

The relevance of Relevance to the study of metacommunicative cause

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Abstract: A type of causal meaning that has so far received little attention in pragmatic research is that of ‘metacommunicative’ cause introduced by Kalokerinos (2004). In fact, the specific notion has been explicated in terms of the causal marker *yiati* picking up “elements of the communicative setting to justify not an illocutionary act but a higher-order act of communication” (Kalokerinos 2004: 37). We will argue that the view of metacommunicative aspects of meaning is wanting in two important respects for rigorous descriptions of causality. For one thing, it seems to be insensitive to linguistic underspecificity considerations. Moreover, we will argue that the notion at hand appears underdefined and, in this light, is not expected to constitute a constant point of reference in prospective accounts of relevant causal data. Ultimately, we will put forward the claim that all cases thought of as metacommunicative are analyzable in the procedural terms stipulated in relevance theory at no extra cost. In the same vein, cases of underspecification are accounted for procedurally, too, in an economical fashion.

Key words: metacommunicative cause, relevance, procedural meaning, interpretive resemblance.

0. Introduction

One of the classes of causal encoding was only recently identified as a means of causal expression (Kalokerinos 2004). The type of expression at issue has been labeled ‘metacommunicative’ or ‘metamodal’ and seems to have received little attention up to now in pragmatic analysis.

Kalokerinos has described metacommunicative operation in terms of a causal marker used to pick up “elements of the communicative setting to justify not an illocutionary act but a higher-order act of communication” (37). For instance, *yiati* in (1) below marks a justification of the repetition of an illocutionary act, rather than the illocutionary act being repeated.

- (1) Ο Γιάννης την αγαπάει, γιατί δεν το άκουσες.

John loves her, because you didn’t hear it.

[Kalokerinos 2004: 37]

Moreover, a number of subclasses of the notion under investigation have been distinguished, as we will see.

We would like to argue that the model of meaning description proposed for classifying data as a special case of causality, i.e. metacommunicative, fails in two interrelated respects: observing the prospective role of semantic under-specificity in fine-tuning metacommunicative interpretation and, also, resulting in a profligate, but most importantly, *ad hoc* characterization of the particular notion. Both defects are taken to impact the reliability of the criterion set up for a rigorous definition of ‘metacausality’.

Instead, we will argue in favor of a relevance theoretic approach in view of a unified and, therefore, more economical account on procedural grounds (Blakemore 1987). In this light, we will avail ourselves of the opportunity to determine the sensitivity demonstrated by the model employed in describing the sort of causal meaning under discussion, our orientation towards economy notwithstanding.

1. Kalokerinos's scheme

Kalokerinos's (2004:37) classification of causal conjunctions can be schematized in the following table:

Table 1

Non-modal	Modal	Metamodal
	EPISTEMIC NON-EPISTEMIC	'saying that' 'saying how'

Non-modal connections relate the contents of two propositions, in correlation to the Sweetserian (1990) lines of content reading, as with (2) below. By contrast, Sweetser's epistemic (3) and speech act (4) causal instances represent non-propositional modal expression, in that here *because* fulfils the role of a discourse -rather than sentence-connective accessing intentional attitudes or illocutionary forces.

- (2) John came back because he loved her.
- (3) John loved her because he came back.
- (4) What are you doing tonight, because there is a good movie on.

[Sweetser 1990: 77]

As evidenced, a disparity between epistemic and non-epistemic, or speech act interpretation is maintained in the modal category given that "epistemic modality (as far as belief is concerned) appears to enjoy a special status in discourse sequencing" (Kalokerinos 2004: 36).

Now, the class of causal meaning left to discuss is that of metacommunicative encoding, that is the type of encoding singled out for exposition in this paper. We will now turn to a relevant discussion.

2. Definition of metacommunicative cause

In Kalokerinos's terms, metacommunicative instances of causal expression are

[...] cases where both content and intentional attitude are 'invisible' to the import of DC-SS [subordinator]. These focus exclusively on the situation of communication and pick up elements of the communicative setting to justify not an illocutionary act but a higher-order act of communication, as in (1) above (2004:37).

However, he also makes the following addition:

As a matter of fact, there is one step further that a causal DC [discourse connective] can take, namely comment on and justify *etic* aspects of the communicative act (2004: 37).

Such a function is demonstrated in the following example:

- (5) ΠΗΓΑΙΝΕ! Γιατί πρέπει να φωνάζουμε εδώ πέρα.
GO! Because we have to shout in this place.

[Kalokerinos 2004: 37]

On account of this distinguishing meaning feature, cases like (1) and (5) represent a distinct type of cause, which is not to be treated along modal or non-modal lines of interpretation.

3. Types of metacommunicative cause

Kalokerinos lists the following utterances as instances of metacommunicative cause, apart from (1). Example (5) is being repeated here as (7), for convenience.

- (6) Ο Γιάννης την αγαπά. Γιατί πρέπει να το ξέρεις.
John loves her, because you have to know.
 - (7) ΠΗΓΑΙΝΕ! Γιατί πρέπει να φωνάζουμε εδώ πέρα.
GO! Because we have to shout in this place.
 - (8) Μετάνιωσα που τον σκότωσα – γιατί τον σκότωσα.
I regret killing him – ‘cos I did kill him.¹
 - (9) Ο φίλος μου – γιατί μόνο έναν φίλο έχω – ερχόταν καθημερινά να με δει.
My friend – ‘cos I’ve only got one friend – came to see me every day.
- [Kalokerinos 2004: 49-50]

Thus, (1) and (6) seem to draw on elements of the communicative setting in expressing metacommunicative or metamodal meaning, while (7) incorporates *etic* aspects of the communicative act. On the other hand, the causal relation in (8) performs a metacommunicative task on account of “rendering explicit a presupposed part of its content”² (2004: 49). Finally, the ‘metacausal’ sense of the *yiati*-introduced clause in (9) is ascribed to the “justificatory commentary” (2004: 49) presented as informative by itself.

This range of applications already raises an evident query as to a coherent explication of the above-mentioned conjunctions relative to the stipulations regulating the defining properties of the notion under discussion. More specifically, it is not clear whether a case of explicated presupposition, as in (8), or that of commenting on the presupposed information carried by a lexical constituent contained in the main clause, as in (9), can be studied in alignment with the rest of the cases.

This diversity of cases is taken to have non-trivial implications in setting up hard-and-fast criteria for identifying metacommunicative relations in a homogeneous category of causal meaning. But in such a case, inclusion criteria are inevitably under indefinite and *ad hoc* revision and an ensuing classification such as the one offered above turns out to be open-ended.

Moreover, inasmuch as the notional category at hand comprises disparate causal phenomena, which are not readily explained by way of the defining specifications of ‘metacommunication’ proposed, the method of analysis discussed here is faced with the challenge of descriptive rigor.

¹ Kalokerinos’s choice of ‘cos as the translation counterpart of Modern Greek *yiati* is seen as an attempt at a more natural-sounding rendering of several of the ‘metacommunicative’ instances (cf. Kalokerinos 2004).

² An account in terms of presupposition does not follow from the specifications of metacommunicative interpretation offered above. However this may be, we intend to take account of this suggestion as well in shaping our arguments.

In what follows we will discuss a second problem undermining the predictive potential of the definition of metacommunicative cause.

4. Semantic under-determinacy

Recent pragmatic research has acknowledged the role of under-determinacy resolution in inferential accounts. Referential indeterminacy, semantic ambiguity and further types of inferential adjustment (Carston 2002) are pragmatic tasks undertaken to bridge the gap between the logical form of a sentence and the speaker's informative intention. It is this hybrid form of linguistically determined and contextually supplied aspects of meaning that yields the speaker's intended interpretation.

Semantic under-determinacy issues have been discussed at length in the relevance-theoretic framework. Such issues are taken to be resolved through an inferential process of explicating unarticulated elements of a sentence, a process leading to the development of the semantic representation of a linguistic structure to a complete interpretation of an utterance in context.

Granted the indisputable contribution of pragmatic import to the development of logical form to a fully-fledged assumption, it is rather surprising that issues of under-specificity are invisible to Kalokerinos's postulations. In fact, it has been shown in the field of causality, that the realization of causal conjunctions may be a matter of the adverbial conjunct hinging on, and thus, pragmatically augmenting aspects of the logical form of the matrix clause (Bardzokas 2009). This observation also seems to have a bearing on licensing the use of *giati*, rather than *epeidi*, to mark such non-propositional causal connections in Modern Greek discourse (Kitis 1997/2006, Kalokerinos 2004). To illustrate, take example (10):

- (10) Τελικά, βρήκε γυναίκα, γιατί /*επειδή και οι δυο είναι σε ηλικία γάμου.
He found a woman, after all, (be)'cause both of them at the right age for marriage, too.

In this loose use of (10) the focal lexical concept that undergoes pragmatic adjustment is 'woman'. The specific concept is narrowed to that of a young, straight woman who is eligible for marriage, by way of *on line* concept construction (Carston 2002). This case does not seem to fall into the so-called metacommunicative category, in the sense that it does not appear to receive a reading along the lines of higher-order elements of the communicative setting or *etic* aspects of the communicative act.

Another example comes from Kitis's data.

- (11) Είχαμε, δηλαδή, τη χειρότερη θέα, γιατί η καλύτερη έβλεπε προς τη Αγία Σοφία.
We had, that is, the worst view, because the best view was over St. Sophia.
[Kitis 1997/2006:238]

In this case, the subordinate clause is taken to guide the hearer inferentially to the intended interpretation of the adjectival predicate 'worst' in comparative rather than superlative terms. As with (10), this non-propositional case does not succeed in satisfying the definition of metacommunicative causal links, despite the availability of the 'saying that' phraseology option.

In Kalokerinos's defense, the causal interpretation of both (10) and (11) do not seem to depend on retrieving intentional attitudes. Nonetheless, they do not seem to qualify for the category of metacommunicative cause on the basis of retrieving higher-order aspects of communication, either.

We are, thus, left with the remaining option of examining examples (10) – (11) against the tacit suggestion that metacommunicative readings may consist in explicating presupposed information. At first sight, this line of speculation seems plausible. On the other hand, failure in this attempt would preclude the inclusion of the examples at issue in the metamodal class. This, in turn, would undermine the operability of Kalokerinos's project (table 1), with the proviso that these examples do not fall into the modal or non-modal planes of discourse, either.

To assess this latter claim we will consider examples (10) and (11) in contrast to (8) or even (9), which are viewed as reflecting a presupposition-explicating construction. Upon a closer investigation it transpires that the former conjunctions depart from the latter. More specifically, while the former appear to condition the senses of lexical constituents in their main clauses, the latter are taken to serve as interposing additional information that results from a presumed requirement for clarification on the part of the speaker. In this sense, the concept encoded in *friend* does not seem subject to adjustment. Rather, it seems that the *because*-introduced clause offers elaboration independently of an otherwise fixed sense attached to the particular word.

We have already indicated that under-specificity issues are disregarded in Kalokerinos's model of describing causality, in general, or 'metacausality', in particular. We are now ready to advance our critique with respect to what seems like an additional defining property of metacommunicative cause, that of presupposition.

5. Under-defined notion of presupposition

We have already made a point of the heterogeneity of the category of cause under discussion. However, to make matters worse, we assume that even in constricting our perspective to an account of rendering explicit presupposed information, we unavoidably come across the requirement of adjusting the definition of presupposition to accommodate a range of similar but not identical cases.

Consider (12), for instance:

- (12) Τα αεροπορικά εισιτήρια κοστίζουν 400 €, γιατί είναι αμφίβολο αν υπάρχει άλλος τρόπος να ταξιδέψουμε.

The plane tickets cost 400 €, 'cos it's doubtful that there is another way of traveling.

Here, the speaker neither justifies a repetition (1), nor explicates a shared or unshared item of presupposed information (8), nor makes a justificatory commentary of a previous utterance of the sort in (9). On the contrary, it can be said that the utterance framed in the *because*-introduced clause encodes a speculation offered parenthetically, which justifies the speaker's intention to inform the hearer of the expenses of an alternative type of journey. In other words, the speaker intends to share a speculation rather than background information.

On a propositional level (12) would be reflected as in (13) or (14):

- (13) Σε πληροφορώ για το *p* [την τιμή των εισιτηρίων] επειδή/ γιατί αμφιβάλλω αν υπάρχει άλλος τρόπος να ταξιδέψουμε.

I'm informing you that *p* [the cost of the tickets] because I doubt that there is another way of traveling.

- (14) The reason why I'm informing about the cost of the tickets is because I doubt that there is another way of traveling.

Deciding to adhere to the presuppositional grounds of expounding the case of (12), i.e. that an item of presupposed information is in doubt, would ultimately involve tackling the predicament of reformulating arbitrarily the definition of presupposition against a number of differing cases. But the specifics of this undertaking are no foregone conclusion.

Up to now the problems that seem to shake the foundations of the model of causal analysis at issue pertain to the following issues:

- a) the descriptive rigour of the specific method of analysis
- b) the heterogeneity of the class of metacommunicative meaning
- c) the under-defined notion of presupposition
- d) overlooking the under-determinacy thesis

Based on the aforementioned findings, we would like to offer an alternative account of metacommunicative encoding.

6. An alternative account

In the relevance-theoretic model, discourse connectives have been discussed in terms of a major distinction in meaning, i.e. conceptual and procedural. This distinction informs the analyst of the propositional or non-propositional effects of the use of a connective in the process of interpreting a sequence.

Traditionally, discourse connectives have been treated in procedural terms (Blakemore 2002). Hence, a procedural marker guides the comprehension process so that the hearer ends up with the ultimate conceptual representation of an utterance. More specifically, it serves to constrain the implicatures derived from deductive inference.

Recent research, however, indicated that procedural encoding can affect explicatures in addition to implicatures, to the extent that the recovery of either type of information consists in inferential activity. On this account, the distribution of connectives may divulge unarticulated higher-order explicatures, i.e. propositional attitudes or speech act assumptions (Wilson and Sperber 1993). This latter postulation seems to find application in the field of causality (Iten 1997, Takeuchi 1997, Kitis 1997/2006, Bardzokas 2009).

Take Sweetser's examples (3) and (4). They represent instances of a procedural constraint that the causal marker imposes on higher-order assumption schemas. That is, the use of the adverbial clause reveals a speech act description into which the propositional content of the main clause or the causal utterance as a whole is embedded. Moreover, it has been suggested that the bounds of procedural encoding should be expanded to include constraints to base-order explicatures (Bardzokas 2009), as with examples (10) and (11).

We are now ready to pursue an account of metacommunicative cause along procedural lines.

7. Procedural approach

We surmise that Kalokerinos's examples (1) and (6) – (9) may all receive a procedural interpretation exploiting the notion of higher-order explicatures, despite Kalokerinos's

avowals that determining the interpretation of metacommunicative sequences is not a matter of uncovering the speaker's intentional attitudes. Let us explore this possibility.

In the best-case scenario, metacommunicative cases display no structural differences from Sweetser's epistemic or speech-act data, which are amenable to a procedural analysis, as we have witnessed, as is the case in (1) in comparison with (3). In the worst situation, however, it may be argued that a metacommunicative case like (9) represents an elliptical conjunction in that the main clause does not seem linguistically encoded and, if it is, it cannot be properly encoded as a main clause to the specific subordinate clause: *'cos I've only got one friend*.

But how is the meaning representation of the main clause itself determined, if the main clause is not properly encoded? Potential differences in structure notwithstanding, the hearer can make up for the missing linguistic material making use of linguistic resources, which seem to be of two sorts here. Firstly, it seems that the logical form or lexical material that undergoes propositional development is traceable to prior discourse, i.e. what precedes the occurrence of the subordinate clause: *my friend*. In the second place, the realization of the adverbial clause is justified inasmuch as it accesses a speech act interpretation embedding the propositional representation of the unencoded main clause. Hence, determining explicit content here is of inter-sentential or discoursal nature.

In this line of interpretation, the utterance in the main clause in (1) is explicated as a repetition in favour of the hearer. The explication takes the form of a higher-order assumption schema such as *I repeat that _____*. In a similar vein, the speaker in (6) is *informing* the hearer, while in (8) and (9) the speaker *asserts* an element of background information.

Finally, by the same token, the speaker's attitude to the imperative in (7) is one of dissociation from the current situation. This information is retrieved by the justification for this conduct framed in the subordination. Moreover, apart from the dissociating attitude, the prosodic element taken to attach to the use of the imperative conveys information about emotions or attitudes (Wilson and Wharton 2006). Also, given that prosodic effects are 'highly context-dependent' (Wilson and Wharton 2006: 1560) and that a speaker's mental or physical state may affect the prosodic properties of an utterance (Wilson and Wharton 2006: 1562), this type of information is taken to be of a procedural character.

But such a view of the metacommunicative domain is allied to our treatment of epistemic (3) and speech act cases (4) in terms of integrating the proposition expressed in the main clause under the corresponding illocutions. It transpires, then, that while we may speak of a distinguishing syntactic or distributional regularity associated with metacommunicative cause, a meaning analysis seems to subsume this seemingly separate class of encoding on procedural grounds.

In this light, we may analyse all these examples coherently, at no extra cost, as containing semantic constraints on inference and relevance, facilitating the comprehension process. We are, therefore, led to the conclusion that we might be better off without an additional meaning class whose contribution to causality investigations is controversial, due to its indistinctness concomitant of two important drawbacks: heterogeneity, on the one hand, and insensitivity to cases which, however, are not treated as 'modal' or 'non-modal', either.

8. More relevance considerations

Cases of procedural meaning, which, as we said, is pivotal to the analysis of discourse connectives, may be examined in parallel to another salient category of representation

distinguished by relevance theorists: that of interpretive representation. The relevance of interpretive representation to the study of discourse markers lies in determining the meaning of non-literal utterances, as in the case of procedural expressions of sequences.

In the relevance-theoretic framework, there is interpretative representation, or representation by resemblance, when an utterance is used to represent another utterance that it resembles.

For example, in direct quotation an utterance is used to represent another utterance with which it shares linguistic properties; in translation an utterance is used to represent another utterance with which it shares semantic properties; in paraphrase an utterance is used to represent another utterance with which it shares logical properties – that is, with which it shares analytic or contextual implications” (Wilson and Sperber 1988: 87).

Contrary to Grice’s (1989) position, Wilson and Sperber contend that non-literalness is not to be handled as a case of violating the maxim of truthfulness. In fact, there is nothing to distinguish metaphor, irony, impersonations or jokes from serious, literal cases. In this sense, the notion of literalness is to be understood in terms of interpretive resemblance.

Moreover, interpretive resemblance is said to be a matter of degree. At one extreme reside utterances that bear no resemblance to each other (they may not share analytic or contextual implications). On the other side, we have full identity of analytic or contextual implications. We learn, then, that

When a thought or utterance *P* is interpretively used to represent another thought or utterance *Q*, *P* is a literal interpretation of *Q* if and only if *P* and *Q* share all their implications. Literalness, so defined, is just a special case of interpretive resemblance (Wilson and Sperber 1988: 87).

To the extent that all the aforementioned utterances of cause are used procedurally, in terms of inferential steps required for interpretation, they are also seen as non-literal instances of loose talk and are to be treated as such³. For Sperber and Wilson (1986/1995), loose talk is a case of interpretive use, rather than a case of departure from some communicative norm. In this respect, the expectation that is crucial to communication here is one not of truthfulness but of optimal relevance.

For the record,

[...] an optimally relevant utterance is one that communicates enough contextual implications to be worth the hearer’s attention, and puts the hearer to no unjustifiable effort in obtaining them (Wilson and Sperber 1988: 87).

Given the fact that verbal communication under-specifies the speaker’s informative intention, on the one hand, and that pragmatic input spares us the unjustifiable mental effort of processing wastefully explicit talk, the speaker here is taken to communicate a subset of the total analytic and contextual implications (recoverable in contextual assumptions), which is, however, rich enough to be worth the hearer’s attention. No other utterance would have been more economical and easier for the speaker to produce.

Moreover, interpretive uses are taken to constitute attributive interpretations, in that the speaker attributes an utterance to the hearer not only to report it, but also to express an attitude to it. In this respect, the previous cases of, say, direct quotation or paraphrase

³ Insofar as literal meaning is a matter of degree, the non-literal type of encoding proposed in this paper is to be regarded as contributing to the explicit rather than implicit side of communication.

or translation, are special cases of attributive or 'echoic' use (Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995).

Arguably, the issue of what was formerly conceived of as metacommunicative expression can be further characterized by recourse to echoicness. We know from Wilson and Sperber (1998) and Carston (2002) that echoic utterances do not necessarily involve a response to a previous utterance. Rather, they may attribute a thought, as is the case, for instance, with metaconceptual negation (Carston 2002: 297):

(15) A: Their contributions were important.

B: Right, but YOUR contributions were not important, they were invaluable.

[Carston 2002: 297]

In this sense, a representation is used echoically when it attributes some aspect of form or content to someone other than the conversationalist at that moment and expresses an attitude to it.

In this line of speculation, and on the production rather than comprehension side of communication, examples (1) and (6) – (9) may be earmarked as attributive or echoic, metaconceptual uses of cause. Notably, attribution of thought but also the expression of attitude can be either overt (encoded) or tacit. (Wilson and Sperber 1988, Carston 2002). It seems to us that the attribution of thought in metaconceptual causality is on the tacit side.

An analysis of these data suggests a standard principle of explication: the speaker attributes to the audience the thought that they need to obtain a piece of information required for the successful process of an utterance as a whole, and does so implicitly. This type of metarepresentation is conveyed along with a covertly communicated attitude to the thought attributed.

For example, in (1) the speaker appears to attribute to the audience the thought that they missed preceding information, i.e. the information expressed in the respective utterance of the main clause. Moreover, the attribution is achieved along with the tacit communication of the attitude of realization that a repetition of the information is required. The interpretation of (6) works similarly, in that the speaker recognizes that the audience lacks an essential chunk of knowledge. On the other hand, the thought entertained echoically in favour of the audience in (7) is that they wonder about the speaker's conduct. (8) and (9) are instances of the speaker attributing the thought of inadequate contextual information (regarding the use of lexical concepts such as *killing* or *friend*) and realizing the requirement for making up for it.

It is fathomable that attributive representation reflects an appropriate construal of the modal (epistemic and non-declarative) cases as well (3, 4) along similar lines of argumentation, although making this claim would involve an enterprise that is not of our present concern.

In addition, instances of linguistic under-determinacy also seem amenable to the qualifications of metaconceptual cause proposed. In this sense, the speaker makes provisions for information retrieval by way of conjunctive encoding, as in (10) or (11), in favour of the addressee delivering base-order explicatures. These cases are closer to the end of explicitness than all the previous ones, in that such utterances do not represent cases of recovering intentional attitudes. However, this comes as no surprise given that interpretive resemblance or literalness is ultimately a matter of degree.

9. Conclusions

To recapitulate our discussion, we concluded that the notion of metacommunicative causality is neither necessary nor sufficient for the description of causal data treated as cases of the putative category of meaning. Moreover, the meaning description of so-called metacommunicative cause can be readily accommodated for along the relevance-oriented qualifications of procedural encoding and interpretive meaning. The advantage of this approach is a uniform and economical method of pragmatic survey that warrants a coherent analysis of a range of causal applications.

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