who considers Chekhov's short story 'The Lady with the Little Dog' (to give one of its several translations into English), which has received very positive evaluations, sometimes following initially less positive responses. He suggests that positive evaluations come from several sources. These include: ease of representing specific parts of the text (so that new inferences can be drawn from these); ease of representing the text as a whole; the relevance of the outputs of particular inferential processes; the extent to which relatively complex inferential processes lead to significant effects; awareness of the positive responses of others; positive evaluation of particular formal features, and communicative skill. These ideas suggest further investigation of what leads to positive and negative aesthetic evaluations of texts.

## 6. Types of inference

Another question which the Producing and Evaluating Style project considers is about the kinds of processes involved in producing, interpreting and evaluating texts. Much discussion in pragmatics, including much discussion by Grice, is formulated in a way which suggests fairly explicit reasoning. However, it is not plausible to suggest that this is involved in all, or even most, kinds of communication. Face-to-face interactions typically involve fairly speedy interaction, with turns overlapping and responses being produced before full utterances have been completed. There is nothing remarkable about an exchange like this (invented) one:

- (6) Adam: Do you think he  
Bella: No I doubt it

Further evidence that everyday utterances tend to be fairly spontaneous comes from contrasts between what we say and do while interacting and how we think about it later. We often think

differently about an exchange after we have been involved in it and, of course, there is the well-known phenomenon of the 'spirit of the staircase' ('l'esprit de l'escalier' in French) where an individual thinks of something they wish they had said during an exchange shortly afterwards. This is evidence not only of fuller reasoning but also that interpretation often extends beyond the time when we are involved in interactions. Working within a relevance-theoretic framework, Furlong (1996, 2007, 2011) has suggested that interpretation processes can be more or less spontaneous and that the notion of literariness can be understood as involving relatively non-spontaneous interpretation.

Grice recognised that his formulations tended to suggest fairly explicit processes and that these are not necessarily involved in understanding communication:

We have available to us (let us suppose) what I might call a 'hard way' of making inferential moves; we in fact employ this laborious, step-by-step procedure at least when we are in difficulties, when we have an awkward audience, and so forth . . . Following the hard way consumes time and energy . . . A substitute for the hard way, the *quick way*, which is made possible by habituation and intention, is available to us, and the capacity for it . . . is a desirable quality.

(Grice 2001: 17)

Other pragmaticists have assumed that pragmatic processes are often fairly spontaneous and do not involve explicit processes. In developing relevance theory, for example, Sperber and Wilson (1986) saw pragmatic processes as fast and spontaneous. They later suggested (Wilson and Sperber 2004) that their proposal about comprehension could be seen as involving a 'fast and frugal' heuristic which shares properties with those suggested by Gigerenzer, Todd and the ABC research group (1999, Gigerenzer and Todd 2000). Levinson also suggests that communicators follow heuristics in

producing and understanding communicative acts. He suggests a 'speaker's heuristic' and a 'hearer's heuristic' for each of his proposed principles.

A question this project explores is about the extent to which we can understand the processes of production, interpretation and evaluation as involving what Grice termed the 'hard way' and to what extent the 'quick way'. Clark and Williams (submitted) discuss this question with regard to creative writing processes, beginning by considering some ways in which creative writing is discussed in a book by the short story writer and novelist George Saunders (2021). Saunders sometimes describes writing processes as if explicit reasoning was involved. He talks about writers making conscious decisions about what to write when. He points out, however, that this is not what writing usually involves. Instead, he suggests that the process is much harder to describe and that writers often cannot say why they have written what they have.

Clark and Williams link these ideas to ideas about reasoning developed by Mercier and Sperber (2017) who propose an account of reasoning which they describe as 'interactionist' rather than 'intellectualist'. Reason, they argue, has developed for social reasons. We produce reasons in order to appear trustworthy and reliable. They argue that what is involved in reasoning is the spontaneous generation of reasons. The outputs of these processes, they suggest, are of the form 'X is a reason for Y'. To adapt one of their examples, if I am wondering whether to go to the cinema tonight or to stay at home, I might spontaneously access reasons to support each decision, such as that the cold weather makes going out less attractive or that I am so keen to see a film which is currently showing that it might be worth going out despite the weather.

Mercier and Sperber suggest that reasoning is the process of making inferences by attending to reasons and they suggest that we can do this more or less spontaneously or reflectively. One thing which they suggest is that even fairly explicit reasoning involves spontaneous unconscious processes which generate reasons. A writer who says that they wrote something for a particular reason might have engaged in some fairly conscious focus on reasons while making decisions or they might have generated reasons more spontaneously. Even in cases where they focus fairly consciously on reasons

for particular choices, fairly spontaneous and unconscious processes are involved in generating reasons.

One aim of the Producing and Evaluating Style project is to develop this account further, including fuller accounts of different kinds of inferential processes and of how they interact.

## 7. Next steps

The Producing and Evaluating Style project is in its early stages. The discussion above outlines earlier research ideas which are a starting point for the project. The next stages of the project will aim to develop fuller accounts of the processes involved in producing, interpreting and evaluating communicative acts, as well as how they interact and how more or less spontaneous processes are involved in each. One idea which the project will explore is that all of the processes involve (more or less spontaneous) consideration of the actual or imagined effects of communicative acts.

In production, communicators generate representations of possible effects which their communicative behaviour might give rise to (or seems to have given rise to). This is affected by what communicators notice in the behaviour of others while they are communicating, including verbal and nonverbal behaviour (nods, smiles, eye movements, brief verbal responses such as saying 'yeh', 'mhm' or 'really', along with prosodic cues).

In interpretation, addressees consider what communicators might have imagined would be effects of what the communicators say and do. Again, this will be affected by verbal and nonverbal cues which indicate how utterances might be understood, such as tentative or confident prosody and nonverbal behaviour.

In evaluation, communicators focus on actual or imagined effects, noticing their own positive or negative responses and considering effects which they imagine utterances might give rise to.

For production, interpretation and evaluation, processes can be more or less spontaneous and more or less accessible to consciousness. A range of scenarios are possible. An individual might have fairly conscious attitudes towards particular expressions such as forms often used in workplace

communications (such as 'gentle reminder', 'moving forwards', 'reaching out', etc.) In other contexts, a particular way of communicating might be understood as having positive or negative effects because it indicates concern or lack of concern for others. Another possibility is that an individual notices that they feel more or less positively or negatively about particular communicative acts without knowing why. (Clark 2014) makes suggestions about this with regard to literary interpretation.

All of these suggestions can be understood as representing questions about communication. The project will be aiming to develop answers to these questions. While it is not possible to access direct evidence which helps to answer these questions, the project will involve empirical work employing a range of methods to find evidence for and against partial answers.

We look forward to hearing thoughts about these in the MLA Special Session in Toronto. Do please get in touch outwith that session if you have questions or suggestions and cannot raise them there.

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