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Contact information: tompolya (at) gmail (dot) com
On rationality and relevance

Tamás Pólya
polya@btkstud.jpte.hu
Department of Linguistics
Janus Pannonius University, Pécs

Abstract
The paper proposes rationality as a basic notion in communication. Human rationality (as conceived in the philosophy of Donald Davidson) seems to be a more general notion than relevance, the latter being logically dependent on but not entailed by the former. Both rationality and relevance are a matter of degree, attributable only from the observer's or hearer's normative perspective formed on an arbitrary basis. Hence, rationality and relevance are relative to the interpreter and constitute a basic element in one's ontology.

One may wonder whether there can be found a basic notion of communication theory more general than and as useful as the notion of relevance. One candidate to play this role is the notion of rationality, since that phenomenon seems to penetrate not only communication, but our actions as well.

More closely, it is on Donald Davidson's account on action and talk that communication, action and rationality get connected in a principled way. In fact, Davidson's work is at least twofold, for it concerns, on the first hand, actions, intentions, and reasons leading to actions, that is, a theory of actions, and, on the other hand, the possibilities and prerequisites of interpreting others, that is, a theory of communication. Rationality is a salient issue in both of his accounts; more precisely, it is a common element in them. In this paper I would not like to present Davidson views in general, rather, I am going to concentrate on what Davidson says about communication and rationality, and even these topics will only be addressed to the extent our present interest necessitates.

I.

Davidson elaborated his theses on communication under the influence of Quine's account on radical translation,\(^1\) advancing a more optimistic view on the issue.\(^2\) At the heart of his thought on language lies the problem of understanding a completely alien language; this problem determines what the main puzzles for him are: How can one form a theory about the alien language? What form shall that theory have? Can a perfect theory of the alien language be constructed? and so on.

Davidson's central idea in solving these puzzles is what he calls the principle of charity.

\[^1\] QUINE [1960], Chapter two.

\[^2\] See the essays in DAVIDSON [1984].
Charity is required on the part of the interpreter when facing the utterances of an alien speaker. The principle says, somewhat sketchily, that in order to understand the words of others one has to attribute the maximum of self-consistency to the speaker, as far as her beliefs are concerned. Davidson thinks that one cannot come to know the alien's system of belief without understanding her language, or to put it better, the interpreter cannot but assign beliefs to the alien and meanings to her words contemporarily. Davidson devises how one can do this by reading a familiar logical structure (predicates, quantifiers, connectives etc) into the alien's language in order to have the bottommost base on which to rely in interpreting. Then, according to Davidson, the best way for the interpreter to achieve a full-fledged theory (that is, a possibly complete understanding) of the alien language is to rely on his own system of beliefs and attitudes, and to regard the alien as rational as he himself is: the meaning of words of others must always be measured against the interpreter's own self-consistency and picture of the world. Similarly for the explanation of actions: if one is to understand why the other acted in a specific way, he has to assign the right intentions, beliefs and attitudes concerning those beliefs to her. This process is a sort of explanation, "rationalization". Furthermore, "when we explain an action, by giving the reason, we do redescribe the action; redescribing the action gives the action a place in a pattern, and this way the action is explained". This pattern is actually the "familiar picture" which "includes some of the agent's beliefs and attitudes; perhaps also goals, ends, principles, general character traits, virtues or vices".

An obvious problem - pointed out by Davidson as well - with this kind of attribution is that beliefs are attributed holistically, so the validity of a given set of attributed beliefs to the interpreted on the part of the interpreter can always be challenged by a different set of attributed beliefs (etc).

"Hesitation over whether to translate a saying of another by one or another of various non-synonymous sentences of mine does not necessarily reflect a lack of information: it is just that beyond a point there is no deciding, even in principle, between the view that the Other has used words as we do but has more or less weird beliefs, and the view that we have translated him wrong. Torn between the need to make sense of the speaker's words and the need to make sense of the pattern of his beliefs, the best we can do is choose a theory of translation that maximizes agreement. [...] All that the indeterminacy shows is that if there is one

3 "On Saying That", in DAVIDSON [1984], 101.

4 "Radical Interpretation", in DAVIDSON [1984], 136.

5 See "Radical Interpretation" in DAVIDSON [1984], 137.

6 See "Actions, reasons and causes" in DAVIDSON [1980].

7 See "Actions, reasons and causes" in DAVIDSON [1984].


9 Idem.
way to getting it right there are other ways that differ substantially..."^{10}

This, of course, is one more reason to look for a similar belief system to ours (to "optimize agreement", see below). Charity on the part of the interpreter, after all, consists in treating the Other as a rational being.

"The methodological advice to interpret in a way that optimizes agreement should not be conceived as resting on a charitable assumption about human intelligence that might turn out to be false. If we cannot find a way to interpret the utterances and other behaviour of a creature as revealing a set of beliefs largely consistent and true by our own standards, we have no reason to count that creature as rational, as having beliefs, or as saying anything."^{11}

It is latent in Davidson's theory that the domain of understanding stretches from the very rational to the completely irrational. That is, the attribution of the appropriate beliefs to the speaker by the one who interprets her is always a matter of degree. One may find (out) others more or less rational, and, in the extreme case, in lack of any consistent pattern in which to fit the beliefs attributed to the speaker one cannot but regard the other party irrational. On Davidson's account, this blurriness of judgement pertains to the interpretation of actions, just as to that of others' words.

II.

My suggestion is that the notion of relevance can be easily fitted in this picture. Rationality of actions (or words) and relevance of words can be related in the following way. What emerges as relevant for the hearer, that is, yields the greatest effect at the cost of the least effort, is but what can be rationally inserted or what prompts the insertion of some piece of information in the hearer's cognitive environment (this may be an unconscious process).

To make the point clearer it would be useful to consider an example; namely, some variations on a specific communicative case. We examine a simple pair of question and answer, where the question is constant and sounds:

(1) A: "It would be great to go to the cinema this evening, wouldn't it?"

There are four answers presented (there may be infinitely more, of course; these three are just enough to serve our purposes) which differ in their relevance and/or rationality, and range from the easily understandable to the completely irrational and insensible.

(1a) B: "I'm sleepy."

A can clearly infer the relevance of B's answer to his question, for B's tiredness (this flows from

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^{10} "On Saying That", in DAVIDSON [1984], 101.

^{11} "Radical Interpretation", in DAVIDSON [1984], 137.
her sleepiness) is something which makes it impossible for her to enjoy a film, and what is the point of seeing a film without the possibility to enjoy it? That is, A understands that B is too tired to go to the cinema, and that her answer amounts to a "no".

(1b) B: "I must present the annual report tomorrow at the convention."

This answer may call for a bit more cognitive work on the part of A. The cinema is tonight and has nothing to do with tomorrow, the annual report or the convention. But, the elaboration of an *annual* report takes much time and effort, and one should work it out precisely and carefully. Maybe B has to finish this report, or has to prepare the slides for it, or anything like that. *This* may be a reason for her to prefer home to the cinema.

(1c) B: "I hate my boss."

This answer may puzzle A for some moments. How can B's boss have any influence on B's going to the cinema? Suppose B's work (or life) has generally nothing to do with cinemas: this makes it improbable for A to think that the boss will be at the cinema for some official reason (the boss could be the director of the cinema, etc). And if not for this reason, then why should B think - thinks A - that the boss will be present at the very cinema A has in mind? Maybe A and B used to encounter the boss and his family in their preferred cinema, and B would like to avoid that embarrassing situation? In this imagined situation B's reason to say (1c) is different. Namely, B thinks that A knows that it was her boss to *assign* her the task to present the annual report the following day and that she has many, but many things to prepare tonight in order to be able to present the report tomorrow morning.

A may arrive, by way of inferences, at this thought, or he may not. In order to understand B on this occasion A must be able enough to obtain (from his memory) the somewhat deeply located piece of information which B thought is easily available to A. That is, the relevance of B's words - and the rationality of her act to utter (1c) - may not be obvious for A.

(1d) B: "The are sonnets playing in the lawn, said Milton."

There may be situations where this sentence is a completely acceptable and has a crystal-clear meaning for the hearer; however, in our thought-experiment this answer is supposed to be completely exorbitant, irrelevant to A and prompts him to consider this move of B's irrational, that is, without reasons he could recover. A finds (1d) totally obscure since what for him the sentence literally or non-literally may mean bears no relation whatsoever to their going to the cinema this evening; or if it did, it did only in a *too* intricate manner - it required too much effort to yield an answer which - A thinks - could have been said *much* more clearly. In this situation it is easier for A to deem B or her act of uttering (1d) irrational (at least instantaneously) than to find a relevant sense for her utterance.

We see in these cases how the system of codes, the more firm and solid component of language, loses its importance during A's interpretation of B only to call for a much more "mobile" component, in lack of a better term, the pragmatic-inferential one. In terms of relevance theory, this passage may be viewed as one from the fewer inferences of obtaining explicatures to the inferentially richer phase of recovering implicatures.

Here I would like to stress the following points. There is a clear correlation between Davidson's account on rationality and what relevance theory can say on the inferential processes
we saw in this dialogue-fraction. Rationality, just as relevance, is not a clear-cut matter. Rather, it is a matter of degree, it can be attributed to the speaker to a greater or lesser extent, according to the ease or difficulty with which the hearer can construct the most probable and acceptable pattern of the speakers' mental states (beliefs and attitudes, etc) and states of affairs in the world (maybe previously unknown to him) which can explain what the speaker means by her utterance. Remember that - on Davidson's account - one is regarded rational if she can be attributed the right reasons to act in a specific way or to utter this-and-this; this is rationalization. Just as rationality is attributed through rationalization, the relevance of an utterance is recognized through the process of searching for the contextual clues yielding the greatest cognitive effect and demanding the least cognitive effort. I would like to suggest that these processes are not only analogous; rather, what is called the relevance on the part of words is called rationality on the part of actions or actors, that is, humans. Rationality of others and relevance of talk differ only in that relevance of words stems, or is logically dependent on (but not entailed by, of course) human rationality - as making an utterance is necessarily an action whilst performing an action can but must not amount to the uttering of something.12

There are some appealing arguments in favour of this view. Intuitive similarity between rationality of actions and relevance of words is not a very firm argument, though it is obvious, at least to author. But there is a perhaps more striking similarity between how the hearer, when looking for the relevance of the speaker's words, is weighing (consciously or unconsciously) alternative pieces of information recoverable (as explicatures or implicatures) from what was said, that is, how things become manifest in his cognitive environment and the (conscious or unconscious) weighing of alternative reasons for an action (possible intentions, beliefs and attitudes) on the part of the actor to be interpreted. Furthermore, the very fact that the one who interprets the words of others, when cannot infer to or recover any relevant piece of information from the speaker's utterance - that is when communication fails altogether - has the valid escape route to say "This utterance has no sense, there can be no reasons to say this." shows that relevance and rationality do at least correlate. Notice, moreover, that the attribution both of relevance and rationality function mandatorily: relevance on the part of the speaker's words is presumed the same as rationality on her (actions') part.

III.

Now the task seems to be that of fleshing out in more detail the notion of rationality. From the philosophical point of view, I may join Davidson's strand and accept an account resembling his one: an action is rational if there can be found reasons, that is, intentions, beliefs and related attitudes on the part of the actor which explain the given act. However, this does not seem to provide us with a definitive answer, since one can always ask what is it for an intention, belief and attitude or any combination of them to be such that explaining an action; though in general one grasps this by way of intuition.

As for the empirical concerns, say, a psychological definition of rationality, the best I can

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12 The term "rationality" can be used ambiguously: a) an act can be called rational and b) an actor can be called rational; I avail myself of both usages in this paper. When one would like to talk exclusively about the "rationality of actions", so be it; we could couch a term which would be equivalent to the term in my (b) sense; and that term would be logically prior to "rationality" in the (a) sense. Until this distinctive characteristic can be preserved, I see no reason to think that this ambiguity bears substantially to the issue raised here.
offer is very modest suggestions. There is broad discussion among psychologists about how one could define rationality, whether we are really endowed with it, whether the rules of rationality (if there are any) resemble the rules of modern symbolic logic and so on (see: KAHNEMANN ET AL. [1982], JOHNSON-LAIRD & BYRNE [1991], MKNTELLOW & OVER [1990]).

Converging partially on COHEN's (1986) opinion on the issue, I consider it reasonable to think that what counts as rational in a given situation finds its ultimate justification exclusively in human intuitions; and these may prove, obviously, arbitrary and relative to a given group of people (culture) or even to a single person. And what is worse: if arbitrary, the intuitions serving as the base for (the given) rationality may turn out fallible, and may possess only restricted applicability and no universal validity. Hence, it seems, if one faces an alternative account of rationality, he cannot claim his own type of it to be better (in any sense) than the other for both types of rationality are ontologically basic, ergo incommensurable.

Now it unavoidably follows that relevance of words can only be as interpreter-specific, arbitrary, fallible, and fundamental ontologically as the rationality on which it depends is.

IV.

In the concluding remarks I would like to stress the main points of the paper. Presently, we committed ourselves to four fundamental claims. First, we identified relevance in terms of (or as stemming by) rationality, wishing to approach a somewhat higher level of analysis. Second, it seemed to us that what distinguishes the relevant from the irrelevant (the less relevant) and the rational from the irrational (the less rational) is not something substantial, as both are imperfect in a sense. Rather, between the respective parties there is only a difference in degree and not a difference in kind. Third, rationality of actions and talk, and, in turn, the relevance of words and actions seem to emerge only from the specific and arbitrary, normative perspective of the interpreter; rationality being, fourth, a basic and irreducible fabric in one's ontology.

REFERENCES:

Quine, W.V. [1960]: Word and Object. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press

13 Cf. "Meaning Revisited" in Grice [1989], 283-302, who, when defending his own account on meaning against accusations of infinite regress, indicates that it is not inconceivable that perfect communication does logically necessitates something empirically impossible. All we can have in the sublunary world, he says, may ultimately prove to be imperfect and incomplete in some Platonic sense: why should communication be an exception?