T. Wharton, C. Bonard, D. Dukes, D. Sander and S. Oswald. April 28, 2021

Relevance and emotion[1]

The function of emotions is to fill gaps left by 'pure reason' in the determination of action: […] it is one of Nature's ways of dealing with the philosophers' frame problem.

de Sousa (1987, 195-196)

1   Introduction

To those working in pragmatics, particularly relevance theory, it might come as a surprise to learn that relevance is an important notion in affective science: in order for a particular object or event to elicit an emotion, that object or event needs to be, in some sense of the word, **relevant** to the person in whom that emotion is elicited.

The aim of this talk is to explore the parallels or divergences between relevance as it exists in affective science and in relevance theory.[2]

2   Pragmatics and relevance

- "Ladies and gentlemen, **the building** is on fire."

To which building should the hearers take the speaker to be referring? Which building would best satisfy their expectations of relevance? Which building would be the most salient and accessible to them and give them the most cognitive effects for minimal processing effort?

But relevance theory is not just a theory of communication. It is a theory of **communication and cognition**.

To the people in the building, smoke seeping under a door (or the smell of burning) is as relevant as the utterance above.

3   Relevance in theories of emotion

Whichever theory of emotion you adhere to, **relevance** is likely to be found at its core. All emotion theorists agree that for an object to elicit an emotion, that object must in some way be relevant to the person experiencing the emotion.

How, then, do emotion theorists define 'relevant'?

- Relevance$_{AFF}$ is the property of being relevant to important concerns, goals, needs, values, or desires. When a stimulus is appraised as relevant, other appraisals are triggered (e.g., congruence, urgency, causation, coping potential). They in turn may trigger an affective episode or just a heightened attention.[3]

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[1] Wharton, T., C. Bonard, D. Dukes, D. Sander, S. Oswald (forthcoming) *Journal of Pragmatics*

[2] The current paper is one of a pair we have written in an attempt to build bridges between the disciplines of pragmatics and affective science. In the other paper, *Emotion and relevance* (in prep), we present our ideas from a different perspective, designed for a more affective-science oriented audience.

[3] "[T]here are some specific appraisal criteria that have been studied and linked to emotional responses [. They] include the following ones: How relevant is this event for me? Does it directly affect my social reference group or me? (goal relevance); What are the implications or consequences of this event and how do these affect my well-being and my immediate or long-term goals? (goal congruence); Did I expect this event and its consequences and how certain are they (novelty, expectation, certainty); Who caused this event, am I responsible or someone else? (agency, causation); How well can I cope with or adjust to these consequences? (coping potential, control, power)." Sander, Grandjean, & Scherer (2018) Emotion Review, p. 226. See also Pool et al. (2016) *Psychology Bulletin.*

- Relevance$_{PRAG}$ is a property of inputs to a cognitive processes: an input is relevant$_{PRAG}$ to me if it interacts with existing thoughts/assumptions and gives rise to cognitive effects. The intuition that there are degrees of relevance is captured by balancing cognitive effects against processing effort

4   Two notions of relevance?

How much in common is there between the two notions of relevance?

Four putative differences.

(1) Relevance$_{AFF}$ is defined in relation to one or several goals or concerns while relevance$_{PRAG}$ is not.
(2) While the definition of relevance$_{PRAG}$ appeals directly to cognitive effects and processing efforts, the definition of relevance$_{AFF}$ does not.
(3) While in relevance theory the reactions tend to be argumentation and warranted (but non-demonstrative) inferences about propositional, often linguistic, contents, in appraisal theory, the reactions are emotional episodes, which may in turn lead to further courses of emotional action.
(4) Relevance theory focuses on (so-called) 'higher', epistemic processes – e.g., linguistic interpretation – while appraisal theory focuses on 'lower' processes – e.g., emotions such as fear or joy that may be shared with infants and non-human animals.

We claim that these putative differences are **only apparent** and that there are profound similarities between the two notions.

- Differences (1) and (2) do not indicate incompatibilities about the definitions of relevance$_{PRAG}$ and relevance$_{AFF}$ but may, in fact, be interpreted as indicating overlapping properties.
- Differences (3) and (4) may actually concern processes other than the detection of relevance.
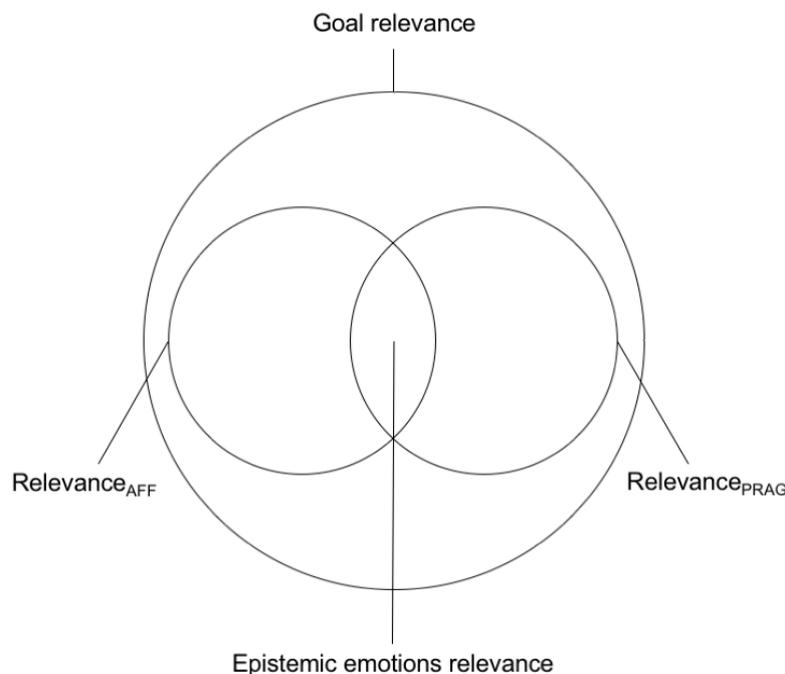

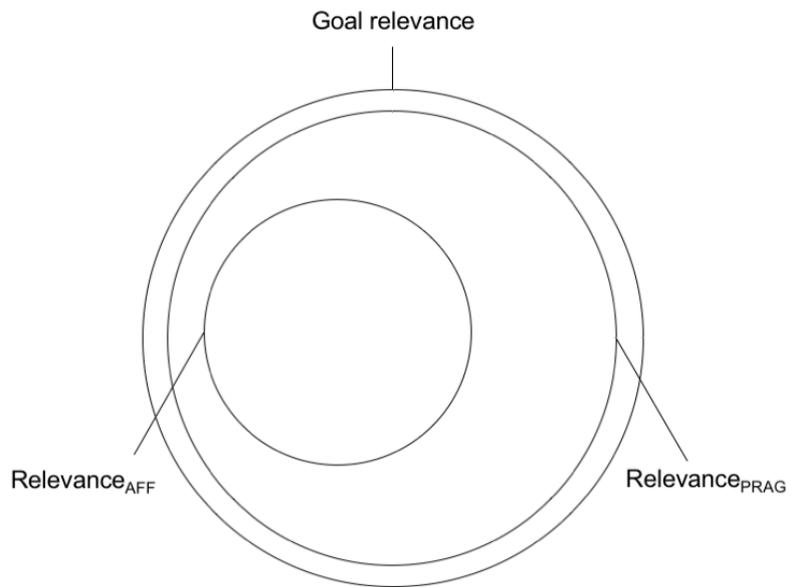Fig. 1. How the concepts are used in the relevant fields today.

Fig. 2. How the concepts may be used in the relevant fields in the future.
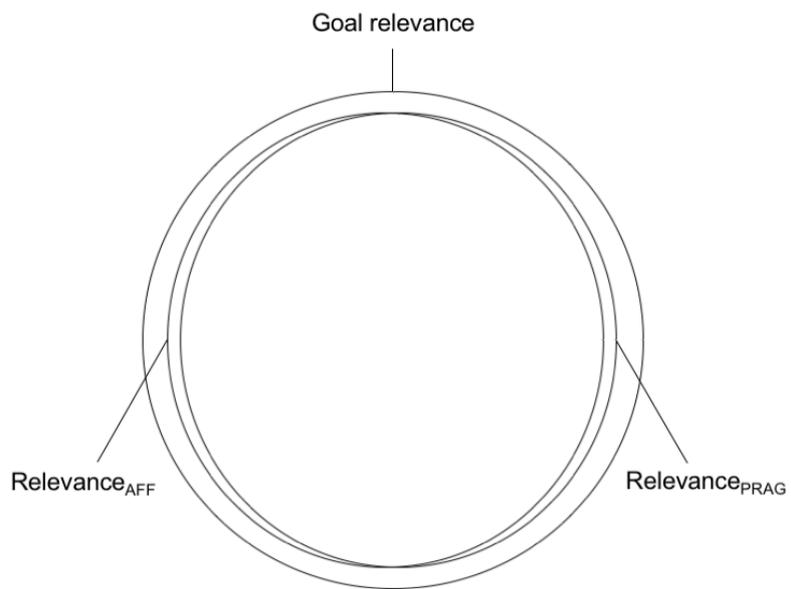

Fig. 3. How the concepts may be used in the relevant fields in the future.