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BOOK OF ABSTRACTS

Plenary Speakers

The Interpretation of Metaphor: Propositions, Images, Attitudes and Affect

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The phenomenon of metaphor is studied across a wide range of disciplines (literary studies, philosophy of language, psychology of language processing and, of course, pragmatics, theoretical and experimental), each looking at this multi-faceted use of language from a different perspective and focusing on a specific dimension, whether the aesthetic value of metaphor, its epistemic potential (to reveal truths of a sort), the mechanisms and online processes deployed in comprehending it, and the nature of the cognitive (propositional and non-propositional) effects it can achieve. I survey these different approaches before focusing on work in Relevance Theory, starting with the account offered by lexical pragmatics in which the understanding of metaphorical language is assimilated into a wider account of the pragmatic modulation of encoded meanings in context, resulting in ‘ad hoc concepts’ (Carston 1997, 2002; Sperber & Wilson 1998, 2008). I then move to my own later work (Carston 2010, 2018, forthcoming) and the attempt to integrate propositional and non-propositional (imagistic, affective, attitudinal) aspects of the effects that metaphors can have on us.

My aim in this work is to achieve (a) inclusiveness, and (b) balance. With regard to inclusiveness, the approach tries to encompass the full range of cases of metaphor: conventional metaphors, novel metaphors, single word metaphors, extended metaphors, conversational metaphors, literary metaphors, and to draw on insights provided by other disciplines, including philosophy, literary studies, and psycholinguistics. As regards balance, the aim is to produce neither a deflationary theory (according to which, metaphors have no special properties that distinguish them from other language uses) nor an inflationary theory (according to which, metaphors are so special that they require their own dedicated mechanisms of understanding, such as domain mappings or metaphorical schemas). Rather, the idea is that all the mechanisms and cognitive resources utilised in metaphor understanding (lexical modulation processes, ad hoc concepts, metarepresentation, mental imagery, pragmatic inference) are also deployed in other aspects of utterance interpretation, but that they combine in a unique way in the case of metaphor. This view challenges many prominent existing accounts, some of them deflationary, most of them inflationary.

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Relevance and Frames of Reference

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Relevance theory showed that pragmatic processes also enter the derivation of propositional meaning (Carston 2002). Within the relevance-theoretic framework, these inferences are called explicatures and they involve an array of processes required to enrich and disambiguate meaning, as well as to assign reference (Scott 2010).

I will argue that relevance-driven processes are responsible for the enrichment and disambiguation of deictics (Fillmore 1971) such as *to the right of* and *behind* which rely on a frame of reference (Levinson & Wilkins 2006) to acquire their explicit meaning: an utterance like *The picture is above Lucy's head* can mean three different locations depending on the FoR used (relative *vs.* intrinsic *vs.* absolute). Moreover, the region denoted will vary depending on a series of contextual parameters.

I show that considerations of relevance guide the selection and construction of FoRs. I depart from the prevalent model (Levinson 2003) to claim that all three universal FoRs are not conceptually different but constitute related construals on a continuum. In this model, relevance-driven inferential processes—sensitive to the optimisation of spatial disambiguation and contextual accessibility—allow the hearer to reconstruct the frame of reference used by the speaker and derive the appropriate explicature.

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Speaker Presentations

Conceptualisations of toxicity in gaming discourse

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This paper presents preliminary findings from an ongoing PhD project investigating how gamers and non-gamers conceptualise toxicity in online gaming discourse. Rather than treating toxicity as an inherent property of specific linguistic forms, the study approaches it as an evaluative judgment grounded in relational work (Locher & Watts, 2005). It focuses on receivers' evaluations of selected gaming utterances and, more specifically, on how participants interpret their illocutionary force and relational meaning.

In a pilot study, a small sample of gamers and non-gamers were presented with short, minimally contextualised excerpts drawn from online gaming interactions. Participants evaluated each utterance in terms of perceived intent and degree of toxicity. The analysis explores how respondents interpret the relational meaning of these utterances (e.g. as insult, banter, criticism, or aggression) and how these interpretations affect their evaluations of the behaviour as toxic or normatively appropriate.

Preliminary findings suggest that toxicity does not reside in propositional content alone but emerges from hearers' evaluations in relation to community-specific norms. The study positions toxicity as a concept grounded in receivers' evaluations and contributes to ongoing debates in interpersonal pragmatics

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Misinformation Detection Under Cognitive Load: An Investigation of Disfluency in L2 Processing

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This preregistered study examines the effect of a second language (L2) on misinformation detection as a function of its (not-)at-issueness. Previous studies (e.g., Giunta, Domaneschi, & Mazzarella, 2025) show that at-issue and not-at-issue content are processed differently in native speakers. We extend this to L2 processing, exploring how disfluency influences misinformation detection.

According to Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1995), relevance is defined as an optimal ratio between cognitive effort and cognitive effects. As L2 processing typically increases effort, we hypothesize that this disfluency will disrupt the allocation of cognitive resources during interpretation. We test two competing hypotheses. First, the heightened processing demands associated with L2 processing weaken the distinction between at-issue and not-at-issue content, thereby yielding a more even detection of misinformation in both at-issue and not-at-issue conditions. Alternatively, increased cognitive load may prompt a strategic reallocation of cognitive resources toward optimizing relevance during comprehension. Here, nonnative speakers would preferentially allocate focus to the evaluation of at-issue misinformation over not-at-issue misinformation.

We find that at-issue trials show higher accuracy in misinformation detection, and faster RTs. Interestingly, we observe a main effect of Nativeness in that L2 participants are slower and slightly more accurate. Even more strikingly, among L2 speakers, our language competence index correlates with faster responses across conditions. Competence also improves accuracy in at-issue trials, suggesting better use of syntactic cues. Results thus indicate an initially undifferentiated treatment of information and a competence-driven shift toward greater sensitivity to at-issue information rather than a uniform L2 effect.

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Metaphor interpretation in L2: the role of mental imagery and context

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This study investigates the interplay of mental imagery and linguistic context in L2 metaphor interpretation within Relevance Theory. Mental imagery acts as a non-propositional effect that enriches comprehension by guiding inference beyond propositional meaning. It draws on personal experience and background knowledge to generate weak implicatures, producing rich cognitive effects with reduced effort (Carston, 2010, 2018; Wilson & Carston, 2019). Context is dynamically constructed online, integrating linguistic input, encyclopaedic knowledge, personal experience, and inferential abilities (Sperber & Wilson, 1987/1995; Wilson, 2024). Evidence suggests that context and mental imagery function interdependently to facilitate inference and meaning derivation through imagistic simulation (Bardzokas, 2023; Ifantidou, 2019, 2021a, 2021b; Ifantidou & Hatzidaki, 2019).

The forthcoming study manipulates context experimentally, aiming at providing evidence as to whether rich imagery depends on contextual support or not. Tests will engage approximately 100 advanced L2 English speakers. Participants will complete: (1) a pen-and-paper task with metaphors and literal fillers in isolation, and (2) a lab session embedding the same items in extended drama-film contexts. Stimuli are matched for length, contextual density, and lexical concreteness; metaphors are pre-rated for novelty. Self-report measures (identical across tasks) assess imagery elicitation, vividness, concreteness, personal/episodic links, and perceived vocabulary difficulty. Quantitative and qualitative analyses will examine if contextual embedding yields richer, more vivid imagery, stronger personal connections, and lower lexical barriers—demonstrating context's role in activating imagery during L2 metaphor processing. Results will refine Relevance Theory's treatment of non-propositional effects in L2 figurative language processing.

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Victimhood as Process: A Critical Discourse and Systemic Functional Study of Trauma, Identity and Agency

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This paper examines the discourse of two testimonies by Greek actors through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), with a particular focus on victim narratives. By employing Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), this research aims to explore how language and experience are presented in the emergence of trauma, identity and shame (Laughlin, 2025; Knoff, Vasterling & Verfaellie, 2023). This research draws on narrative processing in post-traumatic experiences, exploring how verbal, relational, mental and material processes are used to present meaning in the context of abuse.

By closely examining the types of processes and the roles that participants play, we can gain insight into how social actors engage in various activities and how these engagements contribute to their representation. Verbal processes foreground the transition from silence to public speech, situating testimony as an act of hermeneutic justice that challenges social silencing (Alyce & Taggart, 2023). Relational processes of identification and classification recontextualize past experience within contemporary frameworks of harm and recognition, resonating with discourse on the social construction of victimhood (Chouliaraki, 2024). Mental processes reflect delayed cognition, memory inhibition and embodied recall, consistent with findings on trauma narrative characteristics and shame-sensitive practice (Laughlin, 2025; Knoff et al., 2023). Material processes encode embodied action and turning points that embody survival and constraint.

Across both narratives, victimhood emerges not as static identity but as linguistically and experientially negotiated, shaped by familial response, institutional context and ongoing negotiation of disclosure, shame and solidarity. The analysis highlights how language choices encode both concealment and revelation, illustrating how victimhood and agency are dynamically reconstructed through discourse.

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Backgrounding and foregrounding effects in Corporate Social Responsibility communication

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Building on Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory (1986, 1995), I explore backgrounding as a form of relevance management in public controversies, treating it not merely as a grammatical option but as a local discursive strategy (de Saussure 2005) that guides the addressee's inferential path. Backgrounding, understood here as the demotion or omission of the agent (Siewierska 2008), extends beyond syntactic choices to become a pragmatic device guiding the reader's attention in corporate discourse. In this view, we assume both backgrounding and foregrounding are forms of ostensive communication as they draw the addressee's attention to specific discourse elements, in a similar way as an explicit request to look at something or a nonverbal pointing to an object. Within Sperber and Wilson's framework (1986, 1995), human communication prioritizes information that is relevant to the addressee. Applying this postulate to the analysis of periphrastic passives, we assume that the information foregrounded should be maximally relevant with a lower cognitive effort to process it, while the retrieval of backgrounded or omitted agents involves greater effort. Based on a corpus-based case study of Inditex's 2024 CSR report, we suggest that periphrastic passives in CSR report function as management devices to control which information is made accessible and which must be inferred. The paper also considers potential cases of strategic misdirection, where communicators may be deliberately foregrounding less relevant information to divert attention from responsibility or crucial issues which would otherwise be taken as relevant in the circumstances. In this context, we discuss the link between the passive, relevance, and uncooperative verbal communication (de Saussure 2005; Oswald et al. 2016).

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Narrative Relevance: learning from processing fictional minds

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Relevance Theory (RT) offers a robust pragmatic framework for communication and information processing, yet its application to fictional narrative faces a specific conceptual hurdle: if cognitive effects are defined as an improvement in an individual's knowledge of the world, what "knowledge" is acquired from fictitious events? While RT has addressed literary effects (Green 1993; Pilkington 2000; Cave & Wilson 2018) and the expression of emotions (Wharton 2016; Wharton & de Saussure 2023), the specific relevance of processing fictional minds remains under-theorised.

This paper addresses this gap by synthesizing RT with cognitive narratology, arguing that narratives function as a specialized mode of thinking for processing agents, intentions, and social vicissitudes (Bruner 1986). I contend that while fiction can feature extraneous rules or non-human entities, its coherence depends on characters acting in a psychologically plausible manner. As Mäkelä (2018) argues, readers must project a human-like consciousness onto characters for a text to achieve "experientiality," leveraging fundamental aspects of our real-world knowledge of mental functioning (Palmer 2004).

Because humans are biologically primed to seek psychological motivations, fiction is intrinsically rewarding; it exercises our "Theory of Mind" (Zunshine 2006) and provides simulated models of the social world (Mar & Oatley 2008). We propose that narratives can be defined within RT as a processing mode that utilises metacognitive acquaintance (Sperber & Wilson 2015). Under this framework, stories achieve relevance by producing positive cognitive effects regarding our understanding of mental states, providing the "experiential" mental models necessary to make sense of agents' behaviours in general.

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Meiosis: Insight into Figurative Meaning

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Meiosis, blatant underemphasis that the hearer is intended to recognize as such, raises important questions about figurative meaning. Meiosis can be used either to say less to mean less or to say less to mean more. Both raise questions about what is asserted, the role of literal meaning, and how the interpretation is derived.

Meiosis as saying less to mean less is shown in Mercutio crying out “A scratch, a scratch” after being fatally stabbed (*Romeo and Juliet* 3.1.92). Mercutio’s blatant underemphasis presents a mismatch between the situation in the common ground, that Mercutio has been fatally wounded, and his assertion that it is just a scratch. Meiosis as saying less to mean more is shown when, seeing fifty police in the street, you say “There are one or two police outside”. This can be interpreted as highlighting the unusually high number of police.

Accounts of meiosis do not give clear insight into these interpretations. The making of a clear contrast, between what is said and the actual situation, presumably plays a central explanatory role in both uses (on contrast, Colston & O’Brien 2000). This indicates a role for literal compositional meaning. This is problematic for notions of lexical adjustment or modulation (Wilson & Carston 2007; Recanati 2004), which also struggle to explain the final interpretations. Walton explains meiosis in terms of ‘salient contrast’ (2017), but does not address questions about different interpretations. Observations about meiosis generalize to hyperbole, hence raising significant questions about a wide range of figurative language.

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A Pragmatic Approach to Mirative Evidentiality in Modern Greek

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Mirative Evidentiality shares with Evidentiality the marking of the source of knowledge (Aikhenvald, 2003). Interestingly, contrary to Evidentiality, the source may be stated yet it is clearly not the underlying motivation for the marking (Aikhenvald, 2012). Evidence retrieved from online corpora of Greek during our pilot study (Tsavdaridou, 2021) suggested that evidential verbs βλέπω ‘I see’, ακούω ‘I hear’, λες ‘you say’, είδες ‘did you see’ are used in the majority (75%) of the structures that convey the emotion of surprise. Drawing on the criteria we have proposed for mirative markers, namely action readiness (Frijda et al., 1991), or the urge to take action to decrease the incongruity, and short duration, as cognitive mastering occurs relatively fast (Noordewier et al., 2016), we will examine the plausibility of treating evidentials as markers of surprise. Our current data have been drawn from a collection of everyday situations that are readily available online, ranging from TV shows to game shows, interviews and podcasts. All instances of surprise have been extracted manually and presented in their broader context of occurrence. Apart from the context, intonation patterns, i.e. surprise contour (Chondrogianni, 2011), facial and bodily reactions have also been taken into consideration in order to capture the entire range of means through which surprise can be expressed.

To identify which aspects are involved in the delivery of surprise and how they do so, we will draw on an approach that can accommodate any type of inference (Wharton et al., 2021: 263). Relevance theory will aid the retrieval of the processing path as mirative evidentials are non-propositional. If they cannot be interpreted as evidentials proper, how should they be treated and what do they contribute to the meaning of the clause? Addressing these questions will serve as the springboard to our examination of surprise in Modern Greek.

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Meaning beyond the author: Plato and Isocrates on written discourse

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When classical Greek society transitioned from orality to literacy, thinkers of that time faced new questions about how meaning is communicated. In his myth of Theuth in Phaedrus, Plato famously asserts – ironically in writing – that the introduction of writing brings problems: not only does writing weaken memory but also generates texts that cannot explain themselves and thus always require their “father” to clarify intention (275e). Isocrates, a contemporary of Plato, similarly notes that written discourse is “robbed of the prestige/opinion (δόξα) of the speaker” (To Philip 26). Unlike Plato, however, Isocrates treats this risk as an opportunity: once “bereft” of its author, a text places the primary burden of interpretation on the reader (Bons 1993; Haskins 2001). To Isocrates, discourse is not an art governed by “hard and fast rules”, as grammar is, but is a ποιητικὸν πρᾶγμα, a creative act (Against the Sophists 10). This paper seeks the roots of the modern field of pragmatics (cf. Biletzki 1996) in ancient Greek philosophy, focusing particularly on how the aforementioned authors conceptualize the (re)construction and communication of meaning in written discourse. By analyzing the metaphors they employ, such as those drawn from agriculture and the visual arts, I argue that both Plato and Isocrates conceive meaning as fundamentally interactive. However, whereas Plato has a more speaker-focused idea of communication, with Isocrates we see a shift toward hearer’s – or reader’s – meaning, resonating with a recent development in modern pragmatics that highlights the hearer’s role in communication (Hansen & Terkourafi 2023).

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Cross-Mapping Procedural Encoding and Non-Propositional Meaning across RT's Square

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Recent developments within Relevance Theory (RT) have expanded the domain of non-propositional meaning: while the original “meaning/showing” distinction primarily associates non-propositionality with direct “showing” (Sperber & Wilson, 1986/1995, 2015), subsequent work has extended it to cases of indeterminate “meaning”, e.g. metaphors conveying weakly manifest arrays of propositions (Carston, 2018; Wilson, 2018). In parallel, the notion of procedural encoding evolved since Blakemore (1987), revealing convergence with non-propositional meaning: conceptual ineffability and resistance to truth-conditional evaluation appear as shared defining criteria (Blakemore, 2011; Potts, 2007; Wharton, 2009; de Saussure, 2011). This paper investigates whether this convergence is systematic by cross-mapping the two axes of RT’s bidimensional continuum, construed here as mapping encoding type (input: in/directness) against intended import (output: in/determinacy).

Applying truth-conditionality, conceptual ineffability, and inference type (general narrowing/loosening versus specific inferences) as diagnostic criteria (de Saussure, 2011), we identify cases where the overall encoding is primarily procedural, and cross-rank them against degrees of determinacy in intended import. We hypothesise that no case of primarily procedural encoding yields a fully determinate, exhaustively propositional intended import, unaccompanied by relevant non-propositional effects. If confirmed, this would support a gradient correspondence whereby more indeterminate imports co-occur with more direct, procedural encoding, reflecting a cost-benefit structure: indeterminate imports require specific procedural computations for disambiguation, whereas determinate imports rely on general pragmatic inferences governing conceptual content.

We discuss implications for non-propositional effects as inferential outputs (Wharton & de Saussure, 2023; Wilson & Carston, 2019), for dual-route models of cognitive processing, and for the evolutionary hypothesis that conceptual encoding emerged from its procedural substrates through cognitive offloading (de Saussure, Pozner & Van Mulders, in prep.), with increasing indirectness and indeterminacy requiring progressively greater metacognitive resources.

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The Emotional Impact of Verbal Irony

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Research on the emotional impact of irony has produced conflicting findings: some studies suggest that irony mitigates emotional force (Dews & Winner, 1995; Filik et al., 2017; Pfeifer & Lai, 2021; Thomson et al., 2016), while others show that it can intensify perceived hostility or praise, particularly in sarcastic forms (Leggitt & Gibbs, 2000; Toplak & Katz, 2000; Colston & Gibbs, 2007; Bowes & Katz, 2011; Filik et al., 2016). Recent developments within relevance-theoretic pragmatics propose a more flexible account, whereby irony functions as a vehicle capable of either mitigating or enhancing effect depending on contextual and paralinguistic cues (Wharton, 2009; Yus, 2016; Wilson & Carston, 2019; Wharton & de Saussure, 2023; Ifantidou, 2025). However, the conditions under which these effects arise – especially in written communication where prosodic and facial cues are absent – remain underexplored. This presentation focuses on the theoretical background and methodological design of an ongoing experimental study examining how emotional polarity (praise vs. criticism) and affective emoji cues modulate perceived emotional force across ironic and literal written contexts. English-speaking participants will read short scripted scenarios in which identical utterances are interpreted either literally or ironically and are accompanied by playful, demeaning, or no emojis, before completing indirect intention judgments and emotional-evaluation ratings. By integrating cognitive and affective perspectives on meaning construction, this research aims to clarify how multimodal cues guide emotional interpretation in irony and to contribute to broader discussions on affective pragmatics and context-sensitive language use.

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