A Relevance-theoretic Analysis of Mustofa Bisri's Poem "*Siapa Menyuruh?*"[1]

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Abstract

This article presents an interpretive study of *"Siapa Menyuruh?"*, a poem by Indonesia's contemporary poet Mustofa Bisri. The study is carried out within the framework of Sperber and Wilson's relevance theory (RT), which is based on the principles that human cognition tends to the maximization of relevance (I), and that every act of communication presumes its own optimal relevance (II). This suggests that in the relevance-theoretic perspective, Bisri wrote the poem *"Siapa Menyuruh"* not because he wanted to violate certain linguistic norms or any communicative maxims, but because this was the most relevant utterance he could produce. He intentionally raised the effort to process his poem because he promised greater cognitive effects to the reader. The reader who is willing to process his utterances in the poem further is granted not with one, single strong implicature, but with a number of weak implicatures.

Key words: Relevance Theory (RT), strong and weak implicatures, Mustofa Bisri, and contemporary Indonesian poetry.

1. Introduction

Relevance Theory or RT (Sperber & Wilson, 1986, 1995; Wilson & Sperber, 2002, 2004) is a pragmatic approach to human communication rooted in the notion that what we need in communication is to be relevant. The search for relevance is not a procedure that we can follow or violate because it is the basic nature of human cognition. An utterance is relevant to us, according to Wilson and Sperber (2002, p. 251), when it interacts with our background information to produce significant conclusions or positive cognitive effects[2], for example, "by answering our question, improving our knowledge on a certain topic", or "confirming our suspicion".

Relevance is measured in terms of *positive cognitive effect* and *processing effort*. The greater the cognitive effects produced when processing an utterance, the more relevant the utterance is. In contrast, the lower our effort to process an utterance, the more relevant the utterance is. Our cognition, however, does not process any relevant utterance available, as it tends to be "geared to the maximization of relevance" (Sperber & Wilson, 1995, p. 260). This means that our cognition tends to choose utterances with the greatest cognitive effects and the lowest processing effort.

Imagine an interview in which I asked Bisri for what he thought about Indonesia's current situation, and he could answer my query by saying either (1) or (2):

> 1) *Indonesia ini bobrok hampir di semua lini.*
>   'Almost all sectors of life in Indonesia are badly-managed.'

or

> 2) *Negeri adiluhung yang mengimpor majikan asing dan sampah*
>   *Negeri berbudaya yang mengekspor babu-babu dan asap*
>   'A country of high cultural values that import foreign employers and waste
>   A civilized country that exports servants and smoke' (Bisri, 2002, p. 2)

Both (1) and (2) were relevant to me in the sense that the two utterances supplied me with information that mattered to me: Bisri's opinion of Indonesia's current situation. However, within the context of the interview, utterance (1) was more relevant than utterance (2) because it required less processing effort.

Utterance (2) is actually lines 16-17 of Bisri's poem "*Di Negerimu*" (In your land). Poetry, in the relevance-theoretic framework, is considered to be offering different kind of relevance (Trotter, 1992). A poet frequently raises the cost of processing utterances in the promise of richer cognitive effects. Hence, in the case of utterance (2), Bisri intentionally increased the processing effort because he promised greater cognitive effects to the reader. This raised a question in my mind as to how the idea of *greater cognitive effects* was of use in the analysis of poetry. I was therefore interested in using RT to analyse contemporary Indonesian poetry, and I chose Bisri's poem "*Siapa Menyuruh*" ' Who ordered you?' as the object of study for two reasons. First, "*Siapa Menyuruh,*" like other Bisri's poems, is written in colloquial language, which makes it easier for lay people to understand. Second, despite its simple language, the poem offers deep, contemplative meaning(s), especially for the people of Indonesia.

2. Relevance-theoretical Analysis of "*Siapa Menyuruh?*"

Siapa Menyuruh?
Siapa menyuruh kalian mengangkat para pemabuk kekuasaan dan harta menjadi pemimpin siapa menyuruh kalian memilih para gelandangan menjadi wakil-wakil kalian siapa menyuruh kalian menyerahkan nasib demokrasi negeri ini kepada orang-orang frustasi yang tidak bermoral siapa menyuruh kalian menunjuk orang-orang miring untuk menegakkan keadilan siapa menyuruh kalian menugasi para pencuri menangani urusan ekonomi siapa mengamanatkan urusan agama kepada mereka yang tak memiliki rasa kasihsayang siapa menyuruh kalian mempercayakan negeri ini kepada para badut yang tak tahu diri?

> Kalian sendiri
> menggiring berlapis-lapis gelap
> mengepung negeri
> Kalian sendiri

> 1421

> (Bisri, 2002, p. 34)

As we have seen, the first stanza of the poem was written in a prose layout, and was written in such a way that there is no division of the stanza into clauses or sentences. The only punctuation marks are the capital letter at the beginning of and the question mark at the end of the stanza. This makes the stanza look like a very long question. However, if the stanza is examined carefully, it consists of seven complex interrogative sentences:

(3)   a. *Siapa menyuruh kalian mengangkat para pemabuk kekuasaan dan harta menjadi pemimpin*

'Who ordered you to appoint people obsessing about power and wealth to be your leaders?'

b. *siapa menyuruh kalian memilih para gelandangan menjadi wakil-wakil kalian*
'Who ordered you to assign vagrants to become your representatives?'

c. *siapa menyuruh kalian menyerahkan nasib demokrasi negeri ini kepada orang-orang frustasi yang tidak bermoral*
'Who ordered you to hand in the fate of democracy to frustrated and immoral people?'

d. *siapa menyuruh kalian menunjuk orang-orang miring untuk menegakkan keadilan*
'Who ordered you to appoint the lunatics to uphold the law?'

e. *siapa menyuruh kalian menugasi para pencuri menangani urusan ekonomi*
'Who ordered you to assign thieves to handle economic affairs?'

f. *siapa mengamanatkan urusan agama kepada mereka yang tak memiliki rasa kasihsayang*
'Who entrusted religious affair to the merciless?'

g. *siapa menyuruh kalian mempercayakan negeri ini kepada para badut yang tak tahu diri?*
'Who ordered you to trust insolent clowns to rule your country?'

Stanza 2, on the other hand, was written in verse form, and it consists of one single complex sentence:

4) *Kalian sendiri/ menggiring berlapis-lapis gelap/ mengepung negeri/ Kalian sendiri*
'It was you yourselves who brought darkness to your country'

This stanza can be considered as the answer to the questions raised in the previous stanza, meaning that the questions raised in stanza 1 are not real questions, but rhetorical questions. If the speaker of the poem did not really want to elicit information or to expect an answer from his audience, what was/were the reason(s) he raised the questions?

The poem "*Siapa Menyuruh?*" was published in Bisri's anthology *Negeri Daging* (Land of Flesh, 2002), on the preface of which he wrote that in this anthology, like in his other books of poems, he continued to create poems related to humanity and Indonesia. Therefore, it is relevant to assume that the poem "*Siapa Menyuruh?*" is connected to Indonesia and the people of Indonesia. The pronoun *kalian* (you, plural) referred to the people of Indonesia, and the immoral individuals mentioned throughout stanza 1 were Indonesia's bureaucrats, parliamentary members, and judicial personnels. Based on these assumptions, we can draw a contextual implication:

5) The rhetorical questions of stanza 1 were used to point out the fact that *kalian* (Indonesian people) had authorized irresponsible individuals in all sectors: politics, economy, law, and religion.

Such a paraphrase as (5), in RT perspective, is inadequate to articulate the rhetorical questions. The paraphrase, as Blakemore (1992, p. 156) puts it, misses "the bite of the original". A poet creates poetry not because he wants to communicate a proposition or a set of propositions; on the other hand, people read poetry not to obtain certain information or to derive a particular conclusion, as is capture in (5). Instead, they read poetry for pleasure, and the pleasure of literary writing and reading is lost under the paraphrase in

(5).

Another problem with the paraphrase in (5) is that it contradicts the idea of the search for optimal relevance. If the search for optimal relevance is the basic nature of human communication, a speaker will not attract his audience's attention unless he produces an utterance with the greatest cognitive effects and the least processing effort. Hence, if the paraphrase was exactly what Bisri intended to communicate, he had violated the search for relevance by raising the processing effort. He could have reduced the cost of processing effort by, for instance, saying his intention more directly (rather than bothering his audience to process his poem).

In literary communication, according to RT, a poet frequently raises the effort to process his utterances because he promises greater cognitive effects to the reader (Pilkington, 1991, 1992, 2000; Trotter, 1992). In the case of stanza 1 of "*Siapa Menyuruh?*", the rhetorical questions are used "primarily for stylistic effect" and are used when a speaker "is trying work up the emotional temperature" (Cuddon, 1999, pp. 748-749). This leads to a further challenge, for the rhetorical questions, and thus the poem, may raise different emotions in different readers, and it is unclear which emotional state was actually communicated by the poet. The readers can only weakly assume and conclude which emotional state or impression is intended by the poet. This means that the readers are left with greater responsibility to choose the relevant interpretation(s) of the poem because there is not one single interpretation of the poem (strong implicature), but there are a number of possible interpretations (weak implicatures).

3. Conclusion

In the Relevance-theoretic approach, it is the search for relevance that governs human communication. *Relevance* is assessed with regards to cognitive effects and the cost of processing effort. The greater the cognitive effects resulted, the more relevant the utterance; on the contrary, the lower the effort used to process an utterance, the more relevant the utterance. Literary communication, however, offers different kind of relevance, by increasing the cost of processing effort and promising richer cognitive effects.

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[2] The three types of positive cognitive effects are (1) contextual implications or context-dependent conclusions, (2) cognitive effects that confirm our assumptions, and (3) cognitive effects that revise or abandon our assumptions (Wilson & Sperber, 2004).