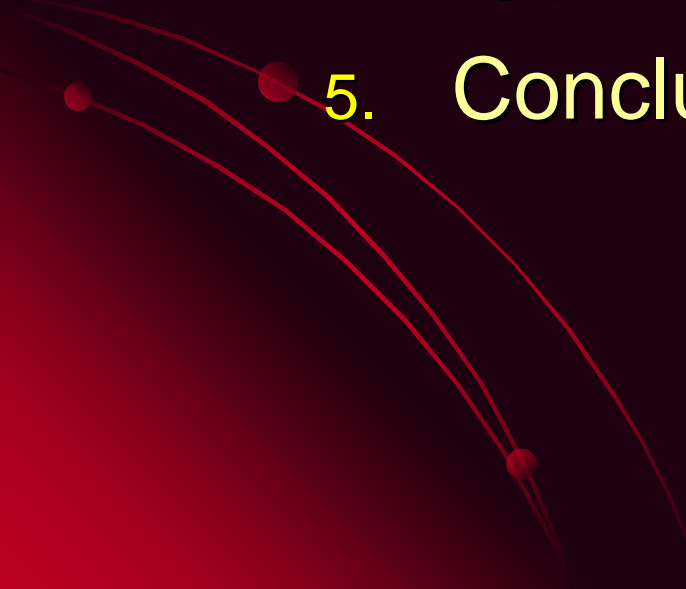


The central role of relevance in translation – 'communicative clues'

GradUS Workshop,
Saarbrücken, 3.7. 2009

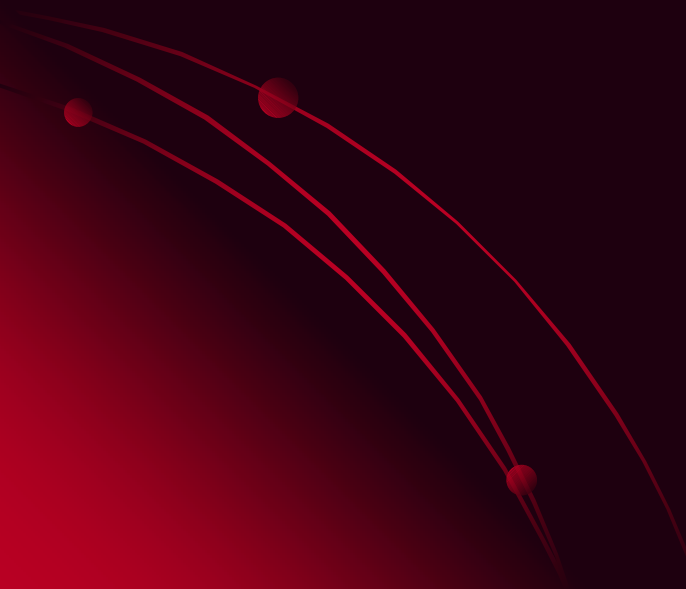
Ernst-August Gutt, SIL International

Outline

1. Introduction: The problem
 2. Some fundamentals
 3. 'Communicative property'
 4. 'Communicative clue'
 5. Conclusion
- 

The problem

Which features of the source text should a good translation reflect?



The problem

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, ...

(Charles Dickens *A tale of two cities*; opening paragraph)

- “There is an almost poetic cadence in this excerpt. The sound symmetry conveys its ironic tone extremely well.” (Chukovskii 1984, p. 144)

The problem

Backtranslation of a Russian translation:

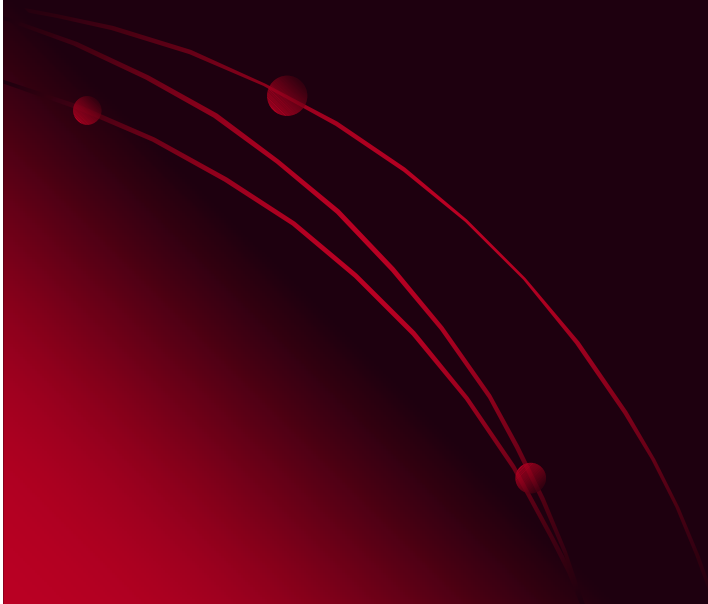
It was the best and worst of times, it was the age of wisdom and of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief and incredulity, it was the season of light and darkness, it was the spring of hope and winter of despair, ...

(S.P. Bobrov and M.P. Bogolovskaja 1957 *Povest' o dvukh gorodakh*, *Sobranie sochinenii*, Moscow, vol. XXII, p. 6)

“[The translators] did not catch the author’s intonations and thus robbed his work of the dynamism stemming from the rhythm.” (Chukovskii 1984, p. 144)

The problem

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times ...



The problem

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times ...

Conjunction reduction:

It was the best and worst of times



The problem

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was
the age of wisdom and of foolishness, it was
the epoch of belief and of incredulity, it was
the season of light and of darkness, it was
the spring of hope and winter of despair, ...

Was this adjustment inappropriate?

**Is there an objective basis for
making that kind of a judgment?**

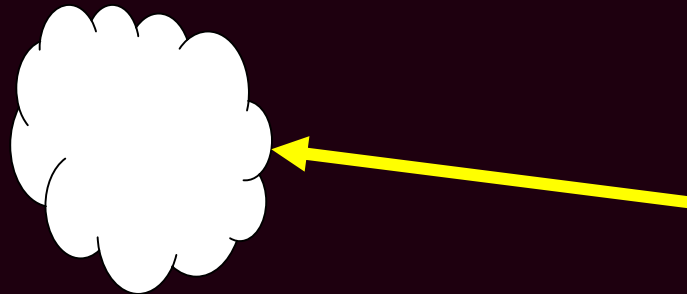
After coming

It was the best and worst of times, it was the age of
wisdom and of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief
incredulity, it was the season of light and darkness, it
was the spring of hope and winter of despair, ...

Verbal communication

“mind reading”

discover the thoughts
to be communicated

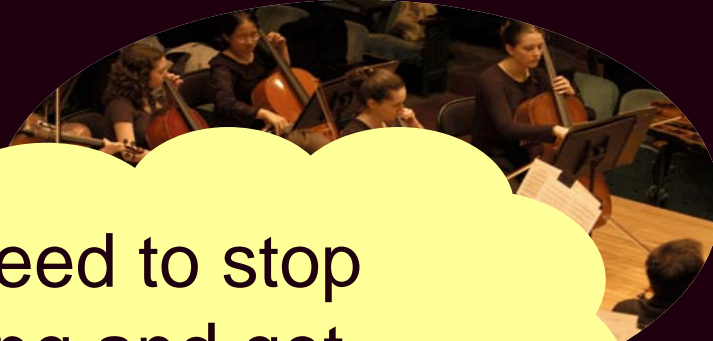


** *****

communicator

Verbal communication

You need to stop working and get ready for the concert now.



Time: 6.45 p.m.

The comprehension procedure

Our mind carries out a special

comprehension procedure

The procedure is carried out
automatically and
subconsciously most of the
time –
we only become aware of its
existence when problems
arise!

Making sense

- | Our mind tries to make sense of things.
- | It looks for ways to inferentially integrate new information with what we already know (our cognitive environment).
- | When it succeeds in establishing such a relationship, it experiences this information as

relevant

Cognitive effects

- | Contextual implications
- | Strengthening of assumptions
- | Erasure of assumptions (via contradiction)

Cognitive effects

NB: “assumption”: relevance-theoretic term for ‘a thought assumed to be true’

Contextual implication

a) *Mother*. What's your new teacher like?

b) *Daughter*. He rides to school on a motorbike.

The daughter finds men cool who ride motorbikes.

Answer. She likes the teacher.

Reason: She likes him because he rides a motorbike.

Contextual implication



Contents expressed

| *Premise 1:* The new teacher rides to school on a motorcycle.

| *Premise 2:* Only young men who ride motorcycles like motorcycles.

Benefits!

Contextual assumption

| *Conclusion:* The daughter likes the new teacher.



Contextual implication

Effort

- | structural complexity of utterance
- | accessibility of contextual information in our mind
- | complexity of thought processes required
- | etc.



Cost!

An optimisation process

Optimal relevance:

- | Adequate cognitive effects –
- | without unnecessary processing effort



The comprehension procedure spelled out

The relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure:

- | follow a path of least effort in search of cognitive effects.
- | when expectations of relevance are satisfied stop and assume that the interpretation arrived at is the intended one.

[Adapted from Sperber and Wilson 2002,
'Pragmatics, modularity and mind-reading']

The comprehension procedure spelled out

The relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure:

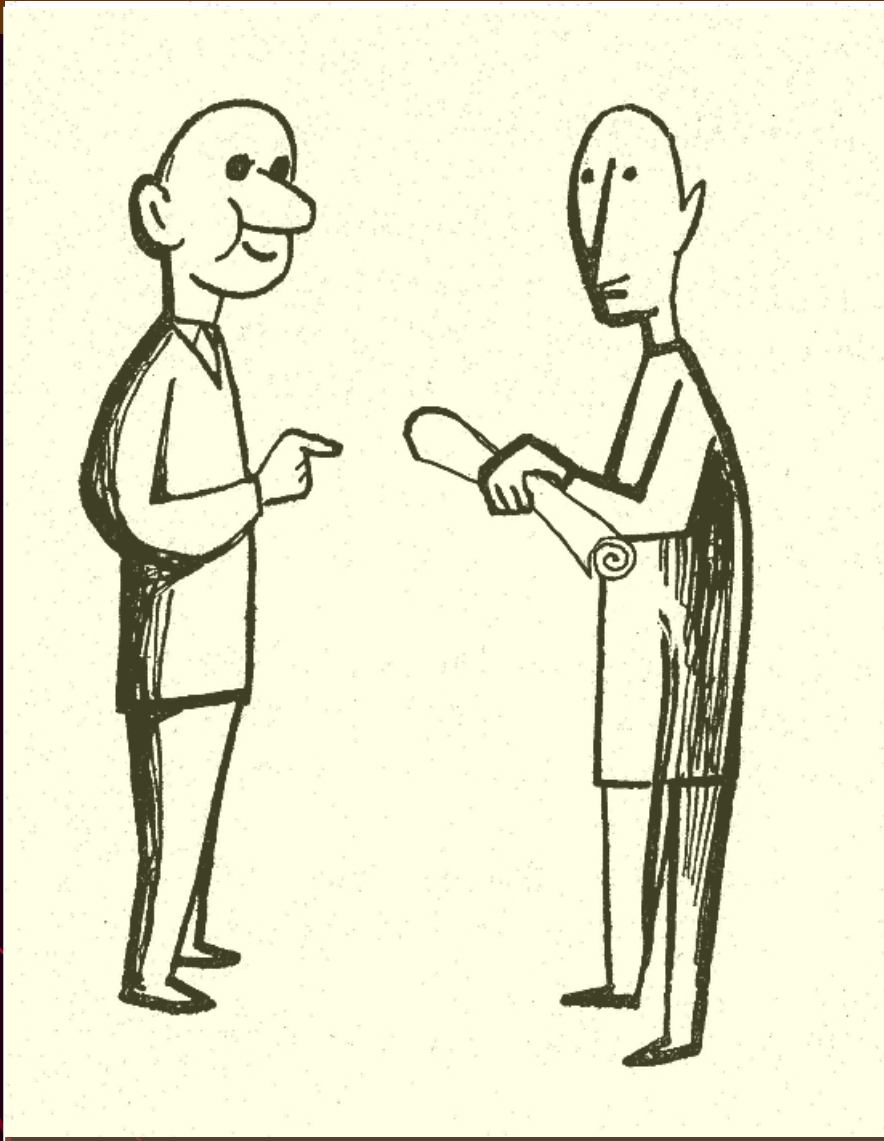
- | follow a path of least effort in search of cognitive effects.
- | when expectations of relevance are **satisfied** stop and assume that the interpretation arrived at is the intended one.

[Adapted from Sperber and Wilson 2002,
'Pragmatics, modularity and mind-reading']

Mr Veneranda ...



At the decorator's ...



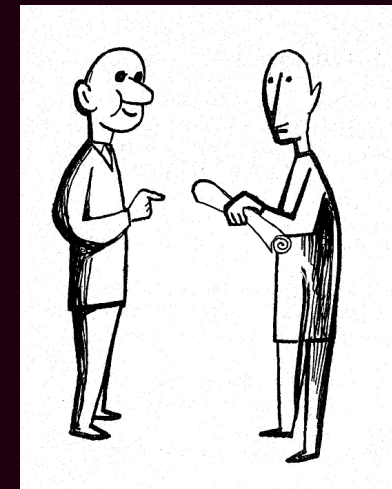
“How can I help?” the decorator asked Mr. Veneranda.

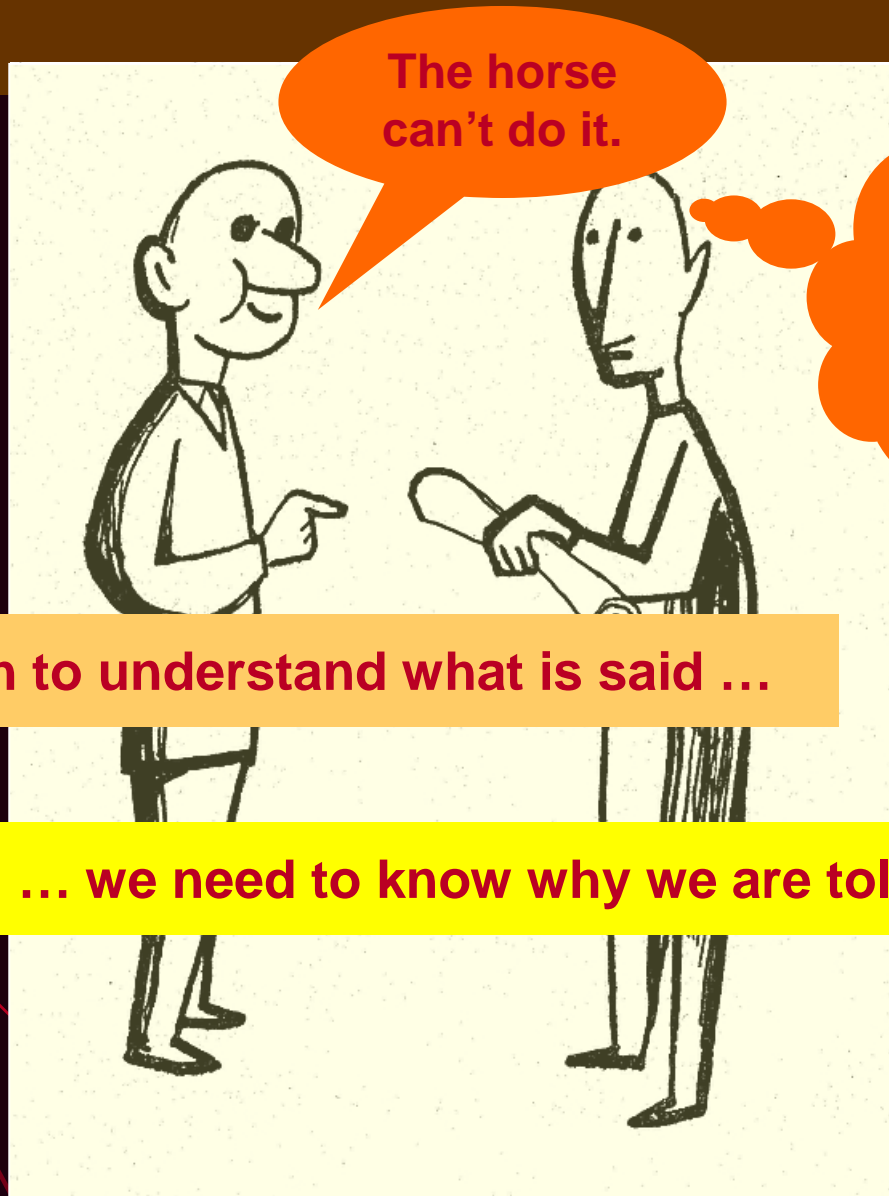
“I would like to have my dining room wallpapered,” Mr. Veneranda said. **“the horse can’t do it.”**

“Pardon?” the shop owner asked, thinking he had misheard something.

“I said,” Mr. Veneranda repeated, “that I want to have my dining room wallpapered.”

“But you added, ‘The horse can’t do it’,” the decorator stammered. “Perhaps I did not understand you correctly.”

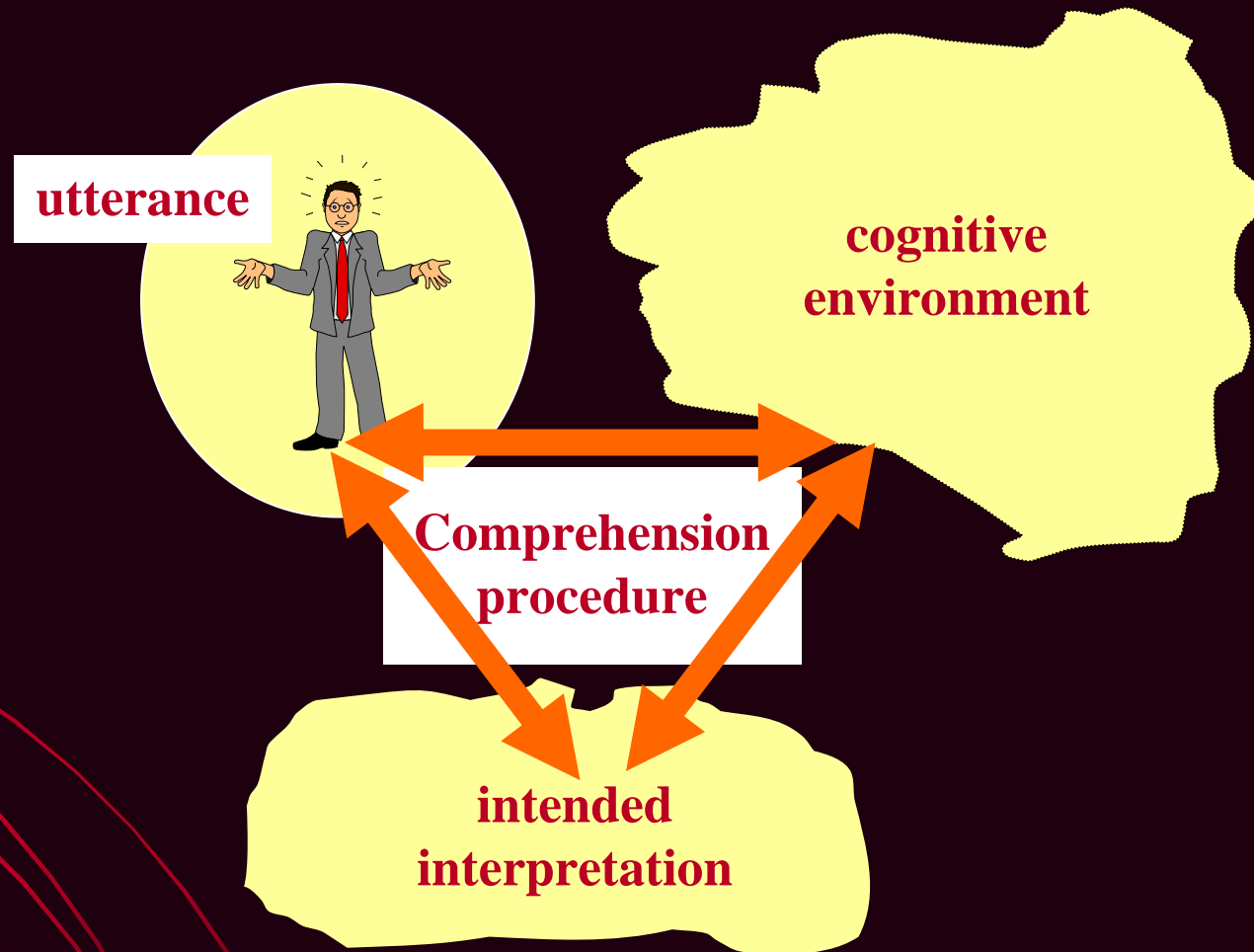




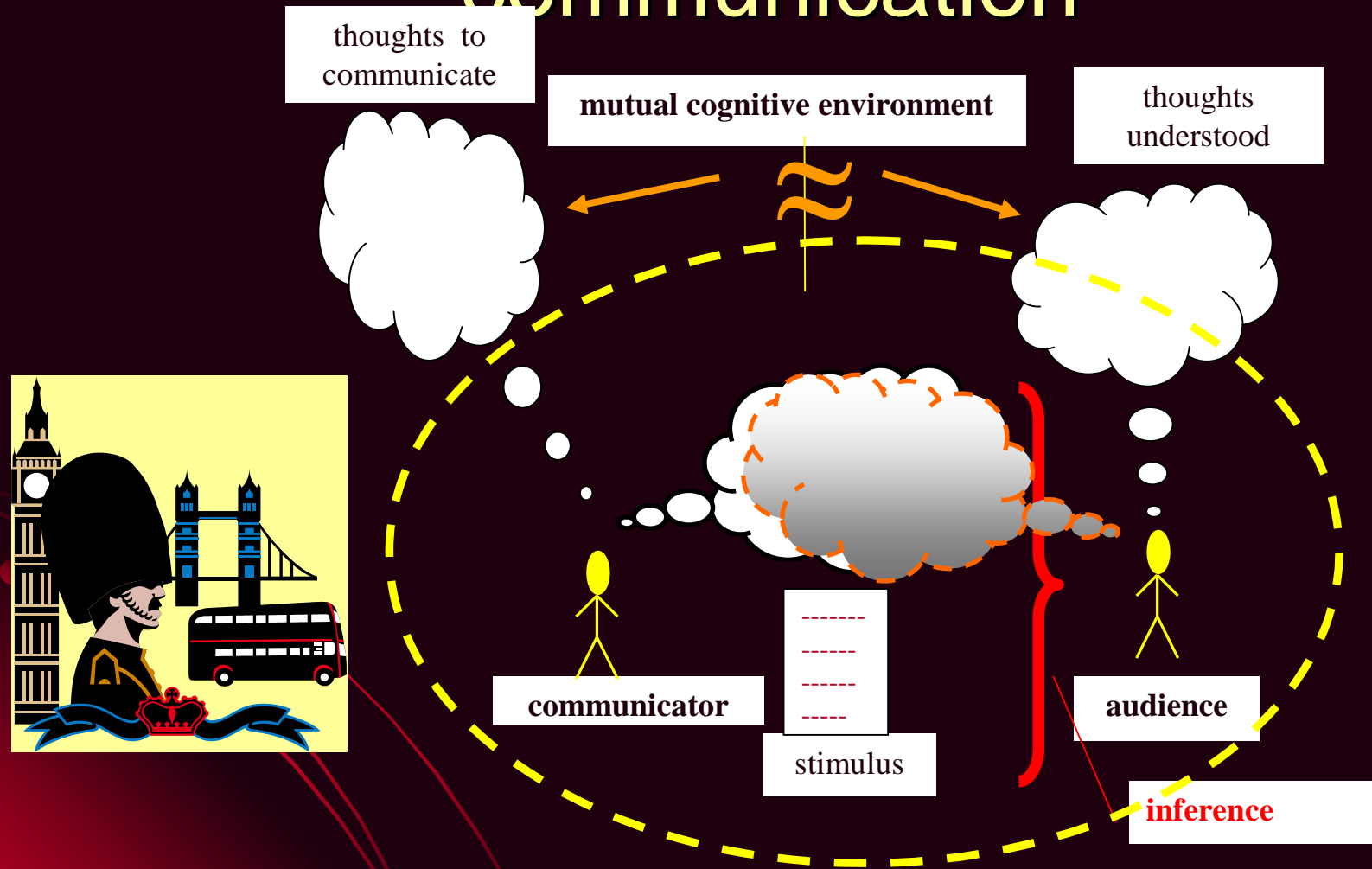
Not enough to understand what is said ...

... we need to know why we are told this!

A highly dynamic, interactive process



An act of ostensive-inferential communication



How utterances influence the interpretation

| Recognisable properties that play a role for the intended interpretation

- | lexical contents
- | grammatical structure
- | other

**communicative
properties**

| Recognisable properties that play no role for the intended interpretation

- | individual voice quality
- | speech impediments
- | other

**incidental
properties**

How utterances influence the interpretation

The thundergod went for a ride
upon his favourite filly.

“I’m Thor!” he cried.

The horse replied,

“You have forgotten you **th**addle **th**illy!”

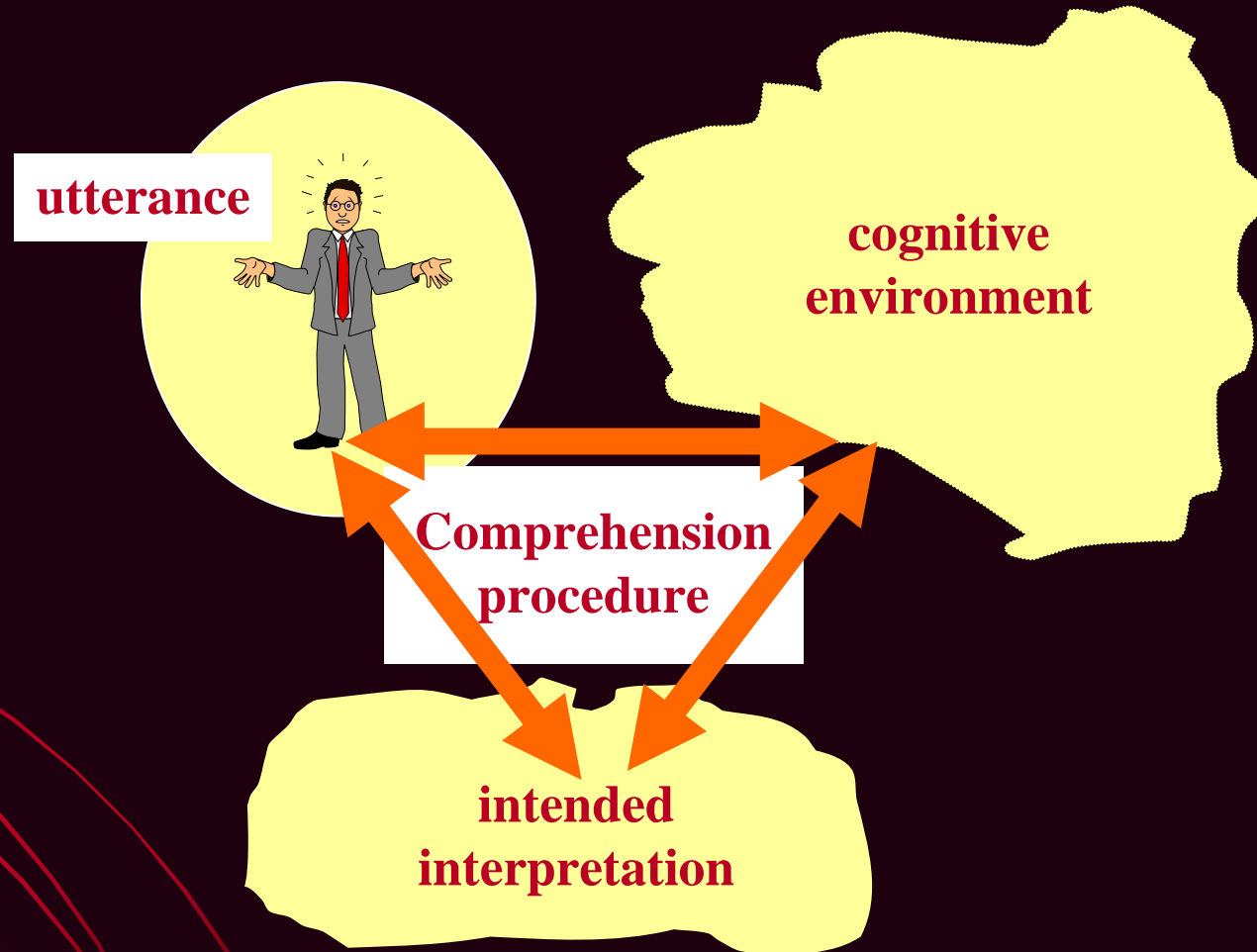
(unknown author)



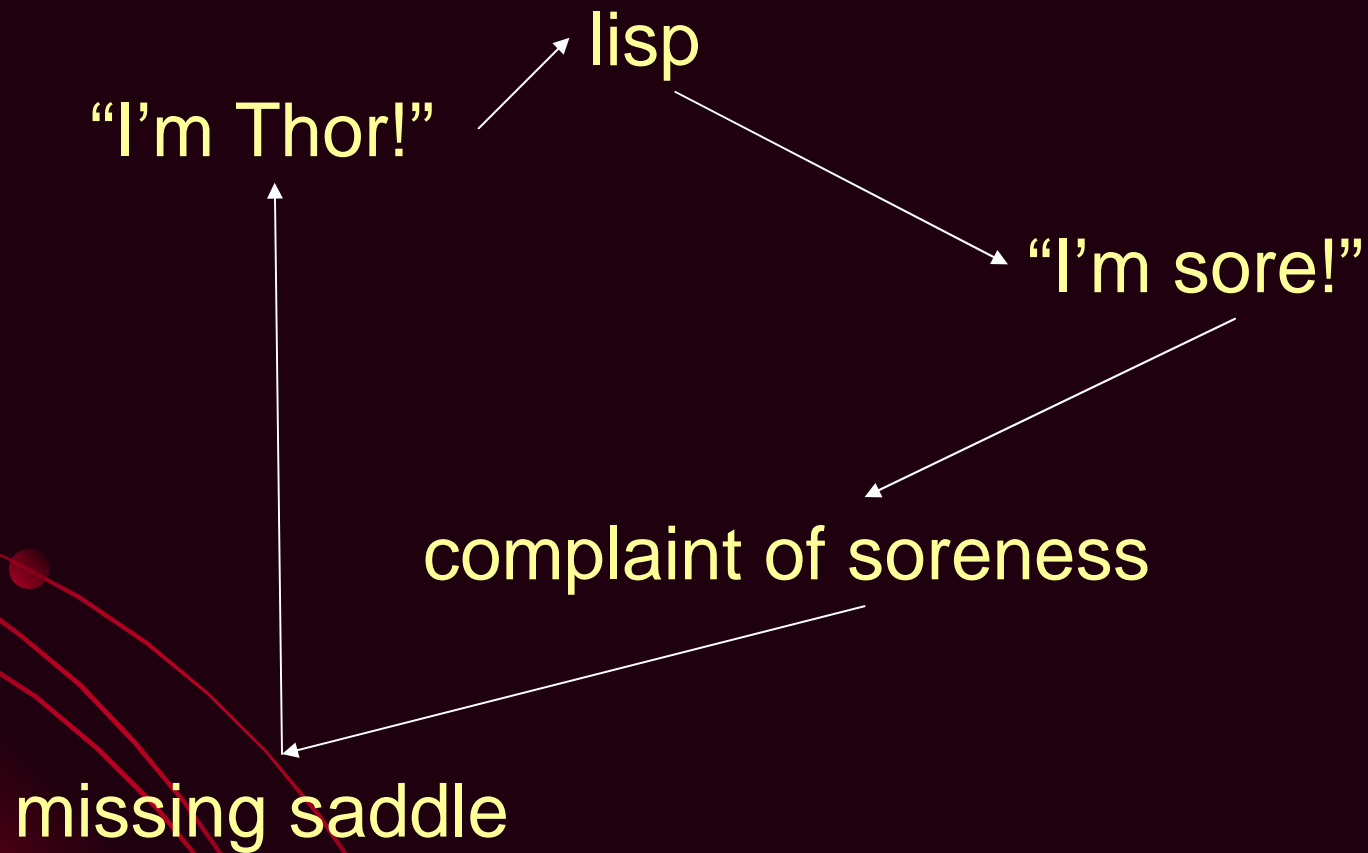
How utterances influence the interpretation

- | Recognisable properties that play a role for the intended interpretation
 - | lexical contents
 - | grammatical structure
 - | other**communicative properties**
 - | Properties that play no role for the intended interpretation
 - | individual voice quality
 - | speech impediments
 - | other**incidental properties**
- 

Dynamic interdependence



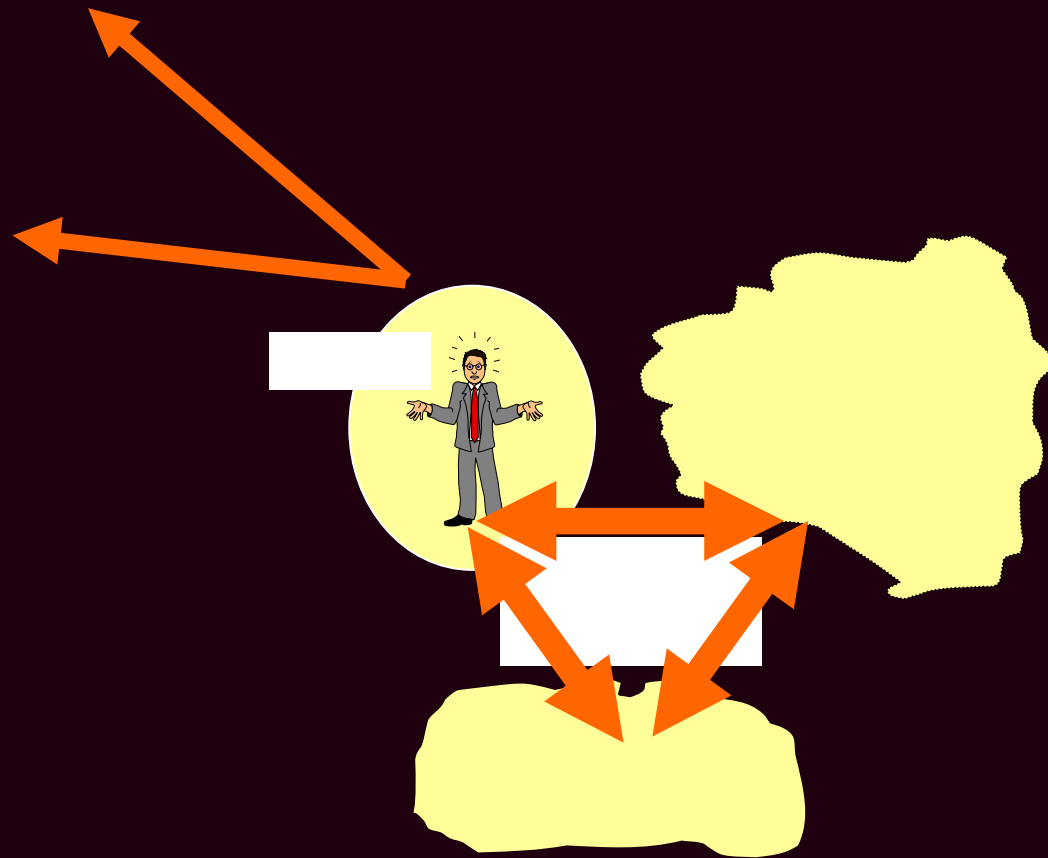
Confirmation by relevance



Communicative properties are utterance dependent

**communicative
properties**

**incidental
properties**



Can "communicative properties" help?

It was the
the
the
the
the sp

it was
as
s
as

Was this adjustment inappropriate?

Is there an objective basis for making that kind of a judgment?

After conjunction reduction:

It was the be
wisdom
incredul
was the spring

age of
belief
ss, it
..., ...

Can a comparison of communicative properties provide such a basis?

The problem: ...

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, ...



Unnecessary effort ...?

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, ...

After conjunction reduction:

It was the best and worst of times, it was the age of wisdom and of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief and incredulity, it was the season of light and darkness, it was the spring of hope and winter of despair, ...

... did Dickens fail?

How does irony arise?

- | representation of what someone said or thought (“echoing”)
- | with a dissociative attitude



Representing the thoughts of other dissociatively

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair — in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.

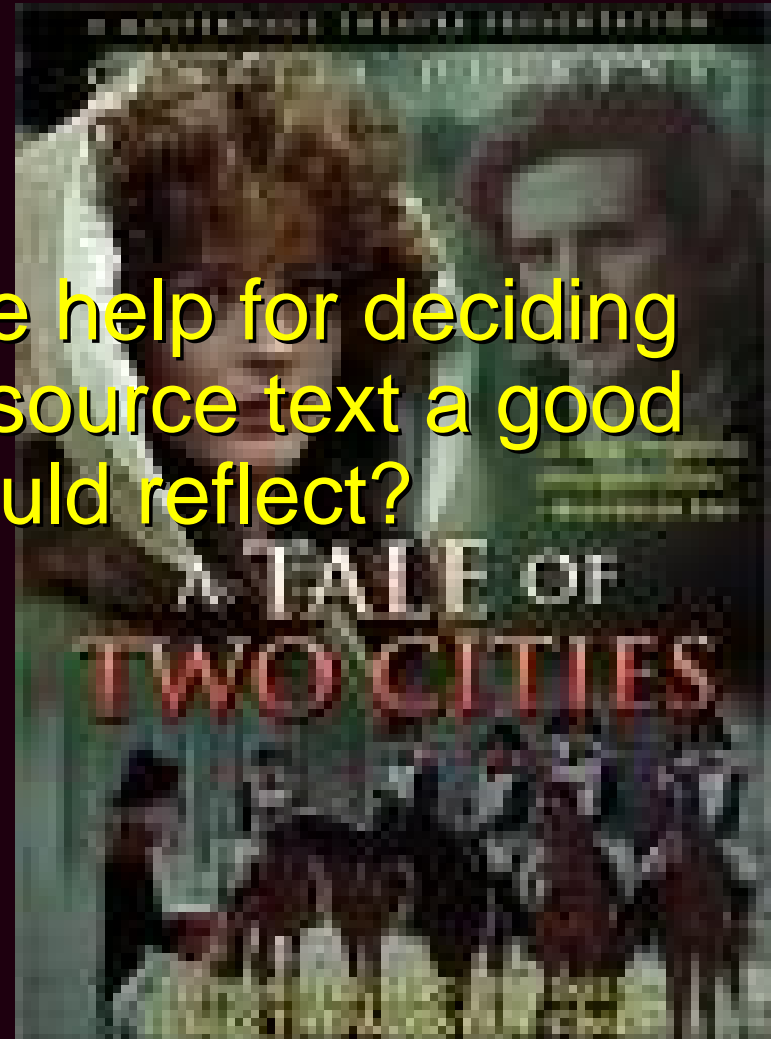
A list of self-contradictory statements

It was the best and worst of times,
it was the age of wisdom and of foolishness,
it was the epoch of belief and incredulity,
it was the season of light and darkness,
it was the spring of hope and winter of despair —
in short, the period was so far like the present
period, that some of its noisiest authorities
insisted on its being received, for good or for evil,
in the superlative degree of comparison only.

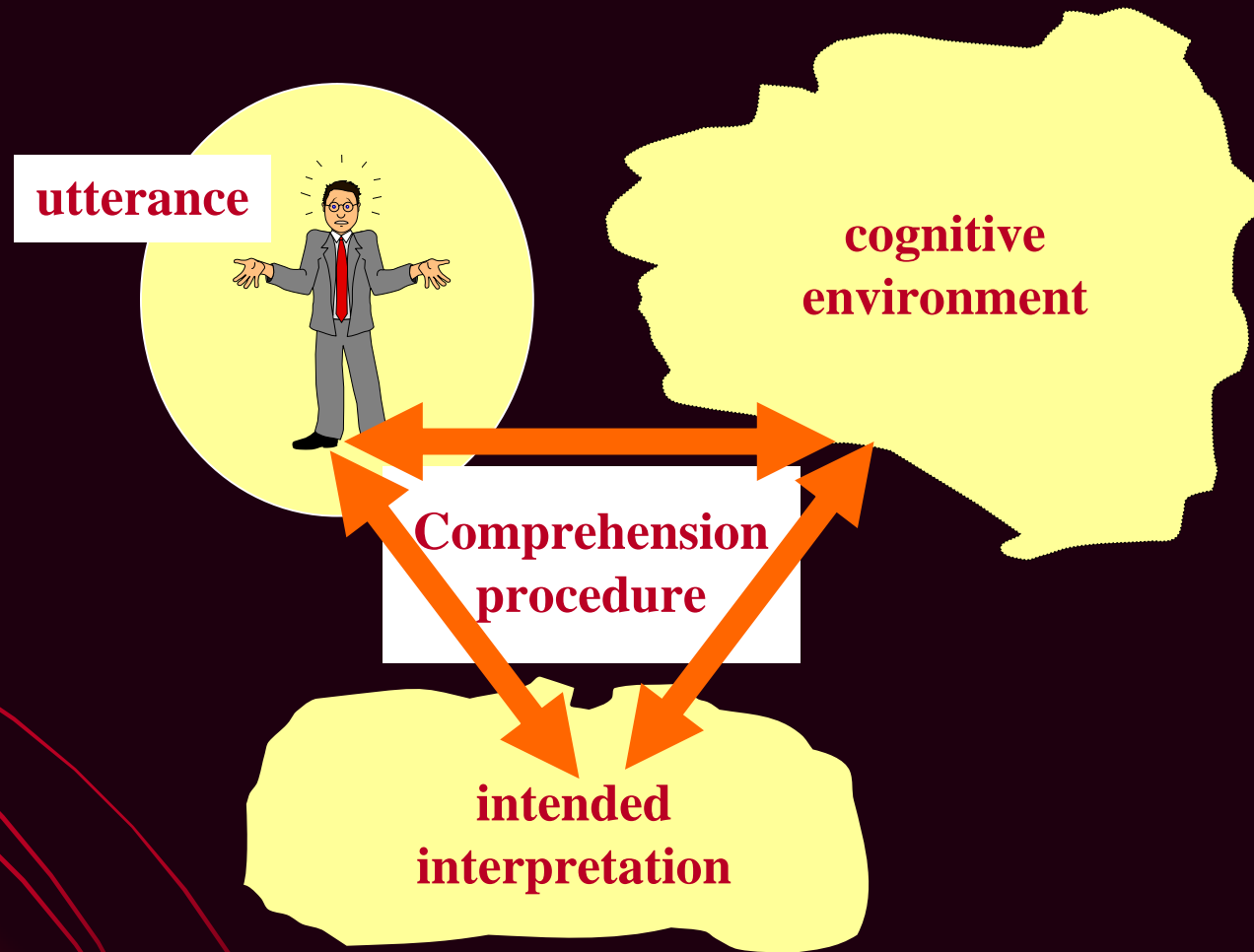


Taking stock

Is there some objective help for deciding which features of the source text a good translation should reflect?



Taking stock



Taking stock


Irony:

**dissociative 'echo' of
someone's opinion**



Taking stock

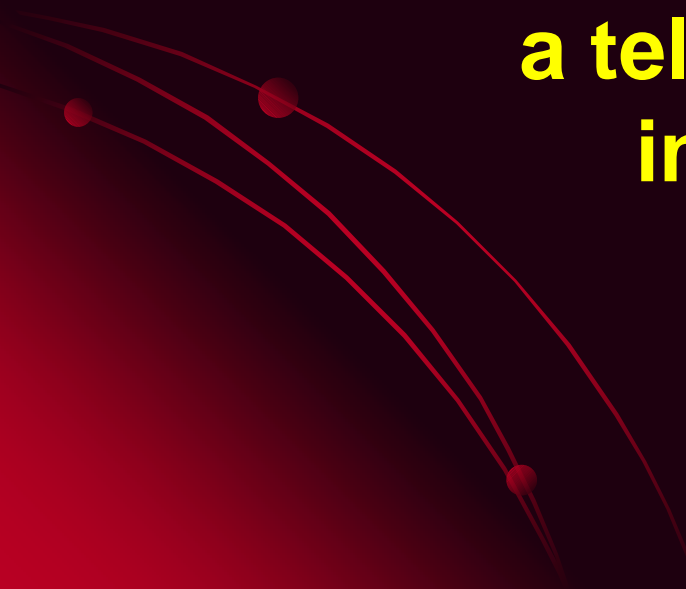
Separate sentences:

- | opinions of different people
 - | communicative property
 - | to be reflected in the translation
- 

Taking stock

Processing effort

**'unnecessary' effort can be
a telltale sign of missed
intended meaning**

A decorative graphic in the bottom-left corner of the slide. It consists of three curved lines, each starting from the left edge and curving downwards and to the right. Each line has a small red circular dot at its end. The lines are thin and light red, and the dots are a slightly darker shade of red.

Taking stock

Why adequate translation
presupposes understanding:

The communicative properties of an
utterance cannot be determined apart
from its intended interpretation



Different languages = different properties

... but the receptor language is
different – has different properties!



Communicative clues



•• Die **Erde** ist
eine **Scheibe**

Und Umweltschutz
ist überflüssig

Wir machen weiter.

Jetzt anrufen, informieren, mitreden.
• Infoline: 0180 - 55 0 95 •
Fax: 040/306 18 - 100
T-Online: greenpeace#
E-Mail: mail@greenpeace.de
Internet: <http://www.greenpeace.de>
Greenpeace e.V., 22745 Hamburg

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••••• ✂ •••••

Literal gloss:

the earth is
a disk

and environment-
protection is
superfluous



•• Die **Erde** ist
eine **Scheibe**

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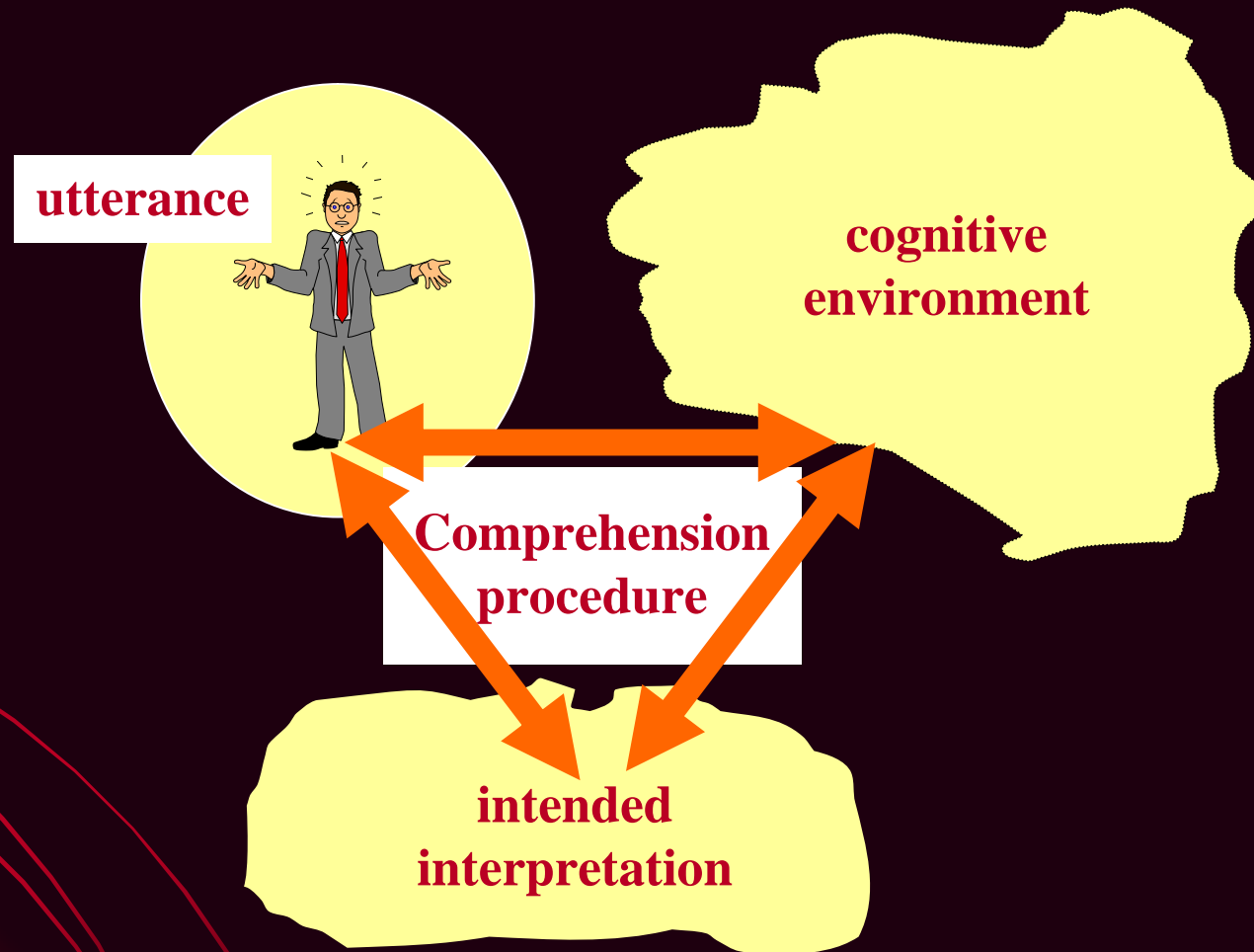
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• 25 Jahre Taten statt Warten •

••••• ✂ •••••

The earth is flat

And protection of the environment is unnecessary

Dynamic interdependence



Communicative clues



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Reader's cognitive environment



Current attitudes:

- | naïve
- | outdated
- | ridiculous etc.

• Die **Erde** ist
eine **Scheibe**

Und **Umweltschutz**
ist **überflüssig**

Wir machen weiter.

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Greenpeace e.V., 22745 Hamburg

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cognitive effects

“claiming today that the environment doesn’t need to be protected is as false, outdated, ridiculous and so forth as claiming that the earth is flat.”

relevant

German: *Scheibe*

Reader's cognitive environment



- | Current attitudes:
- | naïve
- | outdated
- | ridiculous etc.

English: *disk*



English: *flat (earth)*



disk

more processing effort

Die Erde ist eine Scheibe ...

The earth is flat ...

communicative
properties
different



Why is the difference in communicative properties ok?

It leads to the same interpretation as the source text

... influences the interpretation in the same way

... provides the same **communicative clue**

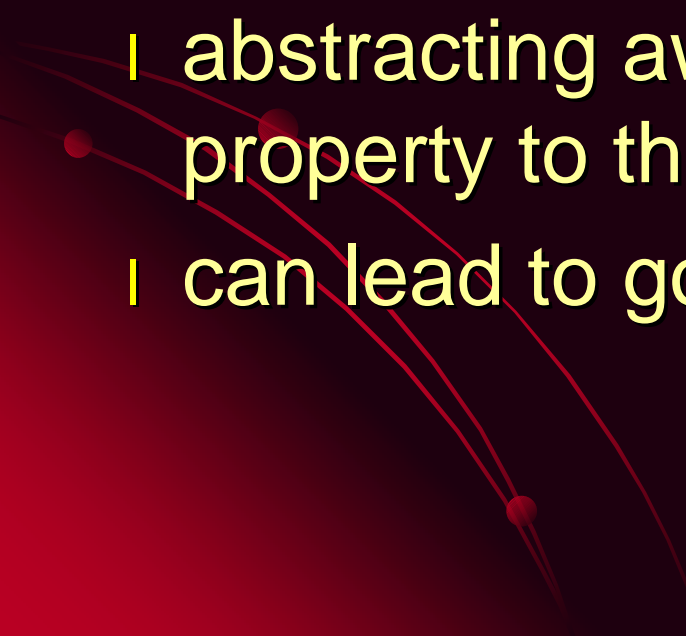


Die Erde ist eine Scheibe ...

The earth is flat ...

provide same
communicative
clues



- | helps in sorting out conflicting intuitions about meaning
 - | helps when receptor language lacks communicative property in source text:
 - | abstracting away from the communicative property to the communicative clue ...
 - | can lead to good translation solutions
- 

Example from an Ethiopian language

English:

| The DEALER stole the money.

Background assumption: someone stole the money

| The dealer STOLE the money.

Background assumption: the dealer did something to the money

Amharic:

| gänzäbun yäsärräqäw nāggadew näw.
the-money he-who-stole the-dealer it-is

| nāggadew yadärrägäw gänzäbun mäsräq näw.
the-dealer what-he-did the-money steal it-is

cf. Gutt 2000:134-135; Sperber
and Wilson 1995, ch. 4, section 5

Usefulness for translators

- | helps in sorting out conflicting intuitions about meaning
- | helps when receptor language lacks communicative property in source text:
 - | abstracting away from the communicative property to the communicative clue ...
 - | can lead to good translation solutions
- | **complementary strategy for translation checking**

Caveats

These notions ...

- | are not a panacea
- | do not address or resolve differences in cognitive environment
- | may require re-analysis of familiar linguistic features
- | do not have a theoretical status of their own

Conclusion

Summing up ...

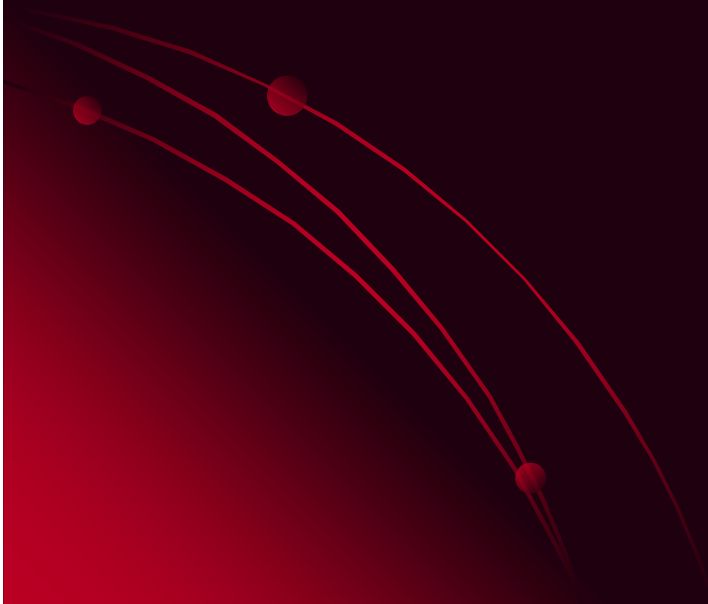


The central role of cognition and relevance in translation – ‘communicative clues’

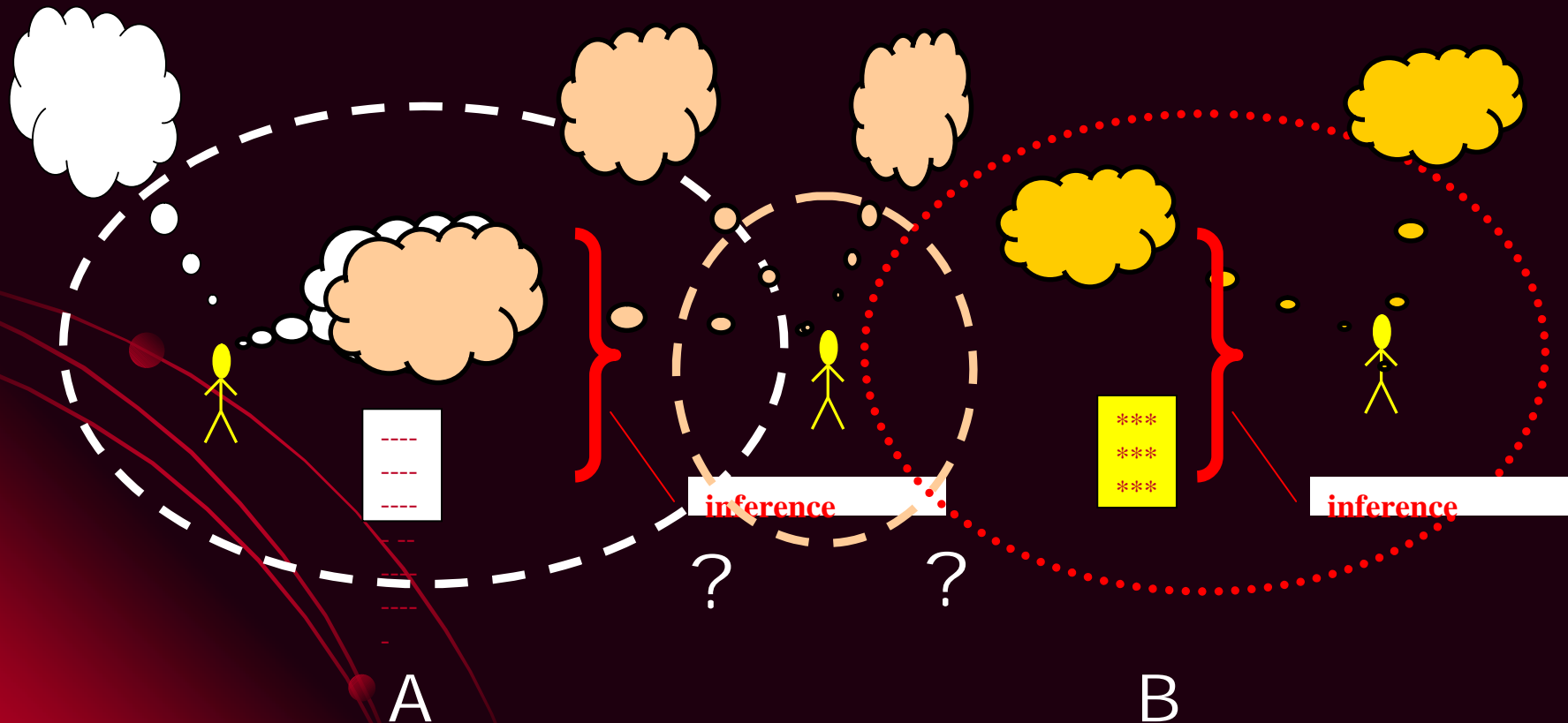
Thank you!



Appendix

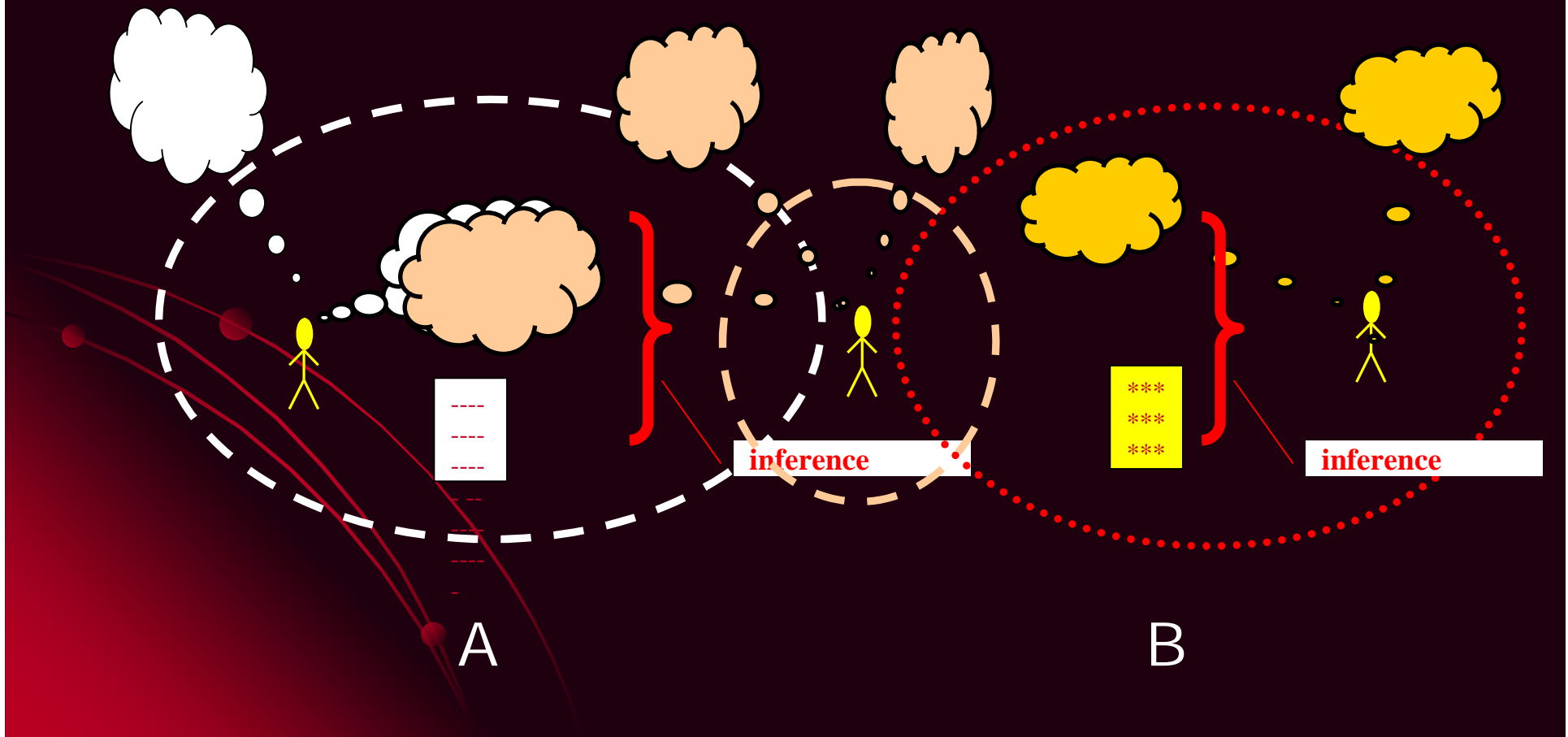


Interpretive processes in translation ...



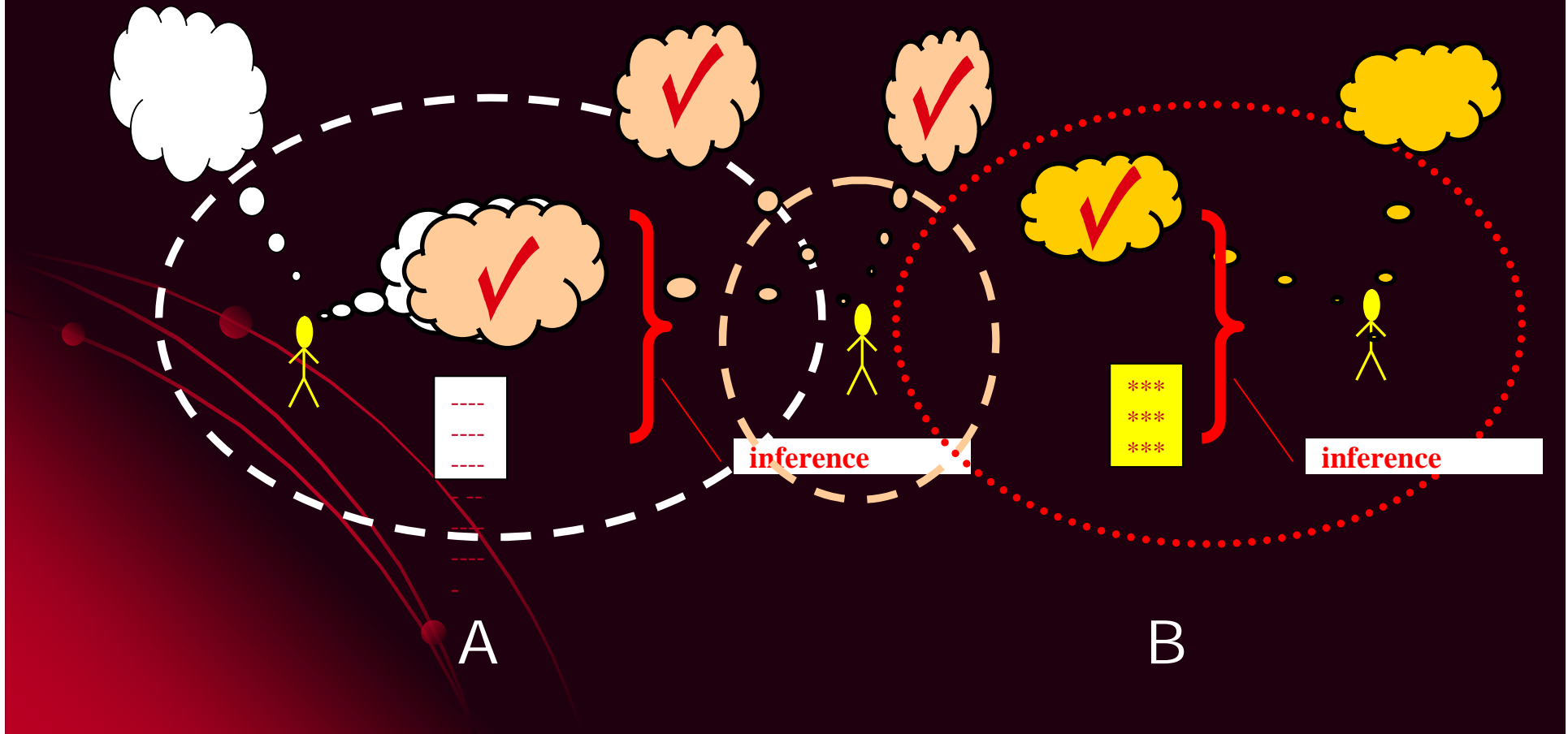
Where translation can go wrong

... (2)



Where translation can go wrong

... (3)



Translation is successful when

...

Maximal resemblance?

