A Cognitive-pragmatic Approach to Discourse Topic: A Cross-linguistic Analysis and Universal Account

Vincent Taohsun Chang
National Chengchi University

Abstract

This paper investigates contemporary Mandarin Chinese and English discourse topic across text genres to render plausible interpretations based upon a relevance-theoretic approach, as opposed to previous studies from syntactic/structural and functional/ cognitive points of view. Examining discourse topic from a cognitive-pragmatic perspective will not merely facilitate readers with more accessible contextual effects such as implicatures, but also subtopics such as grounding and composite topics can also be approached layer by layer with regard to cognition and language. This plays a crucial role in perception, comprehension and interpretation of utterances and non-verbal communication, and hence the mental processes of assigning/deciding a topic. The topic may thus vary from a word, short phrases to a sentence, and, above all, it is the gist that inferred by the audience that eventually forms the basis for the topic of the text/discourse.

Keywords: pronunciation, allophones, transferability, differential salience, discourse topic

1. Rationale

This paper presents an examination as a response to studies by Chu (1993, 1998, 1999, 2000) regarding prototype/prototypicality of a topic in Mandarin Chinese; it also provides English data to serve as a cross-linguistic analysis. Chu proposed five criteria/attributes to evaluate potential and qualified topic prototypes in Mandarin Chinese: 1) being nominal, 2) serving as an interclausal link, 3) being specific/referential, 4) occupying the sentence-initial/preverbal position, and 5) bearing no selectional relations to the predicative verb. He also tried to place emphasis on discourse topic, as opposed to Van Oosten's study (1986) on the prototypical-cognitive approach to language universals. The examples in Chu's research are almost solely at the sentence level, and the instances discussed are not so common in everyday life. However, we should not ignore actual language use and intuitive factors in examination of examples.

One of the most challenging points is then the explanatory adequacy of the attributes of the prototypicality of topic in Mandarin Chinese advocated by Chu, and hence if it is workable cross-linguistically. We would like to take an entirely different view to propose a cognitive-pragmatic perspective to render plausible explanations and interpretations based the aforementioned concerns and the following research aims.

2. Research Questions

Questioning one of the characteristics of the propotypical topic, aboutness (Van Oosten 1986), Chu argued that which maybe the most frequently mentioned quality of topic, but the vagueness about which it is also most frequently criticised. Chu analysed from a structural viewpoint and claimed everything must be encodable before it can be recognised (Chu 1993: 38). But how could we

analyse his data in terms of (discourse) topic with only a syntactic focus without resort to pragmatic-discursive-cognitive considerations, especially considering Chu also emphasized the significance of discourse, discourse grammar, and cognitive-functional grammar? Moreover, what Chu considers "most frequently criticised as being vague" might not necessarily mean conceptually/ cognitively vague.

If Chu's criteria are unable to embrace language facts or momentarily fail to grasp the panorama of language use, it is worthwhile to revisit them for the audience not to always be led by the author to specify whether a certain item is well-qualified for being a (prototype of) topic. This seems to be falling into inadequate reasoning and we do not need to accept the criteria first, and use the criteria to examine the data and assign the topic afterwards. Perhaps we could even abandon the prototype approach just in case it is not convincing and persuasive enough.

Since the prototype approach is not so wide-angled and far-reaching to cover many other speech encounters, this paper collects and investigates data from daily life to investigate the Chinese and English discourse topic/topicality. In many situations we face difficulties in assigning topic(s), and would rather think the utterances are hearer-based and carry context-sensitivity. This is endorsed by the prominent Neo-Gricean pragmatics in Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson 1995, see also Forceville 2005, Noveck & Sperber 2006). For example, how would we process an interrogative sentence and discourse against Chu's attributes? How will different audiences interpret and process the texts or talks in terms of syntactic construction?

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative and synchronic approach to analyse discourse topic in both spoken and written discourses. Data

for analysis comes from daily speech across text genres and discourse types, including conversations, advertising, popular literature, news coverage and so forth. Discourse is briefly defined as texts and talks in contexts. We adopt a cognitive-pragmatic perspective in light of the weakness, limitation and inadequacy of the prototype/prototypicality of topic. In this regard, the relevance-theoretic account helps surmount the shortcomings discussed earlier, as shown in the next section.

4. Theoretical Framework

The analyses in this study are approached within Relevance Theory (RT) (Sperber & Wilson 1995, Noveck & Sperber 2006). Since proposed in 1986 by Sperber & Wilson, the implications of RT on communication and cognition have been widely applied in various fields, including literature, linguistics, psychology, political language, language education, advertising and film studies. In RT, Sperber & Wilson define *optimal relevance* from the hearer's processing ability in terms of her processing effort and those possible effects.[1] This means that the audience, as a decision-maker, has to make a decision during her interpretation process. RT develops two general claims of 'principles' about the role of relevance in cognition and communication, which better help understand how we make decisions as we process utterances and non-verbal messages (Forceville 2005) against the dynamic interrelations amongst contexts and the shared background knowledge/cognitive environment.

In the first of these two principles, *Cognitive principle of*

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[1] In this paper I consider the audience to be female and the addresser to be male (cf. Tanaka 1994: xv).

relevance, human cognition tends to be geared to the maximization of relevance. In the second, *Communicative principle of relevance*, every act of communication conveys a presumption of its own optimal relevance (Noveck & Sperber 2006: 6). According to RT, the presumption of optimal relevance conveyed by every utterance is precise enough to ground a specific comprehension heuristic.

According to *Presumption of optimal relevance,* the utterance is relevant enough to be worth processing and it is the most relevant one compatible with the communicator's abilities and preferences. Meanwhile, *Relevance-guided comprehension heuristic* follows a path of least effort in constructing and interpretation of the utterance, particularly in resolving ambiguities and referential indeterminacies in going beyond linguistic meaning in computing implicatures, etc, and stops when expectations of relevance are satisfied (Noveck & Sperber 2006: 6-7)   From the arguments of RT here, we are to analyse the interaction among discourse, language use, context and the mind with regard to cognition and communication, and to understand how people process discourse and decide a topic.

5. Data Analysis

In this section, we are dealing with the chosen data concerning discourse topic. First, new information in discourse supplies the topic sources, enriches the topic developments, and comes as a core element in finding topics and sub-topics. Let us examine the excerpts from a popular television show below:

(1) Miranda: He was funny. And cute.
     Carrie: Yeah, and in town for a week! What's the point?
     Samantha: That IS the point! It's the best possible scenario,
              because you know he's leaving.
     Carrie: But it's like whatever happens, there's an expiration

date. It's expiration dating.[2]

The topics here may comprise of anything from *Carrie's unwillingness to let the man leave,* because *this relationship could never be long lasting*, to *Miranda's value judgments towards both the man's* and *Samantha's life philosophies*.

When we consider the non-literal meanings of figurative speech such as metaphor, irony, and poetic effects, the syntactic structural and prototype approaches will be insufficient in deciding/analyzing both sentence and discourse topics, whereas a cognitive-pragmatic perspective will make-up for this drawback. Consider (2):

(2) Miranda: Steve is completely predictable but that's one of the things I love about him. He's just so comfortable and safe.
Carrie: Are you dating a man or a minivan?[3]

Carrie's utterance, emerged as an irony to Miranda's statement, is associated with 1) an echoic element: here the one of world knowledge that the traits 'comfortable and safe' are more frequently used to characterize a minivan than to describe a man; and 2) an attitude of mockery and/or disagreement (Sperber & Wilson 1995). The main theme (and discourse topic) we processed from this dialogue is not from literal meaning, but from non-literal interpretation. Thus, the contradictory interpretations between Miranda and Carrie lead to quite different conclusions and topics: *Miranda truly appreciates Steve's simplicity* (comfortable and safe),

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[2] "The Catch" *Sex in the City* Episode Number: 82, Season Num: 6, First Aired: August 10, 2003, Prod Code: 608.

[3] "Drama Queens" *Sex in the City* Episode Number: 37, Season Num: 3, First Aired: July 23, 2000, Prod Code: 307.

whereas *Carrie expects a lover to go beyond comfort and safety*.

Likewise, in consideration of poetic effects, in (3) we present an excerpt of a narrative from modern Chinese prose poem[4]:

(3) "Buyong zhao le," wo huikai Zhangbao, "qishi wo buxiang baofu, qishi wo hai ai zhe ta."

Yinwei ni zaoshang shuaya, huei ding zhe xishoutai shang ta liuxia de fajia.

Yinwei ni di tou chongzao, huei jian qi ta saizhu chushuikou de toufa.

Yinwei dang ni gei kehu dadianhua, xiayishidi jiu bo ta de haoma.

Yinwei ni dian niuromian, huei ziran jiao laoban buyao jia la.

Yinwei ni qu chaojishichang, huei xuie ta renhe dongxi xian kan biaojia.

Yinwei ni cong jiake zhong mochu jiu piaogen, jing shi duonian qian he ta qu kan de xiaoguei dangjia.

"Don't look for it," I waved Zhangbao away, "I don't want revenge, as I love her still."

Cause as you brushed your teeth in the morning, you stared at the hairpin she left on the washbasin.

Cause as you took a shower, you picked out her hair clogging the drain.

Cause as you tried to phone a client, you accidentally dialed her number.

Cause as you ordered beef noodles, you quite naturally asked the boss not to add chilli.

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[4] *Fragility*, by Wang Wen-Hua, reprinted in *China Times*, November 27, 1999. The transliteration of the original Chinese texts is first, followed by my own English translation.

Cause at the supermarket, you looked first the price tag of each item, just like her.

Cause as you took the old stubs of the film tickets from your jacket, you found they were from the movie, *Home Alone,* which you've seen with her years ago.'

The repetition of *yinwei* "because/cause" and the syntactic parallelism triggered the audience's emotional states and can yield rich weak implicatures[5] and underlying poetic effects[6] to serve as abundant topics and sub-topics, as in (4):

(4) We have had a (good/beautiful) life together.[7]

It is not (so/very) easy to have such a (good/beautiful) life together.

It makes me feel (so/very) proud of having such a (good/beautiful) life together.

Your leaving made me quite sad and uneasy.

Your leaving makes me haunted by the sweetness n' bitterness of those old days.

Haunted by the memory of sweetness n' bitterness in those old days makes me (really) want to fall in love with you

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[5] Assumptions that are derivable from the proposition expressed by the utterance together with the context are called implicatures. (Tanaka 1994: 26-7) Also, "…there is no clear cut-off point between assumptions strongly backed by the communicator, and the assumptions derived from the utterance on the addressee's sole responsibility." But both strong and weak implicatures conform to principle of relevance (ibid.: 29).

[6] Poetic effects refer to the peculiar effect of an utterance which achieves most of its relevance through a wide array of weak implicatures (Sperber & Wilson 1995: 222, Blakemore 1992: 157, Pilkington 1992: 38).

[7] The words in parentheses represent further optional explanation for implicatures and are relative to 'degree;' whereas a square bracket with dots inside […] means the indeterminacy of implicatures.

once again.
I just can't let go.
I miss you so much.

The shared background knowledge between the speaker and hearer provides easily accessible contexts and helps decide the discourse topics.

(5)   A: Zenme le, you bu kaixin la?
      B: Meiyou a!
      A: Mingming jiu bu kaixin ma!
      B: Meiyou maidao shu, hao taoyan!
      A: Han! Na zenmeban? Na gankuai dadianhua qu wen
         Zhang Daoxun a!

      'A: Anything wrong? Feeling low?
      B: No, nothing.
      A: You are obviously not good!
      B: Im so upset that I couldn't get the book!
      A: Oh! Well, then … call Zhang Daoxun right now (to ask
         for info)!'

When the audience processes (5), the possible topics may instantly come from the surface structures: *the book, without getting the book, B is not in a good mood, B's disappointment of not getting the book, A is caring about B, A is aware of B's pressing need, and call Zhang Daoxun promptly*. However, after closer examination/processing further, the topics may be initiated by the shared/common friend *Zhang Daoxun* of the intimates A and B, mentioned here by speaker A to try *to find a solution to B's disappointment and anxiety* and *to soothe B's mind*. And the audience could thus inference that *Zhang Daoxun is familiar with (buying/finding) books*.

The point here is then about the gist after processing the whole

text as a single texture. In such cases, it is (much) more obvious that we could not apply the syntactic criteria/attributes as we are dealing with the discourse topics from the overall evaluation of a whole passage. When processing irony, metaphor, and poetic effects in discourse, we could not resort to the literal meanings from syntactic structures to reach the intended meanings of the speaker and decide a topic. This is a major point which distinguishes cognitive-pragmatic processing from syntactic structural analysis, and underlies one of the most eminent/important contributions of RT in cognition and communication.

Similarly, a CTS sports news anchor made the following well-known pronouncement:

(6) zhongshi anpai de dou shi zhonghuaduei you xiwang duopai de xiangmu, meitian jiang zhibo shier xiaoshi de aoyun tebie jiemu, suoyi aoyun shikuang kan zhongshi zhuen meicuo….

'The programs arranged by CTS are all the areas we are hopeful for getting medals in. We will broadcast twelve hours of the special Olympic programs everyday, so it's definitely worthwhile to watch the Olympic Games on the CTS channel….'[8]

Interestingly, based upon different background knowledge and intentionality, the topic here might be, '*Well, the programs will be awful!'*, because the Olympic games in which Chinese Taipei perform well—such as tae kwon do, kickboxing, weight lifting—are widely-accepted as not interesting and unexciting.

All the above-mentioned criteria/attributes and related concepts are closely associated to relevance for assigning discourse topic and

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[8] *CTS Sports* news anchor, Zhou Li-li, April 16, 1996.

would be adequately approached within relevance-theoretic account. The principle of relevance could therefore help interpret and reach satisfactory findings for most, if not all, occasions that we have encountered, be it they involved irony, metaphorical usage, or hyperbolic statements.

Next come the data of longer texts (cf. *macrostructure* in Van Dijk 1977: 130, Blakemore 1992: 165-165) that are seemingly difficult in assigning topics for illustration and manifestations of discourse topic based on the RT analytical framework. (10) is a print ad in Chinese for *Chengpin Yuedu*, "Eslite Reader", released by the Eslite bookstore in Taiwan:

(8) Budong ka-er-wei-nuo. Budong aiqing.
 Budong shenti qixiangxuei. Budong tongxinglian.
 Budong nuren. Budong Magelite-Juhasi Budong Free Jazz.
 Budong siwang.
 Budong shiji muo zhanxingxuei. Budong baohaosi.
 Budong chufu. Budong zhengzhi quanli he douzheng.
 Suoyi women yuedu.

 'Don't know Italo Calvino. Don't know love.
 Don't know the body meteorology. Don't know homosexuality.
 Don't know women. Don't know Marguerite Duras.
 Don't know Free Jazz. Don't know death.
 Don't know astrology. Don't know Bauhaus.
 Don't know Truffault. Don't know political power and dissent.
 We therefore read.'

The lexical repetition of *don't know* yields the following strong implicature:

(9) We don't know (very/so) much.

Don't know interweaves here with diverse cultural elements of a writer, a director, music (*free jazz*) and art. *Love, women, death* are eminent issues in human life, *political power and struggle* are increasingly prevailing in modern society, and *homosexual* issues are not as tabooed as they were before in East Asian and specifically Chinese societies. The compound nouns of '*Body meteorology*' and '*millennium astrology*' are the neologisms suggestive to the reader's rich imagination. All these are manipulated to convey a wide array of weak implicatures and can be treated as topics and/or sub-topics, as in (10):

(10)   (It seems that) We should read.
        We should read more.
        We should read a lot.
        We should read (a lot) to gain more knowledge.
        We should read (a lot) to gain more knowledge to be like
          celebrities.
        We should read (a lot) to know current issues.
        Eslite Reader could tell us those prominent issues.
        Eslite Reader could help us gain more knowledge.
        Buy, and try it.

On further examination, the coherence between *love* and *Italo Calvino*, *women* and *Marguerite Duras*, and the more opaque coherence between *body meteorology* and *homosexual*ity will drive the reader to infer and derive the implicatures as potential topics, as in (11):

(11) If we know something about Calvino, we'll know love more.
        If we know something about Marguerite, we'll know women
          more.
        If we know something about gay life, we'll know "body
          meteorology" (Or vice versa).

>We can find and know these names and issues in the Eslite
>Reader.

The addresser intends here to evoke the audience's emotions, the affective dimension to poetic effects, which is associated with weak implicature in Relevance Theory account: "What look like non-propositional effects associated with the expression of attitudes, feelings, and states of mind can be approached in terms of the notion of weak implicature…." (Sperber & Wilson 1995: 222, Pilkington 1992: 45). The audience is guided to process and even entertain the texts, after which she would be rewarded by extra contextual effects and wide-ranging implicatures, and feel closer to the addresser. Furthermore, the speaker/advertiser employs stylistic patterns to convey a lot of information. It is possible to bring some reading pleasure to the reader in a modern society full of stress and competition. It is possible to build a cultural image for a profit-oriented corporation trying to renew itself as a cultural landmark and to shed some light on business stereotypes of being realistic, 'making profit (only)' and the like. Most of all, it is because, as Sperber & Wilson say, "Every act of (ostensive) communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance" (1995: 158), that the speaker uses this communicative style. Therefore, the strong and weak implicatures, explicit and implicit meanings, in (9-11) analysed above constitute diverse possible and potential topics, also fall into an indeterminate range.

Poetic effects, as a prominent communicative strategy, are not necessarily evoked only in poetry and literature, conforming to some technical rules through exquisite wordings, as the seemingly opaque sense term would suggest. They can well be triggered in ordinary and mediocre utterances, yielding yet poetic effects much weaker and hardly noticeable, or 'visible', as in the rest of the advertisement:

(12)   Faxian nanjingdonglu xin kuangwei

Likai hueiyi faxian anjing de kuaile
Likai celue faxian chuangyi de kuaile
Likai tongshi faxian heping de kuaile
Likai quanli faxian anquan de kuaile
Likai wanglu faxian wuzhi de kuaile
Likai jianpan faxian shuxie de kuaile
Likai fanju faxian meishi de kuaile
Likai bangongshi faxian xin kuangwei de kuaile.

Meishi. Kafei. Caizhuang. Shipin. Shudian.
Faxian nanjingdonglu xin kuangwei.
Shi-yuei shier-ri Chengpin nanjingdian quanmian kaimu.

'Find a New Taste on Nanjing's East Road'

'Leave the meeting; find the pleasure of silence
Leave the strategy; find the pleasure of creativity
Leave the colleague; find the pleasure of peace
Leave the power; find the pleasure of safety
Leave the Internet; find the pleasure of innocence
Leave the keyboard; find the pleasure of writing
Leave the (dinner) party; find the pleasure of gastronomy
Leave the office; find the pleasure of brand-new taste.'

'Gastronomy. Café. Make-up. Deco. Bookstore.
Find out New Taste on Nanjing East Road.
October 12th Eslite Nanjing store is now open.'

The parallel syntactic structure in this text can lead the audience to
infer a series of weak implicatures through which most of the
relevance of these utterances will be achieved, thus producing poetic

effects linked to various topics. Possible implicatures/topics include the following:

(13)   Work is full of pressure and competition.
       Work requires ambition, concentration, and efficiency.
       Work makes people nervous, anxious, and tense.
       Work is accompanying by a series of mind struggles.
       Work is busy and noisy, both in place and in mind.
       Work is routine and sometimes boring.
       Work is usually unchangeable and inflexible.
       Routine work makes people lack mental relaxation.
       Routine work deprives of you many pleasures, makes you
         forget them.
       These pleasures are natural, simple, and essential.
       Come to *Eslite* and forget your work (You deserve it!).
       Find your pleasures again, even temporarily, at *Eslite*.
       Eslite will lead you to re-experience those long-forgotten
         facets of life.
       Enjoy a meal without pressure, enjoy a good book.

If a reader feels this ad is interesting and entertaining with these implicatures, that is in part because her working life has been captured subtly in this text. She is familiar with these experiences, just like listening to a story from a close friend, especially when people are too busy presently to share with their personal experiences. Through the process of experience sharing, she may greatly be touched and implicitly influenced. The act of buying is not what concerns her most at this phase, though selling products/services is the advertiser's ultimate end. The image she has accepted is the one of being an unusual and intimate friend of *Eslite*. She might well recover, as she needs, in these activities provided by *Eslite* based on her own responsibility without receiving a direct and explicit invitation. The selling motive is softened during this image-

building process, and more importantly, the ideological significance become invisible thereafter.[9]

Finally, RT further appropriately explains and handles the discourse topic from visual meanings in multimodal communication (Forceville 2005), as illustrated in the following ad:

(14)   *Aoyun re, re bian jingcheng!*
        'Olympic fever heats all of Beijing!'

The slogan plainly expresses the atmosphere of hotness and the mood of expectation. The picture (see page 17) also echoes this feeling of heat. The sweet round dumplings (*tangyuan/yuanxiao* in Mandarin) are in a bowl with boiling water and vapor (Sweetness is happiness!). The five dumplings, while ostensibly forming the well-known Olympic rings, signify reunion and harmony in Chinese culture. The round bowl in which they sit also supports this point, as 'round', pronounced *yuan*, is a homophone of *tuanyuan,* "reunion". The sweet dumplings, consumed during Chinese New Year, further enhance the meaning of reunion. Moreover, the *bat*-like symbol (*bianfu* in Mandarin) at the rim of the bowl, just beneath the '!', represents good luck and is symbolic of good fortune, as its pronunciation *fuqi suggests* "good blessings". While the dumplings, of course, take a leading role, the 'bat' takes on a supplementary role.

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[9] Ideological working, as suggested by Fairclough (1989: 85), is most effective when they are least visible: Invisibility is achieved when ideologies are brought to discourse not as explicit elements of the text, but as the background assumptions which on one hand lead the text producer to 'textualize' the world in a particular way, and on the other hand lead the interpreter to interpret the text in a particular way. Texts do not typically spout ideology, they so position the interpreter through their cues that she brings ideologies to the interpretation of the text and reproduces them in the process!

Examined from another perspective, this caption strongly implicates, 'All the athletes and audiences from everywhere will reunite in the year 2008,' a happy reunion with expectation and somehow though competition. This caption weakly conveys/ implicates the following series of messages, which could be inferred by and derived from the audience's active processing, and henceforth the potential (multimodal) discourse topics and subtopics:

(15)   We want everyone to participate in this world event.
       Come join us and experience Chinese culture.
       Chinese culture is far-reaching and longstanding.
       Come and experience our passion and friendship. (We are
         friendly!)
       Come to the Games, visit our beautiful scenery, try the
         Chinese cuisine, taste our local specialties (feel a different
         China).
       Look! The hotness of Olympics is spreading across Beijing.
       Olympic fever represents our passion and hopes.

6. Conclusion

People in all languages often mean more than they say. Grammar/syntax on its own is typically insufficient for determining the full meaning of an utterance. As suggested by Hedberg (1990), "It is possible … for a discourse as a whole to end up structured into multiple levels of hierachically organised topics and subtopics. It seems useful to identify the notion of 'dicourse topic' with the superordinate questions, or, in other words, to simply view the 'sentence topic' as the lowest level of 'discourse topic' ". Hedberg is not alone in this view (Chen 1996, Chu 1999). The assumption that discourse is coherent or 'makes sense' has an important role to

play in determining meaning as well (cf. Asher & Lascarides 2005). Just as syntactic surface structures display ramifications of underlying structures, we can well appreciate the rich implicit meaning (vs. explicit meaning) conveyed by the interplay of syntax-semantics-pragmatics and discourse.

Conceptual topic from a cognitive perspective will not merely facilitate the audience with more accessible contextual effects (implicatures), but the subtopics, grounding (Chui 2001) and 'composite topics' (Bilhaut 2005) can also be approached layer by layer. Cognition plays a vital role in the perception, comprehension, and interpretation of utterances and non-verbal communication, and hence the mental processing and inferential processes of assigning/deciding a topic. The topic may thus vary from a word, short phrases, to a sentence, and above all, the gist—after reader's digestion and reorganisation—of text/discourse. All in all, discourse topic (and sentence topic from functional view) should not be confined to or decided simply from the syntactic constructions. We quite often, even if not overwhelmingly, need to read between the lines, search for the optimal relevance, grasp the main theme of text/discourse and sketch the 'underlying' mental image and regard it as a 'topic' thereafter.

As demonstrated in this paper, those weak implicatures for being potential cognitive-discourse topic(s) are the result of the author's higher involvement and active processing. They are indeterminate and unlimited for inferencing, and might be processed continuously, as long as one is willing to think it is worthwhile. That is, she will be rewarded with additional contextual effects, which will outweigh her processing efforts. While different readers will receive different readings and interpretations, the 'absolute levels' are diverse; and perhaps the same reader will receive different readings and interpretations under different degrees of involvement and circumstances. They will reach, at any rate, the optimal relevance for themselves.

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