

Research Article

Pragmatic Inference Breakdown: A Relevance-Theoretic Reading of Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled*

Blesslin Femi J

Research Scholar, Department of English, Vel Tech Rangarajan Dr. Sagunthala R&D Institute of Science and Technology, Avadi, Chennai, India;
blesslinfemi@gmail.com

P. Revathi

Research Supervisor, Associate Professor, Department of English, Vel Tech Rangarajan Dr. Sagunthala R&D Institute of Science and Technology, Avadi, Chennai, India;

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Abstract: This research uses Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory to analyze the cognitive-pragmatic processes underlying the readerly disorientation in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled*. Despite existing research on the novel from thematic, cognitive-narratological, and phenomenological perspectives, the communicative processes underlying the novel's interpretive difficulties remain relatively unexplored. Using a qualitative, scene-by-scene analysis, this research shows how the failure of mutual manifestness, the buildup of pragmatic noise, and the ongoing preference for weak implicatures over explicatures contribute to the disruption of relevance optimization in the narrative. These processes lead to what this research calls inferential overload, a situation in which relevance behavior is constantly triggered while convergence on inference is systematically blocked. The results show that inferential overload is a narrative strategy in its own right, rather than a consequence of ambiguity or indeterminacy, and that it correlates the reader's interpretive experience with the protagonist's psychological disorientation. This research contributes to the application of Relevance Theory to literary discourse by taking into account the narratively productive communicative failure.

Keywords: Inferential Overload, Mutual Manifestness, Pragmatics, Ishiguro, and Relevance Theory

Introduction

The Unconsoled by Kazuo Ishiguro is considered one of the most cognitively challenging novels of late-twentieth-century fiction. Although told in the conventional first-person narrative and set in a familiar European context, the novel continually undermines the communicative assumptions that normally structure narrative interpretation. Although this complexity has been explored in existing scholarship on the novel through various approaches such as cultural dislocation, memory, dream logic, surrealism, and fragmented identity, these approaches have not adequately addressed the processes by which meaning-making itself is systematically challenged. Specifically, the novel's resistance to interpretive stabilization cannot be adequately addressed by cognitive narratology alone; instead, a model that accounts for how readers make meaning of input under conditions of persistent uncertainty, inconsistency, and communicative disruption is required. This research contends that *The Unconsoled* requires analysis from a cognitive-pragmatic perspective, namely Relevance Theory as developed by Sperber and Wilson (1995). Throughout the story, characters interact as if the cognitive environment had already been established, despite the lack of any recoverable common ground for either the protagonist or the reader. Ryder, the pianist, lost in an unfamiliar city, is constantly confronted by expectations, obligations, and emotional claims predicated on the assumption of inaccessible contextual knowledge. This makes the reader's inferential task more burdensome. Thus, *The Unconsoled* embeds disorientation into its communicative design.

Literature Review

There is a growing trend in literary studies to highlight the cognitive and inferential aspects of narrative interpretation, moving the focus away from meaning as a stable feature of the text to meaning as a product of dynamic reader-text interaction. In this context, interpretation is viewed as an inferential process in which readers actively produce meaning by drawing on textual information and contextual knowledge while navigating ambiguity and uncertainty (Stockwell, 2019). The cognitive approach has thus brought to the fore the role of linguistic form, narrative perspective, and stylistic patterning in shaping interpretive expectations and delimiting the scope of inferential possibilities. From a pragmatic point of view, numerous studies have shown how grammatical and discourse-level features are used to control readers' inferences. For example, the work of Parina and de Leon (2016) illustrates the pragmatic role of modality in constructing narrative point of view and epistemic uncertainty, which guides the reader towards making certain inferences and experiencing certain emotions. Cognitive narratology has also helped to clarify the role of readers' management of expectations and predictions in narrative processing. These theories, such as those of Caracciolo (2011), have shifted attention to the embodied and experiential aspects of reading, claiming that meaning is a product of the reader's contextual engagement with the narrative world rather than representational structures. These theories provide a compelling description of the phenomenology of disorientation and immersion, especially in those narratives that defy linear coherence. However, the current state of the art does not provide a satisfactory account of

narratives that persistently solicit inferential effort without reaching a convergence of interpretation. Cognitive narratology generally posits that disrupted expectations are eventually repaired, whereas phenomenological theories emphasize experiential description at the expense of a model of inferential failure. The issue that remains under-theorized is how texts can systematically trigger relevance-seeking behavior while simultaneously denying the contextual satisfaction of relevance. This is especially apparent in the literature on Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled*. Critical approaches have examined the psychological disunity, cultural ambiguity, temporal disruption, and surreal logic of the novel (Călinescu, 2022). The current research aims to fill this research gap by using Relevance Theory to analyze *The Unconsoled* as a narrative that systematically relies on and frustrates pragmatic expectations. By focusing on the failure of mutual manifestness, the proliferation of weak implicatures, and the buildup of pragmatic noise, the research conceptualizes inferential overload as a narrative strategy rather than a consequence of ambiguity or indeterminacy. In this way, the research contributes to the cognitive-pragmatic analysis of narratives, moving beyond the communicative success paradigm to provide a conceptual framework for analyzing the narratively productive failure of communication in contemporary fiction.

Research Questions

1. How does *The Unconsoled* manipulate and redefine readers' inferential expectations during the interpretation of the text?
2. How can Relevance Theory illustrate the communicative failures and pragmatic breakdown integrated into the text?
3. In what ways are narrative junctures' mutual manifestness intentionally destabilized within the text?
4. Why does select fiction privilege weak implicatures over strong ones, and what interpretive effects does this choice produce?

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative, theory-driven, cognitive-pragmatic approach to investigate the systematic destabilization of relevance-based interpretation in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled*, aiming not to generalize interpretive results but to model the conditions under which communicative relevance becomes strained, unstable, or unsustainable. Close reading has aided literary studies by documenting how readers must use interpretive skills to piece together different components of narrative interpretation (McCarthy, 2015). The work is grounded in Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1995), which views interpretation as an optimization exercise in which the cost of cognitive effort is weighed against the cost of processing the data. The novel is treated as an example of ostensive literary communication, in which narrative cues serve as stimuli to trigger inferences under the assumption of optimal relevance. *The Unconsoled* is analyzed as a narrative that constantly triggers this assumption while systematically withholding the contextual prerequisites for its fulfillment. A scene-level analytical approach was employed to facilitate a detailed analysis of inferential processes at the basic level. The selected scenes were chosen through purposeful

theoretical sampling based on expectations from relevance theory rather than narrative salience. More specifically, the selected scenes must fulfill at least two of the following conditions:

- (1) They contain ostensive cues that are highly suggestive of inference (e.g., speech, temporal indicators, emotional claims).
- (2) They rely on shared contextual knowledge that is unrecoverable for both the protagonist and the reader.
- (3) They produce several weak implicatures without settling on a single explicature.

Scenes that are merely descriptive or transitional in a non-inferential way are excluded. Each chosen scene was then subjected to a formalized relevance-theoretic analysis, which focused on two aspects: contextual accessibility and inferential overload. Relevance-theoretic concepts have been formalized as analytical tools. Mutual manifestness breakdown is pinpointed at points where the characters' dialogue suggests they are sharing assumptions that are not accessible in the text. Pragmatic noise is communicative content that requires processing effort without yielding a corresponding cognitive outcome. Weak implicature proliferation is identified at points where the possibilities for interpretation increase without hierarchical structuring. Inferential overload is diagnosed when inferential density systematically outruns a reader's ability to achieve convergence.

The analytical corpus comprises seven scenes chosen from *The Unconsoled*. The number of scenes was determined by theoretical saturation rather than representativeness. Initial scanning of the text indicated the presence of pragmatic patterns of relevance disruption across several episodes. Analytical saturation was achieved when it became clear that further scenes would add little new information to the relevance-theoretic patterns observed. The decision to examine seven scenes represents a balance between the level of analysis and the theoretical sufficiency. A smaller number of scenes would verge on anecdotal evidence, while a larger number would lead to a thinning of pragmatic analysis without further explanation. Each scene represents a unique pragmatic profile, exemplifying a different instance of relevance breakdown (e.g., presupposition failure, pragmatic noise, temporal destabilization, false relevance indicators). The scenes were chosen through purposeful theoretical sampling based on expectations from relevance theory rather than narrative salience. The scenes were chosen because they exert high inferential pressure while simultaneously blocking inferential resolution. This is because the scenes trigger relevance-seeking behavior by displaying ostensive cues such as dialogue, temporal indicators, deictic pointers, or emotionally loaded statements, but at the same time, fail to maintain the contextual assumptions required for relevance optimization.

The other scenes in the novel were left out for one of the following reasons:

1. They are mainly descriptive expositions with no strong ostensive cues.

2. They allow for local relevance optimization, even if global story coherence remains unstable.
3. They are mere repetitions of already identified inferential mechanisms, with no new pragmatic dynamics introduced.

Operationally, a scene is said to be inferentially overloaded if it contains three or more simultaneous relevance cues, including

1. Presupposition-laden speech acts,
2. Deictic expressions (“we,” “here,” “now”) with unrecoverable reference,
3. Temporal markers that contradict story sequencing,
4. Emotionally invested assertions with no grounding in context.

Inferential density was not calculated as a numerical value but rather qualitatively assessed for the presence of simultaneous activation of multiple inferential routes. The crucial marker is not the number of interpretations but the simultaneous activation of competing interpretive routes that require processing resources.

Inferential overload can be procedurally identified as follows:

1. Failed contextual accessibility -The text is assumed to contain contextual assumptions that are not introduced or accessible from a retrospective perspective.
2. Accumulation of weak implicatures without prioritization - The text contains interpretive possibilities that are not prioritized, resolved, or invalidated by subsequent text.
3. Blockage of inferential repair - Subsequent narrative developments do not retrospectively clarify or stabilize the assumptions in the earlier narrative.

This approach provides a replicable analytical tool for analyzing cognitively disruptive narratives and constitutes a solid methodological foundation for relevance-theoretic literary analysis.

The cognitive-pragmatic dynamics focus on how readers navigate fragmented narratives and how the text manipulates interpretive expectations. The analysis on the relevance-theoretic difference between explicature and implicature provides very little explicit information for the reader to rely on, and instead promotes the creation of weak implicature with diffused, open-ended inferences that do not culminate in any fixed meaning. Weak Implicatures are a deliberate literary device in the surrealist narrative structure of the chosen text, which allows one to preserve ambiguity and still be operative in the reader’s inferential faculties. The buildup of it, without directly fixing explicature, directly contributes to what this study terms inferential overload. The notion of inferential overload, as developed in this study, pertains to a narrative state in which the number of potential inferences surpasses the reader’s capacity to integrate them into a unitary cognitive-pragmatic framework. Within the theoretical framework of Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1995), inferential overload can be seen as an

imbalance in the relationship between processing effort and cognitive effects that normally regulate communicative interpretation. Inferential overload is thus not a transient phenomenon but a structural issue that can be identified in a series of scenes. This is achieved when the relationship between processing effort and cognitive payoff becomes persistently asymmetrical. To promote procedural transparency and prevent personal interpretation, counterfactual relevance reconstruction was applied to each scene analyzed. This involved reconstructing the minimal contextual assumptions required for relevance optimization to succeed. The analysis shows how the text either fails to provide these assumptions or actively undermines them. The fact that the diagnostic criteria of contextual accessibility, inferential overload, and inferential convergence are formally specified means that the analytical process can be replicated on other texts that display communicative disruption. Another analyst using the same criteria on the same scenes would arrive at the same relevance-theoretic problems, even if there were differences in interpretation.

Relevance Theory insists that the addressee will make an effort to interpret the ostensive stimulus on the assumption that it will pay off in terms of cognitive benefits. In *The Unconsoled*, this assumption is constantly triggered and frustrated. The narrative is full of ostensive clues, such as spatial transitions, temporal indications, emotional signals, and interpersonal expectations, which are all potentially subject to inferential processing but often fail to combine to form a strong explicature or a manifest assumption. The research analyzes how the primary text presents the reader with competing contextual cues, ambiguous character motivations, and an unstable overload, leading not to communicative failure but to a thematized cognitive experience that parallels the reader's disorientation in the face of the protagonist's psychological fragmentation. Thus, the study illustrates how inferential processes, cognitive strain, and pragmatic disruption underpin the text's distinctive affective and atmospheric effects. The study centers *The Unconsoled* as a distinctive test case for analyzing the limits of relevance-driven interpretation. It provides a fictional application of Relevance Theory to literary analysis by foregrounding the cognitive-pragmatic relationship. While the analysis is based on close reading, it is not an impressionistic close reading, as it uses formally stated relevance-theoretic diagnostics to identify communicative phenomena. The analysis does not assess the plausibility of interpretation but rather diagnoses procedural irregularities in contextual accessibility, implicature selection, and relevance optimization. Since the diagnostics are based on Relevance Theory rather than reader response, another analyst using the same criteria on the same scenes would also identify the same inference irregularities, even if they reached different conclusions.

Results and Discussion

The analysis shows that *The Unconsoled* consistently dramatizes communicative situations in which interlocutors behave as if a shared cognitive environment existed, even though none has been established for the protagonist or reader. Throughout the novel, interactions are structured around presupposed contextual assumptions that remain inaccessible, thereby resulting in systematic breakdowns of mutual

manifestness. Ryder's interactions with subsidiary characters are repeatedly overshadowed by implicit references to shared knowledge, obligations, and emotional histories that the text fails to substantiate. The context is his initial engagement with the hotel personnel, who treat him as if a prior arrangement has been made. His response, "Yes, perhaps there is some misunderstanding" (p. 8), is one of uncertainty rather than acknowledgment. However, there is no recoverable contextual information in the narrative to support this presupposition. This is a scene where Sophie emotionally accuses Ryder. The accusation, "You never listen, Ryder. You never have" (p. 173), is based on the assumption of an emotional relationship and a history of failed communication. In the context of relevance theory, the speech act is based on the assumption of shared knowledge of past interactions and emotional experiences. However, there is no contextual evidence in the narrative that would make such an assumption possible for either Ryder or the reader. The lack of verifiable premises makes it impossible to verify Sophie's accusation, leading to a breakdown in mutual manifestness. At the same time, it is evident that certain premises are missing from the narrative context that would support such a connection. Ryder has no access to them either. Besides interactions with others, several narrative transitions that typically link cognitive contents to align them cognitively are missing from this narrative. In the aforementioned scenes of communicative acts, it becomes clear that the breakdown of mutual manifestness is not an isolated phenomenon but rather a feature of the overall narrative structure. A shared cognitive environment never develops through communicative acts that cannot be introduced or inferred explicitly.

The findings further show how the narrative environment in *The Unconsoled* is heavily embedded in pragmatic noise, communicative material that must be processed but offers little in the way of further interpretation or advancement in the plot. Characters in the novel frequently go to great lengths in digressive dialogue. This is a scene in which Ryder asks the hotel porter for directions, a situation that would normally call for brief, target-oriented communication. However, instead of providing relevant information, the porter goes on a tangent about a neighbor's dog being ill, which is described as follows: "each detail more elaborate than the last, though I could not see what any of it had to do with my request" (p. 52). According to relevance-theoretic principles, communication should be easy to process by providing relevant information about directions. However, the superfluous and tangential information creates pragmatic noise by requiring inferential processing that does not yield further interpretation or development of the narrative. The information cannot be linked to a meaningful contextual framework and does not produce cognitive effects. Instead, it triggers relevance-seeking behavior that is thwarted, thereby increasing the processing burden while denying the payoff. In General, there is often digression in speech to the point of excess in offering detail or repetition of episodes or stories quite irrelevant to any communicative need for their utterance. These ostensive stimuli do induce inferential processing; they do not induce stabilizing cognitive effects; relevance-seeking responses in the reader are uniquely activated without cognitive pay-off. The result of this pragmatic noise buildup is a communicative setting in which cues of relevance are diluted rather than sharpened. Rather than guiding interpretation, the

abundance of minimally relevant material obscures the prevailing priorities. The results demonstrate that noise, in this sense, functions not as an auxiliary narrative ornament but as a means of increasing inference needs while withholding contextual clarification. The most important result of this analysis has been the identification of inferential overload as a dominant cognitive effect of the narrative's communicative structure. Inferential overload is observed "when the quantity and instabilities of potential inferences exceed [the reader's] capacity to integrate them in a coherent cognitive pragma." Ryder is introduced, having arrived in an unknown city with no clear information about his schedule, responsibilities, or social position. However, he is still treated as if these aspects of his life were clearly established. This encounter occurs during Ryder's conversation with Gustav, who introduces him as an important visitor with a fixed schedule. Gustav's style of address assumes the existence of prearranged plans and common knowledge about Ryder's position and duties. Ryder thinks, "Regarding everything that Gustav might tell him, I tried to recall what Gustav had said earlier, but already it seemed to have shifted" (p. 18). Normally, in relevance theory, such a statement would assume the existence of a manifest cognitive environment where pre-discussions have established duties, schedules, or social norms. The reader is expected to assume that such contextual assumptions are available and retrievable. However, in the text, there is no pre-discourse, no mention, and no contextual clue available for Ryder or the reader to retrieve such information. The assumed context is absent and cannot be inferred from the text. The reader is forced to derive several weak implicatures about Ryder's position, which never stabilize, leading to inferential overload. However, Sophie uses an inclusive reference, speaking of "us" (p. 97), which assumes a shared emotional history and understanding of their relationship. This is a scene in which Ryder moves through an interior space in which the perception of time becomes irregular. Ryder says, "We seemed to have been there for hours, though only moments earlier I had entered the hall" (p. 201), highlighting a tension between experience and sequence. In relevance-theoretic terms, temporal indicators should provide a stable procedural signal enabling the reader to construct a coherent temporal sequence. This should enable inferential economy. However, the text lacks the contextual information needed to resolve the temporal tension. Ryder and the reader are not in a position to infer which time sequence is in play. Emotionally charged declarations like Brodsky's further compound this lack of stability, "This is the night everything will be redeemed" (p. 213), which are premised on the expectation of narrative closure. The lack of satisfaction of these expectations puts the reader in the position of having to make temporary, unconsolidated inferences, thereby increasing the burden of inferential overload. It is necessary to distinguish inferential overload from related but notionally different phenomena such as narrative ambiguity, indeterminacy, or interpretive openness. Ambiguity usually involves multiple competing interpretations that can be entertained simultaneously, while indeterminacy involves a suspension of meaning without systematically directing inferential effort. Inferential overload, on the other hand, involves the continuous activation of relevance-driven inferential processes in the absence of adequate contextual premises for convergence. The reader is not presented with a lack of interpretive information but

rather with an excess of ostensive information that continuously solicits inference while withholding stabilization. Inferential overload, thus, does not indicate semantic underdetermination but rather a structural imbalance between processing and cognitive payoff.

No	Quotation	Immediate Communicative Context	Relevance-Theoretic Issue	Type of Inferential Disruption	Cognitive Effect
1.	“Yes, perhaps there is some misunderstanding . (p.8)	Ryder responds to hotel staff, assuming prior arrangements	Presupposition of shared contextual assumptions without textual support	Breakdown of mutual manifestness	Inferential Overload at narrative entry
2.	“You never listen, Ryder. You never have.” (p. 173)	Sophie accuses Ryder of emotional neglect	Speech act of presupposes shared emotional history	Relational presupposition failure	Proliferation of unstable relational implicatures
3.	“Each detail more elaborate than the last, though I could not see what any of it had to do with my request.” (p. 52)	Porter’s digresses while giving directions	Excess processing effort without cognitive payoff	Pragmatic noise	Increased inferential effort without cognitive payoff
4.	“Regarding everything that Gustav might tell him, I tried to recall what Gustav had said earlier, but already it seemed to have shifted.” (p. 18)	Ryder’s failed recall	Failure of contextual accessibility	Inferential instability	Collapse of the assumed cognitive environment
5.	“Us.” (p. 97)	Sophie uses inclusive reference	Deictic marker assumes	Mutual manifestness disruption	Diffuse emotional

			mutual manifestness		implicature activation
6.	“We seemed to have been there for hours, though only moments earlier I had entered the hall.” (p. 201)	Ryder experiences temporal distortion	Procedural temporal cues fail	Explicature collapse	Destabilization of temporal sequencing
7.	“This is the night everything will be redeemed.” (p. 213)	Brodsky announces anticipated resolution	False relevance cue	Deferred relevance satisfaction	Sustained anticipation without inferential closure

Table 1: Relevance- Cognitive Analysis

In the text, this balance is deliberately upset, thus turning communicative failure from a mere narrative accident into a structural paradigm. Instead of representing occasional instances of communicative failure, the novel repeatedly sets up a communicative context in which relevance-seeking behavior is triggered but not the contextual support necessary for relevance satisfaction. This creates a consistent mismatch between effort and reward, locating interpretive failure not as a barrier to meaning but as a constituent of the reading process. The loss of mutual manifestness appears as a key mechanism that maintains this asymmetry. The characters engage with each other based on shared knowledge, emotional experiences, and social commitments that are unavailable to both Ryder and the reader. Pragmatic noise further aggravates this problem by weakening rather than strengthening relevance cues. The digressive dialogue, excessive detail, and narrative sidetracking serve as ostensive cues that require processing effort but do not trigger commensurate cognitive responses. Rather than facilitating interpretation, these contribute to the proliferation of weak implicatures without prioritization, thereby hindering inferential convergence. From the relevance-theoretic account, this represents a deliberate violation of inferential economy, wherein the processing effort of the reader is engaged, but the payoff is indefinitely postponed. The proposed model of inferential overload is not meant to cover all types of narrative difficulty or reader disorientation. It does not apply to those texts in which the violation of expectations is later repaired by means of retrospective clarification, nor to those narratives in which the information is temporarily withheld for suspenseful purposes. Inferential overload occurs only when relevance-seeking behavior is repeatedly triggered without the possibility of inferential repair, even in retrospect. This definition is limited to narratives that are structurally organized around the principle of communicative failure.

The repeated failure of inferential closure corresponds to the alignment of the reader's cognitive experience with Ryder's psychological disorientation. The failure of inferential closure externalizes the cognitive burden as an experiential aspect of the reading process, making the reader susceptible to the same uncertainty, misalignment, and instability that the protagonist experiences in his interaction with the environment. The process of meaning construction is thus rendered continuous but unsatisfied, emphasizing the vulnerability of relevance-based interpretation to the collapse of contextual anchorage. In extending Relevance Theory from its conventional application to communicative success, this research shows that the relevance-seeking cognitive process can be maintained even when the satisfaction of relevance is structurally denied. This has implications for understanding the limits of inferential comprehension in contemporary fiction. Inferential overload, as a model of analysis, provides a framework for examining texts that exploit the pragmatic potential of communicative breakdown and, in doing so, contributes to debates in cognitive pragmatics, literary linguistics, and narrative theory on the limits of inferential comprehension in contemporary fiction. Overall, these studies show that inferential overload arises from the summated effects of disrupted mutual manifestness, pragmatic noise, and unstable temporal sequencing. The reader will continue to use their inferential system but will not be provided with a stable context necessary to optimize the relevance process.

Conclusion

In this study, *The Unconsoled* has been analyzed as a narrative that challenges the relevance-based approach to interpretation not through occasional ambiguity or lack of meaning, but through an ongoing discrepancy between the cost of inference and its benefits. Therefore, the narrative constitutes a limiting case for the application of relevance-based interpretation, highlighting the challenges of inferential understanding given the contextually unstable grounding of inference. The implications of the above analysis are not, however, confined to Ishiguro's novel. The problem of inferential overload offers a model of analysis applicable to contemporary narratives that capitalize on pragmatic expectations. At the same time, frustrate interpretive resolution, especially with texts that are surrealistic, dreamlike, or cognitively dissonant. By highlighting the relationship between communicative breakdown and the reader, this analysis contributes to cognitive pragmatics, literary linguistics, and narrative theory. It underscores the importance of relevance-theoretic analysis for understanding how narrative structure turns communicative breakdown into a site of productive meaning-making.

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