Relevance Theory and (mass-)communicating via pictures and word & image texts (based on Forceville 2014, Forceville & Clark in press, Forceville in progress).

(Charles Forceville, Amsterdam)

Human beings are thoroughly purpose-driven creatures. In order to achieve their goals in life (getting food, shelter, love, sex, money, experiencing artistic catharsis, fame, respect, or simply catching a plane), people constantly, even automatically, judge phenomena confronting them by how these phenomena could help advance, or jeopardize, their goals. Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson make the search for goal-enhancing information the central tenet of their Relevance Theory (RT, e.g. Sperber and Wilson 1995, Wilson and Sperber 2004, Wilson and Sperber 2012), claiming that all human communication revolves around relevance: people in principle formulate their messages in such a way that they are as relevant for the other each other as possible. Although the authors present their theory as holding for all types of information, it is mainly based on face-to-face communication. My claim is that the RT model is the best communication model around (see Forceville 1996, 2005, 2009, 2014, Forceville and Clark, in press, Yus 2008). After briefly outlining the key ideas of RT, I will in this talk show and discuss a number of pictorial and word & image “texts” that impart information purely visually or in combination with language, in the light of Sperber and Wilson’s theory. The texts to be discussed include advertisements, cartoons, logos, cartoons, and comic panels. The talk’s goal is to show that, and how, RT needs to be adapted to model visual and visual + verbal (mass)communication.

References

--- (in progress) [Monograph on applying Relevance Theory to mass-communicative visuals & word & image combinations.]