from birth onwards, humans expect relevance from the sounds of speech (an expectation often disappointed, but hardly ever given up).

(Sperber, 1996, p. 114)

Linguistic pragmatics takes into account the determining role of the hearer or reader in linguistic communication, and demonstrates how meaning – whether explicit or implicit – always depends on context-related inference as well as semantic and grammatical codes. In particular, Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson’s relevance theory argues that utterances are only interpretive representations of thoughts, so that there is necessarily a gap between the semantic representations of sentences and the thoughts actually communicated by utterances, a gap that can be filled by a hearer or reader’s inferential recognition of a communicator’s intentions, guided by contextual clues. The very notion that sign and meaning could ever coincide is based on the dominant but erroneous code model which assumes that meanings are encoded and decoded, and disregards the enormous role of (unconscious, non-demonstrative) inference in linguistic communication.

Although they describe the principle of relevance as ‘an exceptionless generalisation about human communicative behaviour’ (Wilson and Sperber, 1988, p. 144), Sperber and Wilson (hereafter S&W) largely concentrate on spoken communication. In this chapter I will introduce the theory, quoting extensively from S&W. In the following chapters, I will consider relevance theory in relation to literary interpretation.
Linguistic underdetermination

S&W argue that the semantics of natural languages are too weak to encode thoughts, and semantic representations are incomplete logical forms that can only be, at best, fragmentary representations of thoughts. Thus ‘languages do not encode the kind of information that humans are interested in communicating. Linguistically encoded semantic representations are abstract mental structures which must be inferentially enriched before they can be taken to represent anything of interest’ (Relevance, p. 174).

Hearers and readers generally begin their interpretation of an utterance or a written sentence by assigning to it a unique propositional form. This involves pragmatic inferences that build on the incomplete conceptual representation decoded from the linguistic form used in the utterance. Hearers typically have to disambiguate the utterance by selecting one of the possible semantic representations permitted by the grammar; complete the utterance if it is in any way elliptic or semantically incomplete; identify the referents of all referring expressions, including the deictic ones concerning time, person and place; enrich any vague terms until they are semantically explicit; and loosen the meaning of any concepts used non-literally. As S&W point out, ‘By definition, the semantic representation of a sentence, as assigned to it by a generative grammar, can take no account of such non-linguistic properties as, for example, the time and place of utterance, the identity of the speaker, the speaker’s intentions, and so on. . . . The semantic representation of a sentence deals with a sort of common core of meaning shared by every utterance of it. However, different utterances of the same sentence may differ in their interpretation; and indeed they usually do’ (Relevance, p. 9). But semantic representations of sentences are mental objects that never surface to consciousness; we merely use them as assumption schemas to identify the propositional form of an utterance.

Once a semantic representation has been selected, completed and enriched or loosened in various ways to yield a propositional form, a hearer has to identify an utterance’s propositional attitude. This is because ‘the same sentence, used to express the same thought, may sometimes be used to present this thought as true, sometimes to suggest that it is not, sometimes to wonder whether it is true, sometimes to ask the hearer to make it true, and so on. Utterances are used not only to convey thoughts, but to reveal the speaker’s attitude to, or relation to, the thought expressed: in other words, they express “propositional