Chapter Nine

RELEVANCE

Schizophrenic speech is notoriously irrelevant, although this has been called by many other names such as being tangential or derailed. What is it that causes such evaluation? What exactly is relevance? How can we determine whether or not speech is relevant? How is relevance achieved? This chapter will show that relevance and truth are not the same thing, that utterances may be untrue, impossible, even fantastic, but still be relevant. Allied to relevance is the problem of establishing mutual ground, including the ways that this is done. The factors leading to judgments of irrelevance can be isolated so that schizophrenic and other psychotic speech can be analyzed as relevant or not by objective standards.


For those involved with psychotic speech, the problem of relevance is especially pressing because the most remarked upon feature of schizophrenic speech is its lack of relevance. Labels like incoherent, tangential, and distracted are all commonly applied to describe schizophrenic speech. Before discussing these, we need to consider what it is that makes sentences relevant to the context so that a topic can be inferred in oral and written communications. What is it that leads to the judgment that what has been said is coherent, relevant, and sensible.

Relevance has two faces: first, how speech is connected to the interaction under examination; and second how it relates to a topic. It is, admittedly, difficult to separate the two as they are Siamese twins. One keeps to a topic by making relevant allusions to it. The overlap is unavoidable, but we can still see a difference between them. Relevance is an ongoing cognitive process. Topic, a macrostructure category, is more directly concerned with syntax.
Common Ground.

In order for successful communication to take place, common ground has to be established between participants in the interaction. Obviously, the longer their mutual history, the more that each can assume the other (or others) know and this will affect what they have to overtly encode (Kreckel 1981). Beyond these social conditions there are syntactic constructions which indicate that a constituent in the sentence or the discourse is common ground. What interests us here is the sorts of devices speakers use to establish common ground without participants' overtly reviewing their mutual or shared knowledge in each interaction.

We typically take anything in the physical environment as being common ground, and we encode on that basis. For instance, if we are sitting at a restaurant table, and there is a candle burning on the table, we could at first reference say, "The wax is getting all over the tablecloth." One need not mention that there is a candle, it is burning and it is melting. Indeed, to mention that would be odd since anyone sitting at the table can see (or, if blind, feel) the flame. It is just such extraneous mention which we associate with schizophrenicity.

Common ground also comes about by simple mention. If someone says, "Darn, the books are on the table," nobody would think that all books on all tables were meant. Rather a hearer would look for a likely table nearby or in view. Failing that, if the interactors had just left a place with a table upon which relevant books could have been left, the statement would cause a hearer to think back to that spot or would assume that the speaker had left the books on some table before meeting up with the hearer. Mention, then, simply because it has been made indicates that a certain scenario must have taken place, in this case, leaving books that the speaker wants or needs. Mention need not be represented as truth. Within a story or other fiction a character might say, "Drats! They've painted the roses red." So long as the narrator then mentions causes or consequences of the painted roses, listeners will consider their existence common ground in that fictional world. If no prior or further reference is made to them, then their mention is perceived as odd, not relevant. In fact, at the end of such a story, someone might say, "But what about the roses?"

Mention of items that cannot be located by such natural strategies may be taken as evidence of a wandering or otherwise incapacitated mind, especially if the mentioner cannot direct the hearer to an appropriate
scene or object. For instance, if one meets up with a person who suddenly says, “Darn, the books are on the table!” with nothing in the environment or present interaction accounting for this exclamation, the hearer might well ask, “What books?” Presumably, then, the original speaker might answer, “Some books that are 30 days overdue at the library.” That explains the expletive and the concern. If, however, the original speaker responded with “Tippecanoe and Tyler too,” the hearer would be justified in thinking something was wrong with that speaker, unless, of course, the interaction was taking place in an American history lecture or the hearer knew that the speaker was a specialist in American elections. We don’t feel an abnormality in the response unless there is no context, including mutual personal knowledge, that the present item can be fit into. Given the very wide latitude and longitude that we have in establishing common ground, the speaker who fails to do so can be seen to be suffering from a serious, indeed primary, deficit.

Mutual cultural and personal knowledge such as matters pertaining to a given job or profession are also givens in establishing common ground. Frequently, at parties when people ask what kind of job I have, and I respond that I teach, they will say things like “Oh, I better watch how I talk.” In our society, teachers are the repository of socially correct speech.

Until the past few years if someone told me that they had to prepare for a Passover Seder I would assume that they were Jewish. Now that Catholics are having seders on Maundy Thursday, that assumption cannot be made. However, if the person were preparing for a seder but not on Maundy Thursday, I would then be justified in still assuming that the person was Jewish.

This last example pertains to another facet of establishing common ground. Peter Seuren (1985, p. 65) reminds us that the lexicon is dynamic. It is not a simple store of meaningful building blocks for sentences. Rather, the lexicon is “an extremely rich quarry whose creative principles are of the highest explanatory value in linguistic theory.” Certainly, speakers can tap into each other’s lexicons forcing new connections between elements and adding meaning to preexisting items. Frequently, this is how common ground is achieved. To give a trivial example, this sort of thing is frequently done with food. Trying to describe Vindaloo to a novice in Indian food, I said, “Try to imagine the hottest chili you ever tasted. Real Tex-Mex. It’s hotter than that.” another party present added, “Try to imagine food so hot your ears hurt by the second bite. That’s Vindaloo.” My comment then was, “Imagine the smoke coming out of
your ears. That’s Vindaloo.” Each of these images extended the novice’s idea of what hot food could be as well as defining Vindaloo. Notice that both real and imaginary experiences may be blended in order to extend meanings and relationships between items in the lexicon. People don’t necessarily associate pain in the ears with spicy food, for instance, and outside of a Mel Brooks’ movie, smoke doesn’t come out of people’s ears. No matter how outlandish such images are, they are not taken as evidence of insanity or other incapacity. What counts is that they have been presented skillfully enough so that the hearer can find their relevance to the topic.

Another technique for establishing mutual ground, one which also can cause shifts in the lexicon, is to localize something in a known shared experience and then extend it from there. For instance, “You think Jerry used to be fat! You should see him now. His stomach looks as if he swallowed a 20 pound watermelon.” or “You know the gown Liz wore for her wedding? Well, this looked exactly the same except there were about double the pearls on the neck—sort of like a turtle neck all with pearls sewn on.”

Clark and Marshall (1981) maintain “The world in which a thing is claimed to exist can be real or imaginary, past, present, or future.” They give the example of a possible world in which the following can be said:

1. A deer and a unicorn were grazing beside a stream when the unicorn complimented the deer on his beautiful extra horn.

By virtue of the verb tenses and the adverbials beside a stream and when, 1 is presented as a factual occurrence. What occurs to me is that we don’t have to posit a possible world; we start with this one. Except for very young children, hearers know that unicorns don’t exist and that animals don’t talk, although herbivorous, animals do graze by streams. Therefore, hearers know that they have to suspend some reality when they hear sentences like 1. At the same time they can imagine the event because of the inclusion of the real. The imaginary is imaginary because of what we know of this world. It seems to me that hearers don’t maintain several worlds in their brains. If they did communication would require longer processing time because a great many extraneous questions would arise: how much of the “possible worlds” would need constructing; would we be forced to imagine possible weather systems? Housing forms? Vegetation? It’s not so much a case of possible worlds which are constructed, but of this world with some imaginary elements.
Utterances, written or spoken, that do not establish enough common ground so that we can cycle into a subject matter, are incoherent even if the individual phrases and sentences used are normal enough. For instance, part of what is wrong with the following is that we can find no common ground on which to build up an event or explanation.

2. After John Black has recovered in special neutral form of life the honest bring back to doctor’s agents must take John Black out through making up design meaning straight neutral underworld shadow tunnel. (Lorenz 1961)

We can assume that there is a person named John Black and that something was wrong with him from which he recovered, but what a “neutral form of life” is remains a mystery. Similarly, although we can assume that a person can be brought out of a tunnel, we aren’t given a clue as to what a “design meaning straight neutral” tunnel can be. This can be seen as a failure to provide proper syntactic cues, but even if these were present, common ground as to the kind of tunnel still has not been established. That is, there may be a syntactic deficiency, but there is also one in the larger discourse task of providing common ground.

Similarly, despite the syntactic errors, the bizarre quality of 3 comes about because it fails to establish what should be answered and the relevance of Paradise to the rest of it.

3. Mill Avenue is a house in between avenues U and avenue T. I live on Mill Avenue for a period of for now a period of maybe fifteen years. For around approximate fifteen years I like it the fam—I like every family on Mill Avenue. I like every family in the world. I like every family in the United State of America. I like every family on Mill Avenue. I like Mill Avenue. It is a block with that is busy cars always pass by all the time. I always look out the window of my front porch at time when I s- when I'm not sure if it's possible about the way I think I could read people mind about people's society attitude plot and spirit so I think I could read their mind as they drive by in the car sh- will I see Paradise will I not see Paradise should I answer should I not answer w- their thought of how I read think I could read their mind about when they pass by in the car in the house pass by in the car from my house I just correct for them for having me feel better about myself not answer will I should I answer should I not answer will I see paradise will I not see paradise I just correct them to have me feel better
about myself about the way I think I can hear their mind r- about the way I think I could read their mind as they pass by the house ... (data courtesy of Dr. Bonnie Spring)\(^1\)

Interestingly, the matter of reading people's minds as they drive by in their cars is established as this is part of a response about what it is like living in the patient's neighborhood. After localizing the street, the patient then comments on people riding by in cars, and expresses doubt that their minds could be read and that there might be plots in the minds of the passers-by. Note that this is understandable despite the syntactic errors in the passage, but the syntactically intact questions about seeing Paradise and answering are precisely what are incomprehensible. "Should I answer, should I not answer" and "will I see paradise, will I not see paradise" are well-formed, but they don't many any "sense." Thus, although they would appear to be contradictory, common ground can be established in otherwise disrupted speech and syntactically undisrupted speech can yield a feeling of incoherence. Common ground and relevance are not wholly a matter of sentence structure.

Whenever someone speaks, in the absence of other evidence, we assume that at least part of his or her utterance is true. In fiction, we assume that we are to take it as true. Grice (1981) offers:

4. The King of France is bald.

In such a sentence, the hearer takes as factual the underlying proposition that there is a king of France. It is not that someone could not deny that there is a king of France, but, in practice, one is more likely to deny that he is bald, not that there is a king of France. Grice (1981, p. 190) feels this is so because both the speaker and hearer usually assume that at least one conjunct in a sentence is undeniable thus having common ground status. Even if the hearer has never heard of an existing king of France, much less whether or not he is bald, still the hearer will assume that the speaker is correct and that such a person exists.

I find another reason for such an assumption. The article the specifically has the meaning of mutual knowledge. That is, by prefacing a noun with the, the speaker is asserting "this noun is one that we both know of." Hence, for instance, if one American says to another "The President," in the absence of more restrictive context, both will assume that the speaker meant the current President of the United States. Additionally, the topic of the sentence, the first NP, is often taken as given and the predicate is
taken as the comment on that topic. This is what demagogues or even less venal politicians bank on. The hearer assumes that part of the sentence containing the topic is common knowledge and regards it as common knowledge.

Grice adds that another way to achieve undeniability is to mention uncontroversial matters, i.e., “my aunt’s cousin.” No one would question that you have an aunt or that she has a cousin. To this, one could add a whole host of people whose existence you would accept as real: my husband, my high school English teacher, your nemesis, or his brother. None of these need any particular introduction as we assume that just about everyone has or has had such human relationships. Moreover, the possessive my like the is used to signal something already known to participants.

Similarly, “my home” used to be taken as a given, because in America everybody supposedly had a home. Now that has changed, so in a circumstance in which the speaker is homeless and says to the hearer, also homeless, “My home is comfortable,” the hearer knowing that the speaker is homeless, could easily deny that the speaker has a home. For that matter if someone was laden with overstuffed bags and had a general ragged look, almost anyone might doubt that he or she really had a home. It is not necessarily the case that certain utterances or positions in sentences are automatically taken as true or not.

Both Sanders (1987) and Kreckel (1981) stress that a history of shared interactions leads to more accurate understandings between parties. There are more bases upon which to establish common grounds. Shared histories mean that less needs to be said to indicate what common ground is to be assumed, and the more accurately implicatures will be achieved. However, even strangers have ways of establishing common ground.


Apart from formal cohesive devices like conjunctions, relevance can be achieved by the meaning of sentences themselves. If I am talking about rules, for instance, and suddenly mention infractions, relevance is achieved simply because that word is semantically relevant to our concept of rules. All that is necessary for relevance is that the talk of infractions relates to the rules that were discussed previously, or to ones that are going to be mentioned. In contrast, the semantic chaining in
Relevance

Fauconnier's (1985) metaphor of mental spaces pertains to relevance as well as to pragmatics. He says that language forms refer to elements which are set up and mentally pointed to. Language makes its own constructions, building up mental spaces, the relations between them and the relations between elements within them. He portrays language forms as being plucked out of internal networks and pointing outward, perceiving speakers as creating mental spaces which are then populated with language. It seems to me that this view has special explanatory significance for the analysis of schizophrenic speech. Whereas relevance is achieved by mental pointing, schizophrenic irrelevancies seem to be caused by roaming around in internal networks without indications of connection between exterior or interior relations.

Sanders (1987, p. 186) maintains that relevant entries in a discourse affirm, deny, add, or seek information about a proposition or combination of propositions already mentioned. I would amend this to include as well entries which have been suggested laterally, so to speak, by something just said. These are shown to be relevant by further propositions which develop another aspect of the proposition or even a new proposition. Thus topics can and do advance and change within one normal discourse provided that entries are relevant. It is not change of topic per se, then, that gives some discourse its schizophrenic flavor, nor is it necessarily the formal ways of indicating change. It is that schizophrenics do not then produce subsequent entries which affirm, deny, add, or seek information about what they have just said. This is one of the things wrong with the following:

5A. Looks like clay. Sounds like gray. Take you for a roll in the hay. . . . (Cohen 1978)
5B. I was watching a film of a girl and um s bring back memories of things that happened to people around me that affected me during the time when I was living in the area and she just went to the store for a candy bar and by the time ooh of course her brother who was supposed to be watching wasn't paying much attention he was blamed for and I didn't think that was fair the way the way they did that either so that's why I'm just asking yah could we just get together and try to work it out all together for one big party or something ezz it hey if it we'd all in which is in not they've been here so why you
just now discovering it. You know they they've been men will try to use you every time for everything he wants so ain't no need and you trying to get upset for it. That's all. That's all.
5C. You want me to talk about -um- last week experience I had?n it was funny, 'is experience seems to sum up all of what's been goin' on because I've been walkin' around recitin' things. I've written to people and people been listening but then when you get down to it you've got to scrub your own dishes or else nobody's gonna an' I've just been so totally against the idea of people feelin' they have a ticket to carry them along because it's a ticket is not an easy trip along by no means is probably harder if you understand what I mean.

In 5A the first phrase, looks like clay is accurate, but the next sounds like tells us nothing about looking like gray, and taking someone for a roll in the hay advances neither preceding proposition. The only way to make sense out of this is not to try to understand what it means, but to understand the processes that could have produced it.
5B starts out just fine with a recollection brought about by the film. Then the brother is mentioned and the fact that he was supposed to be watching but didn't do it. Then the statements cease to advance the topic. We never find out what he was blamed for, nor who they are nor what they did, nor do we find out what relevance the party has to the preceding. The word salad "hey if it we'd all in which is in not they've been here..." cannot be interpreted in terms of relevance at all, since we don't know what it means, but the irrelevancy of the entire is not caused by this lapse.
5C was produced in answer to the question, "Do you remember the video you saw with me last week?" This is acknowledged in the first statement. Actually, it is possible to give an interpretation of the entire. It seems as if the patient is commenting on the need for self-reliance, of not depending on anybody else. This assumption is based upon the passage when you get down to it you've gotta scrub your own dishes and the references to a ticket. In that context, it is reasonable to assume that the patient is talking about people getting a "free ride." As with so much of SD speech, it is interpretable if you tape it and then examine it at leisure. The irrelevancies get in the way of ordinary interpretation in face-to-face interactions. We are not told how the experience "last week" pertains to his walking around reciting things. There is no elucidation of things, nor
are we told what he has written and what people have been listening to. The but, far from introducing a contrastive statement to what has gone immediately before simply introduces another statement not made relevant, nor are we told why having a ticket makes things harder. This lacks sufficient relevant entries although it is loaded with expressions of time, place, and cohesion.

Normal discourse does not always shows adherence to one topic. As we saw earlier, it often doesn't. In some instances, in normal conversation, overt topic changing markers are used, such as “ooh, that reminds me . . .” or “not to change the subject, but . . .” which are instructions not to interpret following remarks as belonging in sequence. Stubbs (1983, p. 183) points out that these are used strategically, but are not required in the sense that certain syntactic rules are.

Even if such markers are not used in normal discourse, the new topic itself becomes the source of other entries relevant to it. In glossomania, often within sentences, our feeling that a topic is not being adhered results from the lack of affirmations, denials, additions, or questions about any of the propositions singly or in combination. Our sense that there is no strategy in schizophrenic passages like 5A and B, our sense that the sentences seem to be thrown together arises from the absence of such relevant additions to anything mentioned. That is what makes people characterize schizophrenic speech as having “loose associations.”

In order to make entries relevant, one need only formulate in any way possible structures which can be construed as adding to the macro-topic or otherwise alluding to it (Chaika 1976). Relevant entries in and of themselves effect coherence and cohesion aside from any particular overt syntactic cohesive devices which may be used. vanDijk (1977, p. 148; 1980, pp. 105, 194) himself frequently confirms that local coherence is not a matter of connecting facts linearly, but of connecting them to the topic of the sequence. Sanders says:

For strategic purposes, the disposition to say or do something in particular is a secondary consideration to the following ones: (1) whether that utterance . . . can be relevantly entered in the discourse or dialogue at that juncture, and (2) which outcomes become possible (i.e., relevant) and which do not if contemplated utterances . . . are entered at that juncture. (Sanders 1987, p. 11)

VanDijk (1980, p. 77) further points out that macrostructures allow us to “ . . . specify a set of possible inferences . . . ” These are not paraphrases
of the actual sentences used, but are *semantic transformations* which reduce and organize information as well as limit the conclusions. Well-formed macrostructures consisting of relevant microstructures allow such transformations, but ill-formed ones do not. We often find it impossible to infer anything from schizophrenic discourse by referring to the macrostructure itself. Similarly, and from the same cause, we have difficulty coming to conclusions about what the schizophrenic meant. Perhaps because of this, the history of psychotherapy has largely been a history of trying to devise extraordinary ways of achieving inferences and conclusions (Chaika 1981).

For instance, the preceding paragraph can be summarized by saying that well-formed macrostructures allow us to make inferences and conclusions in a non-ad hoc manner. From that paragraph, one can conclude that I believe this is one definable difference between normal and schizophrenic discourse. One can also infer that I believe that psychotherapeutic analyses are fallacious.

Note that these observations are not to be construed as saying that schizophrenic speech never allows inference and conclusions. Some of it obviously does. Some of it can be summarized. In fact, 5B above can be. With some justice, one can even infer that the speaker feels that it is useless for women to complain about being used by men, but the passage is still recognizably schizophrenic (Chaika and Alexander 1986 and Chapter 1).

In contrast, “my mother’s name is Bill ... and coo” is not amenable to summarizing beyond saying something like “The speaker talked crazy about her mother’s name and birds.” We are told that the speaker likes buzzards and thinks they and parakeets work hard, but what can we infer from the rest? About all we can do is repeat what she has said.

We cannot suppose, however, that relevance is foreordained by the macrostructure. We must also allow for the skill of the speaker in creating newly relevant sentences by making connections never before made. This is quite usual in scholarship, for instance. In fact, creating new relations is inherent in scholarship, but is not at all confined to it. Anyone who has a different slant on things can make sentences relevant to a topic that has not previously been conceived of as being relevant. This effectively excludes glossomanic chaining as being in any way a manifestation of intact linguistic ability (Fromkin 1975). Although the patient is connecting sentences and phrases in wholly new ways, these
cannot be construed as being relevant. For precisely this reason, such chaining has always struck observers as being pathological.


Sanders (1987) calls his model of relevance a decision-theoretic model of meaning because, he says, speakers make decisions about what to present as the discourse unfolds. They decide what will best achieve their goals, whether or not a certain utterance is relevant. These decisions change as the situation unfolds. The decision-theoretic model has the distinct advantage of accounting for the ways that relevance is achieved in interaction and what happens and why when it does not. It also avoids the problem of topic-centered theories of discourse in that it shows how topics do get changed in an ongoing interaction with no overt announcement.

Despite his theory of macrostructure, Van Dijk (1980, p. 215) implicitly admits that the construction of relevance is ongoing in a conversation or other discourse mode. He asserts that a proposition is irrelevant if “... it is not an interpretation condition of a following proposition in the sequence.” This claim should be amended to recognize the reversibility of relevant utterances. Thus we can say that a contribution is relevant if it influences a subsequent contribution or if a subsequent contribution is interpretable by reference to a prior one. That is, for any sentence in a discourse, we can determine relevance either by its influence on a subsequent sentence or by determining that it has been influenced by a prior one.

A contribution need not be specifically relevant to its immediate progenitor, nor to its immediate successor. We have already seen the samples of glossomania in which phrases are contiguous but nonsensical. Proximity is no guarantee of relevance. The requisite condition is just that some subsequent or prior contribution relate to it. To my knowledge, nobody has yet computed exactly the degree of proximity requisite for one sentence to be counted as relevant to another in the discourse. It may be that there is no such metric, at least not as a hard and fast rule. We might sensibly expect that there is individual variation in how much space or time can elapse before entries are too far apart to be perceived as relevant.

In any event, there are many linguistic devices which serve the pur-
pose of reminding a cospeaker or reader that a nonimmediately prior statement is to be taken as relevant. Typical examples are:

- As noted above . . .
- The reader may recall that . . .
- As I was saying before we got off the track . . .
- Well, look, to finish what I was telling you about . . .
- Oh, remember what I was telling you . . .
- To get back to what happened last night . . .
- Do you remember when we went to the Yale game last year?

These last can be used to refer to a discourse prior to the current one. Relevance can be created when the mutually influential sentences are not adjacent simply by localizing the time and place being spoken of, or, in Fauconnier’s terms, by mentally pointing to them. By the use of HYPOTHETICALS, even imaginary events or events not shared mutually are made relevant.

Even within the context of one discourse mutually relevant normal utterances may not be proximate for several reasons, including, but not necessarily limited to:

- intervening material which elucidates a prior or coming utterance
- reference to a disturbance in the physical atmosphere
- deliberate digression to recount a non-relevant experience or idea which the speaker has just been reminded of and is afraid of forgetting
- apology for content or mode of presentation
- correcting a cospeaker’s misinterpretation of a prior utterance

Sanders (1987, pp. 175–206) shows that any entry in a discourse has further entries as its consequence, but no single entry must be made. The possibilities of what can be made is constrained but not ordained. At each juncture, the situation changes, and with it, so do the co-speakers’ options. As it unfolds, the speaking situation allows each participant to project different consequences of what must be said next. Of course, this also means that cospeakers cannot predict each other’s reactions with complete certainty. Besides the obvious problem that each person relates what is said to his or her personal experiences, there is also the fact that comprehension is not effected by an algorithm any more than speech is produced by one. Rarely does an utterance mean only one thing, and one cannot predict exactly what meaning a cospeaker may derive from it.
When it does become evident that the cospeaker has misinterpreted, correction can be made. This, then, further affects subsequent relevant contributions. It strikes me that Sanders' model of relevance explains one important facet of conversation that no other model does: the ways that topics change during the course of a conversation.

It cannot be stressed too much that these conditions of interpretation in the light of the unfolding of meaning in a discourse are based upon verifiable strategies and canons of comprehension, and that any meanings not so derived are suspect.

An integral part of a decision model of discourse is projecting how one's contribution will advance the goal of the interaction. The goal need not be a definite one; it can be nothing more than a desire to promote self-interest no matter what occurs in the situation (Sanders, p. 178), or it can be purely phatic such as "shooting the breeze."

We can even rehearse our contributions as in those conversations we have with ourselves in which we project what the other person is going to say and how we will, therefore, answer. Of course, the same can go on after the fact when we ruefully think of what we should have said and how it would have affected the outcome. The latter activity is proof of the difficulty of responding adequately in the midst of conversation to the cospeaker, all the while trying to formulate how self-interest is best served in the situation. This problem is compounded by the necessity of making our contribution relevant both to our goals, and to what has been said or implied by each cospeaker in this interaction or prior ones.

For that matter, it is not inconceivable for our goals to change during the course of an interaction. Perhaps the cospeaker turns out to be far nicer and more accommodating than originally thought. Perhaps he or she turns out to have been duplicitous or guilty or suddenly revealed to be quite stupid and uncomprehending. Whichever, each contribution to the conversation can change its course all the while remaining relevant in terms of what has gone before. Sanders himself assumes a steadiness of goal or of self-interest, but there is nothing in his presentation that denies such changes.

In sum, cospeakers who are perceived as maintaining relevance make their contributions in light of what has been said. They may change the subject, but this is done in orderly ways, such as

- Not to change the subject, but . . .
- That reminds me . . .
- Before we go on a tangent . . .
Then new entries into the conversation will refer to the new topic. Topics are continuously being negotiated in the course of an interaction or in the course of reading. Contributions heard as schizophrenic do not do that. As we have seen, these utterances are often governed by chance phonological or semantic features of a prior utterance.

This conception of the sequential nature of the consequences of what has been said illuminates the difference between SD psychotic utterances and those heard as normal. As we have seen, SD narratives and conversations frequently start out all right, but as they go along they become progressively more deviant. A sequential model of discourse predicts such derailing in a group generally acknowledged to suffer from cognitive deficits. The longer the conversation the more that must be kept in mind in formulating next entries. This is true within one turn. The longer the dialogue, the more challenging it is to remember all that one has said.


There are syntactic clues which interpreters can look for in determining the relevance of statements to the time of speaking or writing as well as for determining semantic relevance. The syntax of English has codified relevance onto the system of verb tense and aspect. Robin Lakoff (1972) noted that it is not possible to say

- Shakespeare is a noted drunkard.

but that it is fine to say

- Shakespeare is a noted playwright.

and, if we believe it true

- Shakespeare was a noted drunkard.

The reason that we can use the present tense of his being a playwright is that his literary works are still relevant to his reputation, but that his being or not being a drunk is not. Similarly, if one says “my uncle had blue eyes,” the very use of the past tense indicates that my blue-eyed uncle is dead.

In contrast, if someone says, “My dog died,” one would be surprised to discover that this occurred 25 years ago. The use of the unadorned past tense here indicates that the death was in the recent past. I suspect
that the reason for this interpretation is that we usually qualify a change of state with an adverbial of time, especially if the change was long ago. That is, if the event is proximate, we signal that by not mentioning time. If it is distant, then we do mention time.

There is a corollary presumption of relevance when mentioning locations. The very fact that a place is mentioned without a qualifying locative term often means that it is relevant because it is close by. If Myrtle tells me, “I found the greatest place to get Liz Claiborne clothes cheap!” because I live in Rhode Island, I would not expect the store to be in California. I assume that the store will be within an hour or so’s drive. Otherwise, Myrtle should append something like, “too bad it’s 3000 miles away” or “I found the greatest place in L.A.” or the like.

Presumed relevance is a key ingredient in how we understand. As the above sections show, we ordinarily assume that speech is relevant to the topic and, therefore, the context. Such an assumption underlies our interpretation of when the dog died or where the Liz Claiborne store is.


Part of our ordinary conversational strategy is to figure out how what has been said can be relevant to the matter at hand. The relevant meaning is the one we take as having been meant. In instances of ambiguity we disambiguate, or try to, in terms of what is relevant, ignoring any irrelevant meanings which may accidentally inhere to the words and grammar used. For this reason, failure to “get” a pun is not unusual, nor does it seem easy for most people to create puns. Therefore, it is a true dysfunction in schizophrenia that patients are conscious of meanings which are irrelevant for the context, a circumstance apparently leading to the glossomanic punning so characteristic of that population. Maher (1983, p. 8) gives as an example

6. To Wise and Company,
   If you think that you are being wise to send me a bill for money I have already paid I am in nowise going to do so unless I get the whys and wherefores from you to me. But where fours have been then fives will be and other numbers and calculations and accounts to your no-account no-bill, noble, nothing.

Here the name Wise becomes the source of puns on wise meaning
"wiseguy," nowise, and whys, just as noble forms a punning relations with no-bill which is a pun on no-account (in the meaning of account which means "bill." The inherent abnormality of this is that the puns are not relevant to anything except their chance resemblances to each other, and relevance assumes meaning coherent with the context.


Oddly, it is possible to have a highly deviant passage in which one can find the relevance of the parts to the whole. Consider the entire passage presented as failure of cohesive ties in Chapter 6:

7. Well I want to work for god in the mission and to work for god in the mission you have to be able to speak and think in a lord tongue in my opinion now to speak and think in a lord tongue you have to have to be able to memory the process memory the parle—the process in the bible the thought pattern the brain wave and your thought process must be healthy enough and your legs must be healthy enough to when you want to study and from when you want to study and progress in the way of the lord you should read the bible and as you read the bible you should if you are in good shape physical and mental and mental good shape and physical good shape you should be able to acquire the memory knowledge necessary as to study the bible to speak and think in a lord tongue you should be able to memory all the knowledge down on down on the page in the bible book to work for god in the mission now in the position I am in now with the medicate and with the hospital program I am being helped but at the same time that I am being help with the food and medicate the food and medicate and the and the ah rest I feel that I still do not have this I still not have the thought pattern and the mental process and the brain wave necessary to open up a page open up the old testament and start to memory it the old te- the old new testament page of the bible start to have me- memory knowledge necessary to speak to think in the lo- speak and think in the lord’s tongue while you study while you study the bible while you study the bible the memory the knowledge necessary to go to work for god in the mission so when your thought problem your brain wave and your mental process is quick enough you will be able to memory the
knowledge in in the old and new testament bible and from memory knowledge in the old testament and new testament bible you are able to memory the knowledge necessary necessary to think and speak in the lord’s tongue and go to work for god in the mission.
(courtesy of Dr. Bonnie Spring)

There are some grammatical errors here, notably the lack of derivational morphemes like -tion on medicate and -ize on to memory. Even without these we feel that this is highly deviant. We understand that the speaker wishes to work in a mission, is concerned with being able to read both testaments, and needs help for his brain problems before he can do this. He also acknowledges that the food and the medication are helping him, but they haven't yet allowed him to fulfill his goals. Additionally, he seems to be concerned with his memory which he feels is not up to the snuff required for biblical study. The problem with the passage inheres in the constant repetitions which do not advance any message; indeed, they get in the way. The entire does not progress. It has a distinct circular movement, starting and ending on the same note, with the same phrases being recycled.

Sanders (1987) concerns himself with the things that can ordinarily go wrong in a conversation. He does not deal with pathologies of any kind, although he does account for cross-cultural miscommunication. Still, his observations bear fruit. Speaking only of normal interactions, Sanders points out that disordered conversation can result from poor exercise of what he terms as STRATEGIC OPTIONS. That is, when faced with a juncture in conversation, cospeakers choose from various options. If the speaker is not successful in those choices, then disorder can result. Thus Sanders locates the source of incoherence specifically in choices made in accordance with the utterances in the developing conversation. Incoherence results when relevance to the context cannot be ascertained by cospeakers. However, this is not just a problem on the part of hearers.

Incoherence ultimately rests upon the choices of speakers or, as seems probable at least some of the time with schizophrenics, the lack of choices. The most disrupted speech, glossomania, seems to be choiceless. The curiously “automatic” flavor of such speech seems to derive from this sense we have that no choices were made, except perhaps for the first part of the utterance. Such speech seems to derive from distraction so great that speakers cannot focus on what needs to be said to advance a discourse coherently. As shown in Chapter 2, SD speech shows the kinds
of patterns one would expect if automatic language functions took over, so to speak, precluding direction afforded by choice. The result is incoherence and irrelevance.

Sanders' insights do give us a working definition of what makes schizophrenic speech tangential and obscure even when it is not accompanied by disruptions in word formation and the structure of the individual sentence. Simply put, it does not seem to contribute to any agenda. Cospeakers cannot find a connection between the schizophrenic speech and what has transpired previously in the interaction, nor can they find an appropriate response. This is because the schizophrenic's contribution may not itself set up the condition for possible responses.


If Sanders account is correct, and I feel that it is substantively so, there is a great cognitive burden on conversants. They must manage turntaking, consider the effect of their speech and of their silence on the ongoing interaction, at the same time divining others' intentions in order to understand in the manner intended.

... conversants must ... [identify] ... transition boundaries within turns and topics, distinguishing between entries intended to be contributions and spurious ones, and organizing contributions into coherent wholes (e.g., episodes). (Sanders 1987, p. 210)

It is no wonder, then, that schizophrenics so often seem to fail in conversation, even when they are evincing no apparent breakdown in structuring sentences. Sanders specifically talks about populations with presumably intact linguistic and cognitive processes, not aphasics or the mentally ill.

Considering peculiarly schizophrenic speech as emanating from the cognitive strains of conversation makes explicit the connection between SD and NSD schizophrenics. Incoherence proceeds on a cline of severity from structurally well-formed but inappropriate responses to a general disintegration of sentence structure and word formation that in the worst cases manifests itself as gibberish and word salads. Dealing with speech as a competency in itself allows us to formulate a coherent account of the illness, one that shows us the connection between SD and NSD schizophrenia. It also explains why some patients manifest different degrees of pathology in their speech.
The cognitive strains spoken of here are not necessarily limited to those patients who are so often called thought disordered. They, of course, show the greatest cognitive disruption. Many patients who would be termed NTD, whose speech doesn’t consist of word salads or glossomania, but is considered merely obscure or peculiar can be seen to be evincing cognitive strain. They are not up to the strains of monitoring cospeakers, figuring out what words and syntax were used by cospeakers, figuring out their intent, matching utterances to context, choosing words and syntax themselves to encode responses relevant to the cospeakers contributions and to their own goals, figuring out how the cospeakers' utterances as they unfold are relevant to what has been said previously, and figuring out to keep their own relevant. Grice (1975, p. 45) points out that “Our talk exchanges do not normally consist of a succession of disconnected remarks and would not be rational if they did.” Of course, it is just such disconnected utterances which gives us the feeling that certain speech is “schizophrenic.”


Relevance is also achieved by conforming to a genre of discourse. A genre is a speech form such as a joke, a sermon, or a narrative. These can vary widely in different cultures. Dennis Jarrett (1984) makes an excellent case for his proposition that blacks understand the genre of the blues, but that whites and Hispanics find that the lyrics don't quite make sense, but in the black culture they do. The blues are intended to describe the singer's feelings and to satirize aspects of black life, such as preachers. For this reason, they never mention nature.

The genre typically has an opener which announces which genre it is. For instance, if someone in mainstream American culture hears, “The King of Tobolopol proclaimed an edict,” he or she would then expect a fulfillment of the genre of fairy tales or an opera. The use of the definite article presupposes that one is to believe that there is a king. That the king is fictional is established in the predicate “proclaimed an edict.” This is a typical opener in fantasies like fairy tales and operas. It is not used in spy stories, so far as I know, or even in historical romances. Real life knowledge plays a part in this as well. There is no country called Tobolopoli. If the hearer later found out there is, he or she could revise that judgment. However, fantasy-hood still would not be ruled out because nowadays only fictional kings proclaim edicts. The hearer also knows
that the fairy tale ends when he or she hears the words “and they lived happily ever after.”

Narratives are a ubiquitous genre, both in the telling of real-life happenings and in fiction. Deborah Tannen notes that both in written and spoken language, narrative has distinctive structure. The ways that psychotic speech are not relevant are illuminated by a comparison of a narrative fragment to a response to an open-ended question, both produced by schizophrenics. The narrative is a portion of one of the ICS (Chaika and Alexander 1986; Chapter 8). Here a subject is describing the final scene in the videotaped story of a child who has managed to get some ice cream:

8A. ... she goes out leaves the ice cream and eats it and on the way and we don't know what happens [smə] the fact you can interpolate and say that she ate the ice cream and brought it home. ...

Here, with the exception of the [smə] all words and phrases are normal, but still the entire is not. Its failure resides in the two temporal mis-orderings of the encoded events, both impossible according to what we know of the real world. The first error lies in the statement that the girl leaves the ice cream, but then eats it after she has left the store. The second impossible sequence relates that she has eaten the ice cream, but brings it home. The events themselves are correctly encoded. They fail at the level of the macrostructure, the discourse itself.

The phrase “and on the way” in 8A is misplaced. This is one of a class of phrases I call NARRATIVE DEICTICS. These are employed to help hearers/readers keep their mental places. This one is proper to narratives. It just has not been placed properly.

Because of the general constraint on narration which demands that correct temporal ordering be followed, 8A is erroneous. Real life constraints apply here. We know that certain events have to follow certain temporal orderings. This may be done in two ways. First, one may simply relate the events in the narrative in the order in which they occurred or are imagined to occur. Second, one may indicate the correct ordering lexically or syntactically without necessarily presenting events in the order in which they occurred. For instance, 8A could have been correctly phrased as

8B. She eats the ice cream on the way [home], after she goes out [of the store]. [Actually], we don't know what happens but you can
interpolate and say that she ate the ice cream [before] bringing it home.

The words in brackets represent words not actually used by the narrator. I am not claiming that he intended to say 8B, just showing how it could have been said nondeviantly employing syntactic devices to indicate ordering. Notice that I have not added to the meaning of the information given. All I have done is to make it cohere.\(^9\)

Another sort of ill-formed speech on the level of discourse is seen in examples in 9 and 7 above.\(^{10}\) Forgetting for now the obvious errors in syntax, these are deviant because of their lack of relevant progression. Their “schizophrenic” flavor inheres primarily in their repetitions. The sheer number of them makes each passage very difficult to understand, and contributes to our feeling that they are inherently abnormal. As we have seen, in order to achieve coherence in discourse, speakers must not repeat words, phrases, or sentences. Rather, appropriate anaphoric words or ellipsis must be used. For instance, perfectly prosaic and reasonable information is imparted in

9 Mill Avenue is also a place where people gather in back yards to have people gather in back yards to have a barbecue in the back yard to have relative over to have friend over to talk in the back yard to be merry with each other.”

What makes it wrong is the repetition to no apparent purpose of “people gather” and “in the back yard.” As we have already seen, such repetition is a hallmark of schizophrenic speech, evincing itself on every level. It is also what causes us to feel that such speech lacks relevance. The repetition creates circularity as it fails to advance topics.

There is another problem with the responses in the examples in 3 and 7 as well. They do not adhere to the requirements of the macrostructure which was elicited, that of the answer. Answers require that one encode only that information which is relevant to the question asked, and when that information is given, it is proper either to stop speaking or to ask the equivalent of “Is that sufficient?” or “Did that tell you what you want to know?” When one is asked what one’s neighborhood is like, it is not appropriate to interject over and over again one’s inner doubts about going to heaven or about one’s ability to read people’s minds or one’s need to speak in a lord tongue.

People who are bores or nags do repeat the same information cyclically over and over, but the repeating in 3 and 7 above are clearly not the work
of sane bores or nags. For instance, one of the oddities in each are their respective refrains. Let's consider one of those in 3:

10... will I see paradise will I not see paradise should I answer should I not answer.

This is a direct repetition of the same words and syntax such as one gets in songs or poems. In songs and poems, the refrain reinforces the topic and is clearly related to it. In contrast, the refrains here does neither. At no time in the discourse of which 10 is a part does the speaker say what it is he should or should not be answering. In normal refrains, the entire is sung or said at stated intervals. In the schizophrenic refrains, the repetition does not come at such regular intervals, after a verse, for instance. Moreover, this refrain frequently starts in the middle of a word, as in

sh—will I see Paradise will I not see paradise should I answer should I not answer I not answer w- their mind

It seems to be randomly accessed both in terms of where it falls in the entire discourse and even at what point in the refrain the patient picked it up. In context it seems as if the “sh-will” started out to be the “should” of “should I answer” and the “w-their” started out to be the “will” of “will I see . . . .”

In contrast, the repetitions of bores and nags are tied to their topics, often with a dreadful relentlessness. Moreover, the repetitions of bores and nags repeat the information, but not the actual phrasing as is done in a refrain. Nags may also preface their repeated remarks by complaints like “I told you . . . .” “How many times do I have to tell you . . . .” and “You never listen . . . .” Such remarks indicate that the nag is in control and is aware of the repetitions. Similarly, bores may ask rhetorically, “Did I tell you about . . . .” and “That reminds me of . . . .” The point here is not that bores and nags always preface their remarks this way, but that they may. The fact of their being bores or nags rests ultimately upon their propensity for repeating information beyond necessity to inform, the nags combining this overinformation with complaints about the hearer.

Most importantly, the criterion of relevance demarcates the repetition of bores and nags from the psychotic repetition above. To be relevant, an answer should contain the information requested. The response should have been confined to information about the physical properties of
Mill Street and its inhabitants. Some digression or added explanation is always allowable in an answer, but only insofar as it advances the topic requested. Bores are guilty of overinformation, of adding too much, but their “too much” is of the nature of providing excessive information which is, however, connected to the question asked. For instance, a bore might tell you that his grandparents first bought their house on such a street and that he grew up with his uncle Teddy, and he had certain neighbors who always did certain things, and changes that were wrought when so-and-so moved away.

In contrast, in number some of the overinformation above is not relevant to the questions asked. In our culture one's religious beliefs and deepest doubts are not appropriate responses to a question about one's neighborhood. Far from reaching a conclusion or advancing a topic, the profusion of verbiage is simply circular, a jumbling of words and phrases in an almost random ordering. What eventually does get said in sample above, that the neighborhood is one in which people get together to have a good time, is an appropriate enough response. It gets drowned in a sea of verbosity not subordinated to the question asked.

Notes

1Dr. Spring does not necessarily endorse my interpretations of these data, however.
2This doesn't mean that people won't try to assign an interpretation to it, but there is no way to verify what it actually means because of its syntactic deviance.
3Actually, the problem is more of “tight” associations, not loose ones. Each word is glued to the next by associations that nonschizophrenics usually don't notice, and if they do notice, they still refrain from saying unless they can worm it into the conversation as an apropos bit of wit or topic change.
4It is not possible to say whether such relevancy marking operates in all languages, but it does operate in many others. However, it may not inhere so closely to verb tense selection as it does in English. In other words, one cannot expect it to be encoded exactly as it is in English. One has to find the equivalent construction.
5Time and space frequently are governed by the same words and conventions of usage. For instance, both time and space may behind us. One event can take place after another, just as one person can be after us. Notice that an event “takes place” in time, just as one event follows the other. It is as if we perceive.
6Sanders (pp. 220–228) also speaks of conversational disorder, by which he means people's interrupting others, controlling the topic, and other such “disorderly” behavior. This is quite different from the kinds of disorder we are discussing here. Typically, there is no problem understanding what is meant, what the speaker's agenda is, etc. Furthermore, such behavior varies greatly with different social
groups, so that it is perceived as disorderly by some, but simply normal warmth and interest by others (Tannen 1984; Chaika 1989, pp. 100–106).

This is possibly true for other kinds of incoherence as well, such as that proceeding from alcohol, drugs, and brain injuries. Since I have made no in-depth study of such populations, I do not make any claims for the provenance of incoherence in them, but I suspect they have a great similarity.

Traditionally called TD and NTD patients. In my view, the latter terminology is oxymoronic.

It is necessary to make this point as so many have attempted to “explain” schizophrenic speech by adding elements that change its meaning or by interpreting as if it had had such meaning (see Chapter 11).

In the original transcript furnished to me, there was no capitalization of street addresses or of recognized terms for nationalities like Italian. I have added those capitals so that the written form of the data looks no more deviant than it actually is. That is, we are used to the convention of seeing capitals on proper names and to omit them is likely to be interpreted as evidence of an even greater deviance than it is.

There are actually many refrains in both passages, but whatever theoretical point can be made of one can be made about the others.