

statements very likely not be apparent to him but he may even think I am suffering from a mental disorder. We do not go up to unknown people in the street and tell them we have just been to Saint-Sauveur and Vesonne. On this point of relevance, what explains the disparity between the expectations of my friends and those of the passer-by? It is not just a matter of inferences.

The conversational situations which show most clearly the limits of the Sperber and Wilson model are cases of non-relevance. Whatever sentence interlocutors may be hearing, it will always be easy for them to make some deductions. In the middle of a conversation, if someone suddenly says *Three times nine makes 117*, the bald statement will be seen in most contexts as irrelevant. The least to be expected is that the speaker will go on to explain either what the statement has to do with the subject of the conversation or why this message had to be conveyed. Sperber's and Wilson's theory cannot explain this. On hearing the statement, we could easily have deduced that 117 is not a prime number, that 117 divided by three makes thirty-nine, etc. According to the theory, such inferences ought to lend a measure of relevance to the message, yet that is not the case. The fact is that we do not make that sort of inference but Sperber's and Wilson's theory cannot say why. To rely on the argument of cognitive effort would be very artificial in this instance. What the theory lacks, if one wishes to apply it to an analysis of the everyday use of language, is a mechanism that genuinely limits the inferences actually drawn by hearers from verbal interactions.

Nevertheless, the idea of relevance does appear to be the key to an understanding of the use humans make of the faculty of language given to them by evolution. It makes perfect Darwinian sense to see the use of language as having a bearing upon the survival and the reproduction of individuals. To discover how language bears upon the lives of human beings, we must understand why some messages are produced and others are not. The messages produced are the relevant messages. What we need is a way of defining accurately what relevance is, not in the absolute as Sperber and Wilson try to do it, but in the particular instance of conversational exchange. And that is what we are now going to attempt.