

Maged Zakher

University of Bedfordshire, UK

Relevance Theory and Making a Case for the Use of Sacred Texts in Cultural Research

Abstract

Traditional research methods such as questionnaires and interviews used in cultural research have some limitations including the possible bias of their wording in favour of the designer's context. The accessibility of contexts expected to be triggered by the verbal stimuli in these instruments is questionable. Therefore, the lookout is for some verbal stimuli that can 'guarantee' triggering a context accessible (at varying degrees) to research participants.

Intuitively, it should be advantageous to investigate social topics such as honouring parents, doing good to others, and self-worth by using sacred texts as prompts for eliciting data from respondents. The framework of Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson, 2004) – one of whose central assumptions is that utterances are mentally processed by accessing the first context leading to some worthwhile cognitive gain with the least mental effort – provides a basis for explaining this intuitive insight. Crucially, sacred texts can (in their fixed forms) readily trigger a context accessible to the followers of the relevant faiths.

An initial investigation of the viability of the use of sacred texts based on these observations was conducted using selected Biblical and Qur'anic verses. In semi-structured interviews, research participants from Egypt and the UK were individually given three pairs of verses from their relevant sacred book to explain. Each pair consists of seemingly-contradictory verses. One example is: "... let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:16 NIV Bible)" and "But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. (Matthew 6: 3-4 NIV Bible)".

This study shows that sacred texts can be used meaningfully in research instruments in the social sciences for their methodological merits explained by their guarantee of triggering contexts relevant to research participants.

Keywords: Relevance, sacred texts, Egypt and the UK, cultural studies, methodology

Reference:

Sperber, D. and Wilson, D. (2004) *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.