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2. The presentation of self in everyday web use

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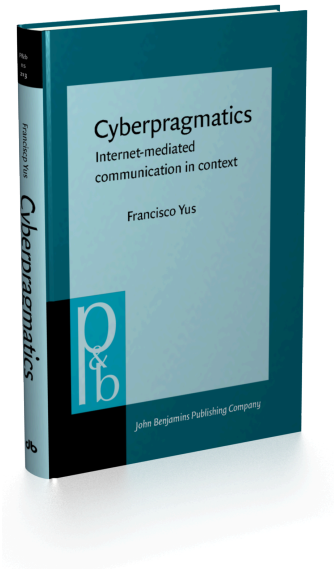

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Cyberpragmatics: Internet-mediated communication in context
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CHAPTER 2

The presentation of self in everyday web use

1. Introduction

On December 18th 1998 the film *You've got mail* was first shown in the USA. In this film, the main characters Kathleen and Joe (played by Meg Ryan and Tom Hanks, respectively) have an intense romance through e-mail communication, with both of them masked behind the *nicks NY152* (Joe) and *Shopgirl* (Kathleen). However, in their physical lives they are enemies that hate each other intensely. This is just one example of how the Internet modifies or moulds the public presentation of people's identities and the challenges that Internet-mediated communication poses for the study of human interactions, not only as just another medium of communication (Belson 1994, Vidal Jiménez 2000), but also as a powerful tool for the definition and development of identities and personalities, together with the creation and consolidation of virtual groups and communities.

The title of this chapter is adapted from the famous micro-sociological analysis by Goffman (1987 [1959]). Goffman's differentiation between the roles that we play in society and the real identity that is hidden behind the "social facade" is undoubtedly applicable to Internet-mediated communication, where users' identities often remain backstage in intimacy, while other electronic identities play their parts in the visible area of the social stage. In this chapter I will show how the individual's identity is influenced, in both cases, by interactions, by the social use of language and by the feeling of community, group or network membership.

2. Discourse and sources of identity

Throughout their lives, people assume a number of discursive features and interactive behaviours that eventually shape them in their growth as human beings. These features arise from a general tendency of humans to gather together and establish social ties, a tendency which Allott (1998) labels as *groupism*. This is why many pragmatic studies have underlined the importance of the social context in human communication (see Akman 2000). Initially, we can represent the links between discourse and identity as an inverted triangle (see Yus 2002a). At the wide top area of the triangle we can place the discursive features of macro-social

quality assumed (and often inherited) by the individual such as race, sex, nationality or specific speech community membership. In the middle part of the triangle we can place social groups whose membership the individual chooses and which are often linked to inherent jargons that mark frontiers of discursive specificity. Finally, at the narrow bottom part of the triangle we can place the individual as a unique holder of personal identity (the self) whose discursive features, shaped as a unique idiolect, differentiate this individual from the others.

One of the main sources of identity is the speech community (Gumperz 1971: 114, 1989). Sometimes, as happens in Quebec or Catalonia, the language of a community may even be the subject of heated political debate, which reinforces the ties that bind people to their shared language and hence stresses their group identity. But individuals may also choose to belong to specific social groups related to specific jargons. This belonging enhances their *intra*-group identity, complemented with their *inter*-group identity of not belonging to other speech groups or communities. Very often, as in well-known *urban tribes*, specific jargons are linked to strong submissions to certain codes or patterns of nonverbal behaviour, including *artifactual communication*, that is, communication through objects such as clothing, complements (e.g. *piercings*) and other visual symbols of strong group identification.[1] Finally, the bottom vertex of the triangle would be occupied by the person's individual identity (self), which is shaped and moulded through conversational interactions with others in daily life. In fact, human beings are constantly negotiating their discursive identity with other people, a process which Boxer & Cortés-Conde (1997: 282) call *relational identity.* In this sense, Goffman (1987) describes human beings as *interactive constructions*, in which individuals negotiate their the personal images (*faces*) with other people or in which they *position* themselves against others (Davies & Harre 1990).

This three-fold representation of discursive identity as layers in an inverted triangle is *re-inverted*, as it were, on the Internet (Figure 2.1). Indeed, the initial wide area at the top of the triangle, made up of macro-social aspects of discursive identity, undergoes a process of minimization or fragmentation due to the users' ability to interact with other users who belong to speech communities that are geographically and culturally distant. This world-wide interaction may dilute the markers of macro-social discursive identity, while other important macro-social

1. An important term, in this sense, is *social network* (Milroy 1978, 1992; Milroy & Milroy 1992), which represents the intensity of discursive social exchanges within a community and which is to acquire special relevance for research on Internet-mediated communication (because of the growing popularity of social networking sites on the Net and the rise of personal networks of a hybrid physical-virtual quality; see Chapter 4). Le Page's (1986) *acts of identity* are also worth mentioning here, a phrase that describes human beings' tendency to reflect upon the linguistic attributes of those social groups they want to belong to or identify themselves with.

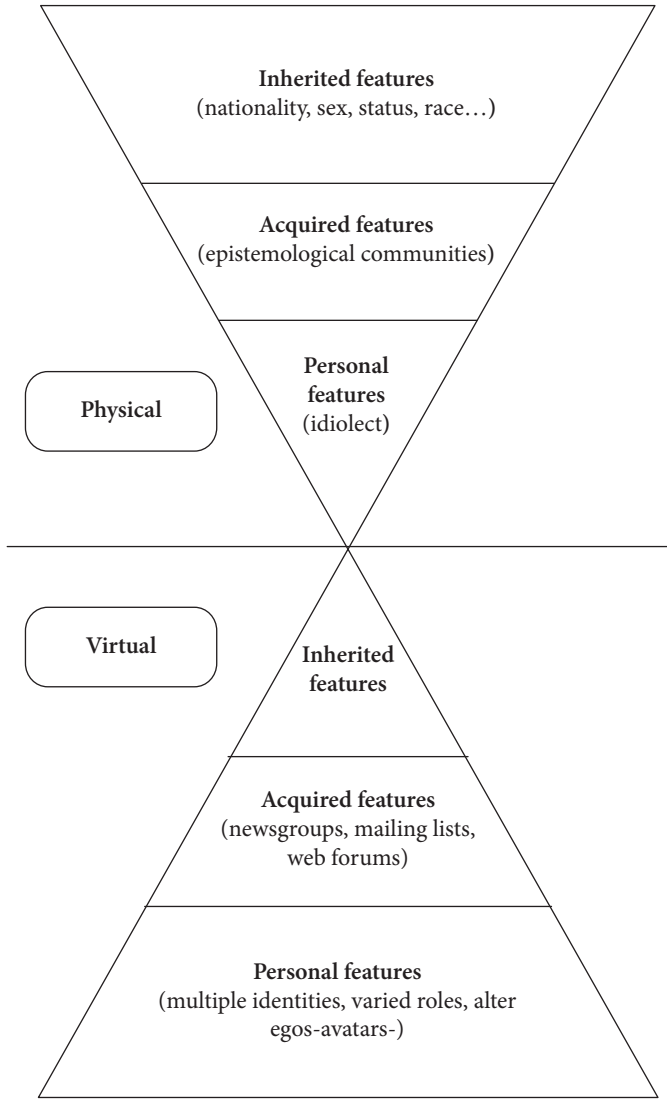

Figure 2.1 Discursive sources of physical-virtual identity

(and inherited) attributes such as the user's sex or race simply disappear in text-based virtual interactions. This is one more aspect of today's globalization, which has led to a physical network society (Castells 1997; Echeverría 1994, 1999), a virtual network society in cyberspace (Garton et al. 1997, Beamish 1995, Reid 1991, Warschauer 2000) and, nowadays, a society of personal networks with a hybrid physical-virtual mixture of interactions (Yus 2005b, 2007b).

The former middle layer of the inverted triangle in offline sources of identity would be similar to that of online groups, but on the Internet these would be replaced with virtual alternatives such as newsgroups, online forums or e-mail distribution lists. But these virtual groups shape, in a similar way, the user's identity by means of a set of tight intra-group markers of discursive identity. Indeed, these social groups on the Net also exhibit jargons and assumed shared information that are only available to those users who belong to the group (Watson 1997: 106, Cutler 1995: 20) and become one more source of group cohesion (Donath 1999, Maldonado 1998, Meyrowitz 1985: 143–144). For example, it is typical of certain newsgroups to use specific abbreviations and acronyms that create discursive barriers of comprehensibility for non-members of the group (Thomsen et al. 1998).

Finally, the former bottom vertex of the inverted triangle that represents the person's identity (self) shaped as idiolect would suffer a process of multiplication and/or fragmentation on the Internet due to the possibility of forming multiple virtual identities that are added to the physical identity, overlap with it or even replace it in extreme cases.[2]

3. The (speech) community

People store a number of commonsense assumptions that emanate from the human environment and our trust in these assumptions is not easily altered by other in-coming stimuli. The fact that we belong to a specific speech community entails the creation and storage of certain archetypical assumptions that we accept as "normal" in the ordinary life of the community. For those belonging to a community it is interesting to observe the extent of the *mutual cognitive environment* that exists among them, that is, to assess which area of the individual cognitive environments of the people of a community is shared by all of them and of which they are all aware (the *mutually manifest* area). Conversations are a good means to determine this area of mutuality. Besides, the reiterative determination of this area generates *community stereotypes,* made up of highly accessible stereotypical

2. Many studies differentiate between *real* and *virtual* identities (also in Yus 2001a). However, this dichotomy is biassed, as if only offline interactions could be *real*. In fact, for many people communication on the Net and their identities therein may be even more important and real than communication and identity formation in traditional physical scenarios. This is why I prefer to use the alternative *physical* versus *virtual* dichotomy for interactions and sources of identity formation. Weinreich (1997) proposes, as a form of compensation for this bias of the real/virtual dichotomy, a differentiation between *sensory world* and *virtual world* (see also Wynn & Katz 1997, Poster 1995: Chapter 2).

schemas.[3] This is part of the tendency of human cognition to form and maintain ties, to weigh one's social prestige against other people's, to assess the effect of our actions on other people's opinions and to predict their plausible replies (Nicolle 2000: 239).[4] Similarly, Jary (1998a: 166) stresses the fact that the stimuli which make assumptions about the social environment manifest tend to be very prominent. The information related to the individual-in-society is very relevant and, at the same time, highly accessible and easy to process due to its archetypical quality (S&W 1986: 88; on the applicability of relevance theory to social issues see S&W 1997 and Coupland & Jaworski 1997, among others). Finally, Gumperz (1977) points out that there are *expectations of co-occurrence*, specific to a particular culture, which people use in their daily interactions, often spontaneously. Frequently, these expectations become prominent in inter- or cross-cultural interactions, in which each participant brings along his/her own cultural specificity, as happens, for example, in inter-cultural business negotiations (Mateo & Yus 2009).

Besides, it should be underlined that in a virtual environment many social attributes are absent due to the lack of physical co-presence of the interlocutors. This absence entails a loss in the amount of mutuality between the users' cognitive environments and a parallel absence of archetypical social conventions to which people tend to resort in their daily interactions (Donath 1996). As Belson (1994) comments, the norms that are habitual in face-to-face communication are no longer conventionalized on the Internet, nor are there many norms for structuring (in)formal messages or for the assessment of politeness. But this statement does not imply that Internet-mediated communication is necessarily doomed to communicative failure, or devoid of effective protocols for interactive behaviour. On the contrary, it will be shown in this book that virtual interlocutors manage to create strategies that make up for the loss of socially connoted conversational cues and of the essential contextual information found in face-to-face conversations

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3. Žegarac (2007) specifies that this kind of information fits what he calls *central cultural representations*, in the sense that they are valid in different contexts of our daily lives without the danger of misunderstandings.

4. This stereotypical information has been labelled by authors differently. Among others, we can list *script* as a prototypical succession of events for a shared activity (Lindsay & Norman 1983: 704), *frame* as a structure of data for representing an archetypical situation (Minsky 1975: 355) or definition of a situation that is constructed in accordance to organizational principles that govern the events and our subjective involvement in them (Goffman 1974: 10), *schema* as a structure of memory that comprises a number of active structures capable of assessing and transferring information (Bobrow & Norman 1975, quoted in Tannen 1979), and *theme* as a conceptual structure that contains a number of inter-related scripts (Abelson 1975, quoted in Tannen ibid.).

(Matthews 2000: 80). At the same time, *cyber-media* for Internet communication have evolved enormously in the last few years, thus opening new options for contextualization and communicative richness (web cam, sound, 3D environments, videoconferencing…). This evolution has increased the ability to convey and process contextual information of a social or personal quality.

4. The virtual community

Several analysts have underlined the difficulty that the definition of "community" entails (see Fernback 1997: 39). A possible solution is to propose the attributes that a community should possess in order to be given this label. This is what Erickson (1996a) did when proposing the following qualities of communities: belonging, relationships, commitment, values, goods, and perdurability. To these, the following attributes can be added: a shared location, reciprocity, norms and goals (see Yus 2010b: 44–45, de Cindio & Ripamonti 2010, Baym 2010: 72–98).

Are these qualities applicable to virtual communities? Yes, they are, in theory, as can be deduced from the bibliography available on this topic.[5] In general, it can be stated that worries about an excessive dependency on computers (and parallel isolation) of some Internet users is more likely to be found in sociological or philosophical studies on the Net than in the linguistic and pragmatic approach of this book. For example, it has been argued that the virtual community is an effect of the progressive adaptation of human beings to different environments or habitats: natural, urban, and now telematic (Echeverría 1999). Turkle (1996a) also stresses how American life, typically in middle-class suburbs where people hardly know their neighbours, has encouraged people to meet in cinemas, malls and, eventually, electronically in their own homes irrespective of their physical location. She points out how the Internet prevents fruitful interactions among people (Turkle 2011). And in Yus (2007b) a growing tendency towards hybrid (physical-virtual) personal networks of interaction is foreseen (see 5 below). For London (1997), communal life, which he calls *the public sphere*,[6] has fragmented due to an obsession with security and protection, not only from crime or violence, but also from having to talk with people, and hence people take refuge in

5. See, for instance, Jones (1995a, 1997a, 1998a), Smith & Kollock (1999) and Porter (1997).

6. Also called *public space* (Habermas), *civic nuclei* (Mumford), *talk shops* (Barber), or *third place*, together with the house and the workplace (Oldenburg, Schurer). Bibliographical references in London (ibid.).

suburbs that isolate them from other individuals (see Galindo Cáceres 1998). By contrast, if we study both types of community from a discursive-pragmatic point of view, we will realize that people resort to similar strategies of contextualization and intention recognition both in *physical* and in *virtual* communities. But this assertion does not mean that the outcome of interpretations will be equivalent in all cases and situations. The search for relevance of the stimuli that reach us is a universal cognitive activity of human beings and is rooted in the biological architecture of the mind. Therefore, the strategies of production and comprehension of messages, guided by relevance, will not differ essentially in physical and virtual environments, but it is nevertheless undeniable that there are different options for contextualization in either case.

In the bibliography available, virtual communities are often defined according to the tie that bind users together: their desire to share a certain type of information, belief or interest (and the subsequent satisfaction obtained). In other words, the tie of being aware of sharing a certain cognitive environment, for instance:

> Groups of people who congregate electronically to discuss specific topics which range from academic research to hobbies. They are linked by a common interest or profession. There are no geographic boundaries to on-line communities and participants anywhere in the world can participate. (Del'Aquila 1999)

> Social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace. (Rheingold 1993)

> Incontrovertibly social spaces in which people still meet face-to-face, but under new definitions of both 'meet' and 'face' […] Virtual communities are passage points for collections of common beliefs and practices that united people who were physically separated. (Stone 1991, quoted in Jones 1998b: 15)

Given the peculiarities of virtual communities, it is understandable that researchers could not avoid the temptation to compare them with their traditional physical counterparts.[7] In this comparison there is often an underlying premise: that both types of community, physical and virtual, are mutually exclusive and that it is necessary to "log on" to virtual communities as a complement to "real" communities. But, in fact, there is a high level of inter-connectedness between them

7. See Weston (1994), Agren (1997), Baym (1995), Kollock & Smith (1999), Wellman & Gulia (1999), Patterson (1996: Chapter 6), Kling (1996a), Giménez (1997), Q. Jones (1997), van Alstyne & Brynjolfsson (1997), Hamman (1999), Croon 1997), Valtersson (1996), Weinreich (1997), McIlvenny (1999), Cherny (1999), Etzioni (2000) and Yus (2001a: 53–57), among others.

in today's society and the qualities of virtual communities are usually related to similar qualities of the physical counterparts (Baym 1998: 37–38).[8] And nowadays few people log onto their social networks. Rather, it is taken for granted that these people are constantly connected to them. We are now experiencing what William Gibson, who coined the term *cyberspace*, predicted many years ago: that in the future (that is, nowadays) people would no longer pay to get connected to the Internet; quite the opposite: they would pay to get disconnected.

4.1 The linguistic essence of the virtual community

In the past, Internet-mediated communication was basically text-based, and even nowadays the text typed by users is essential in virtual interactions. Analysts such as Cicognani (1998) or Danet (1998), among others, make a general differentiation between types of text-based communities. On the one hand, *synchronous virtual communities* (for example chat rooms), where interlocutors are connected simultaneously to the Net, build up a sort of textual interactive dialogue that disappears as soon as the users stop the connection and switch off the computer. In synchronous communities there are no traces of our presence, nor are there options for a long-lasting form of community. On the other hand, *asynchronous virtual communities* (for example newsgroups) build up an archive of interactions and hence an increasingly complex form of community where stronger communal ties can be fostered (see Lombard & Ditton 1997, Sotillo 2000). The possibility to build up an archive of interactions on the Net turns these communities into rhetorical entities (Bormann, quoted in Thomsen et al. 1998), whose collective meaning arises from an experience and history constructed from the users' contributions.

In both types of community, the interactive key (and, eventually, one of the main sources of virtual identity construction) lies in the text typed by the users (Stuart 1999, Simich-Dudgeon 1999). According to Mitra (1997: 59), the texts exchanged on the Internet are artifacts that keep virtual communities bound

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8. An example of the parallelism between virtual and physical communities was the project *Infoville* in Villena (Alicante, Spain). Unlike the virtual community, *Infoville* was not a space separated from the physical community, but an inter-connection between people that shared a physical community and were even neighbours that came across each other in the streets, but who also shared a virtual community as a supplement to their face-to-face encounters (see McInnes 1997). In fact, conversations in offline and online scenarios frequently overlapped without discontinuity. This is a kind of mixture that will be more and more frequent during this century. See also the term *communal computing* (*informática comunitaria*) in Finquelievich (2000).

together, as well as indicators of which direction they are taking. The identities inside the community are mainly created via the ways users present themselves in their discourses. As a consequence, the textual quality of virtual communities is their most outstanding attribute.

On the other hand, the text is useful to link virtual experiences that, on most occasions, suffer from a spatial-temporal fragmentation (or at least re-structuring).[9] The text on the Net may remain archived beyond the synchronous connection of the members of the community.[10] This is why Maldonado (1998: 25) qualifies these communities as *transit communities* (*comunidades de paso*). And the classic label of *global village* by McLuhan would also fit this redefinition of the traditional idea of space and time under the new trans-spatial and trans-temporal possibilities that the Internet opens up (see Stille 2000). In other words, "with infinite space and around-the-clock availability, the Internet has made building relationships and community easier than ever before by defying time and space limitations" (Mitra 2010: 51).

The text is also useful as a holder of the user's features of identity when typing and transmitting it on the Internet. In an interactive medium that has removed the user from the body and the body from its spatial-temporal location, only the textual identity remains (see 6 below), although the loss of information is compensated for by technological advances that in the last few years have brought Internet-mediated communication closer to the richness of oral conversations. But this identity tends to a certain idealization of the virtual self, caused by the absence of the contextual clues that normally frame the extent of our impressions of other people's identities. As Stallabrass (1998: 79–80) points out,

> when we can only count on partial information, we tend to fill the gaps with idealized elements. Here there is no danger of infection, pregnancy or violence, but neither is there danger of physical intimacy. The mask that computer-mediated communication provides, unlike the clothes that one wears for a fancy dress party, hides us completely. The gender, sexual orientation, colour, or even the species, everything can change instantly and at one's will.

9. On this issue, see Cicognani (1998: 18), Greenhill & Fletcher (1996: 182), Bruns (1998a, 1998b), Jones (1997a), Boudourides (1997), Reid (1991), and Sandbothe (1998), among others.

10. Nowadays, the perdurability of text is complemented with authentic "repositories" of visual, audio or multimodal information on the Net, which also play an important communal role, as happens with photographs in *Flickr* or videos in *YouTube*.

4.2 Virtual cognitive environments

When two people interact, a number of assumptions about their cognitive environments are manifest to each of them and some may become mutually manifest, and hence part of their *mutual cognitive environment*. This may be essential to guarantee an efficient flow of conversation and interlocutors normally make hypotheses about which assumptions are *mutually manifest* in the course of a conversation. Thus each speaker will predict that certain assumptions are mutually manifest and each hearer will use these assumptions when selecting the speaker's intended interpretation (S&W 1986: 44).

In Internet-mediated communication the conversational tasks of addresser and addressee do not differ from the ones mentioned for face-to-face interactions. Virtual interlocutors on the Net also make hypotheses about the existence and extent of the mutuality in their cognitive environments, as an essential step towards effective communication. However, very often these virtual interlocutors are faced with limited, partial or even inexistent information concerning other users' cognitive environments. For instance, users frequently log onto the Net with a *nick* and their personal features may be constructed only textually with the keyboard. Their bodies and nonverbal behaviour are absent in text-based interactions, as are gestures or paralinguistic contours of the voice, and it is difficult to apprehend essential aspects of the users such as their race, sex, social origin, physical shape or status. The personal representation inside the Internet is not an inevitable consequence of biology, birth or social circumstances but, rather, an easy-to-manipulate incorporeal fabrication.[11] In this sense, there are *information richness theories*, as they are generically labelled in Yus (2007b), such as *Social Presence Theory* (see Byrne 1994, Jaffe et al. 1995), which suggest the need for interlocutors to be aware that they are mutually involved in the conversation, a feeling that decreases – leading even to a total lack of interest in the conversation – when the contextual information available to both interlocutors is reduced due to the qualities of the channel. On this basis, Kiesler et al. (1984) define computer-mediated communication as a channel that de-personalizes. These authors argue that there is social anonymity that is a direct consequence of having to imagine our interlocutors or, in relevance theory terms, of having to make hypotheses on the assumptions that belong to the mutual cognitive environment of interlocutors that are not co-present. Of course, the informative richness of current *cyber-media* increases the overall options for self-disclosure

11. See, for instance, Mitchell (1995), Trott (1996), Cherny (1995a) and Davis (1997).

and hence the options for more intense interpersonal relationships on the Net (see Mesch & Beker 2010).[12]

In general, which assumptions tend to be manifest – or probably mutually manifest – in Internet-mediated communication? Traditionally, those manifested through typed text, but there are continuous, rapid advances in the richness of *cyber-media* that are generating more and more options for contextualization. But on the Internet it seems that the general norms of behaviour in physical communities are inverted: in physical scenarios, people usually identify other people that share an interest with them. When, in the course of conversational interactions, we reveal and identify aspects of mutuality, we tend to gather and form groups tied by these mutual interests. In virtual scenarios, by contrast, we can go straight to the newsgroup or forum where the topic that interests us is treated and, after that, we can discover new areas of mutuality (Kollock & Smith 1996: 116). Similarly, the more users gather together in a newsgroup, the more difficult it turns out to delimit the area that belongs to all the users' mutual cognitive environment or, in Jones' (1995b, 1997a: 17) words, the more difficult it is to establish the *symbolic space* constructed by interactions in the forum, which is the most essential element of cohesion in any community (see also Mitra 1997: 57–60, Erickson 1996b).

An example of a feature whose mutuality is checked by Internet users (and which eventually serves as a marker of community membership) is the use of abbreviations, the repetition of characters and acronyms in newsgroups, chat rooms and instant messaging. As is the case with any specialized jargon that sets up discursive barriers for those outside the group, in these environments for Internet communication the users make hypotheses on the degree of mutuality with other users that allows for correct understanding of these innovative uses of the text typed thorough the keyboard, in a similar way as happens with jargons in specialized communication (see Posteguillo 1997, 2003; Alcaraz Varó et al. 2007).

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12. *Information richness theories* is a label that covers theories that, one way or another, address how (or whether) the loss of contextual information produced by the channel generates a loss of interest in the information being processed, with an extreme outcome in the interruption of communication. Among others, these theories would fit this label: (1) *Reduced Social Context Cues Theory* (see Sproull & Kiessler 1986), (2) *Social Information Processing Theory* (see Walther 1992), (3) *Social Identity Theory of Deindividuation Effects* or SIDE (see Spears, Lea & Lee 1990, Spears & Lea 1992, Reicher, Spears & Postmes 1995); (4) *Media Richness Theory* (see Daft & Lengel 1984, Rice 1992), and (5) *Uncertainty Reduction Theory* (see Berger & Calabrese 1975).

5. Towards personal networks of physical-virtual interactions

In the last few years it has become evident that the initial attempt at a differentiation between physical and virtual communities no longer makes sense in a technology-filled society like ours, in which the role that both types of community play in this twenty-first century is getting increasingly blurred (see Yus 2003c, 2005b, 2007b, 2008a). Rather than connecting to virtual communities, nowadays people enjoy multiple physical-virtual possibilities of interaction and social gathering shaped as personal networks that form an intersection and in which the user is a node in a dense inter-relation of friends, relatives, colleagues and acquaintances.

Today's evolution of social interactions is leading to interwoven and hybrid interactions of a physical and virtual quality, and the importance of the former as a solid foundation of community bonding is decreasing enormously. Indeed, at the beginning of the 90s, when Internet started to become popular, traditional physical communities were already undergoing a process of disconnection from their physical foundations, and people were already searching for ties and interactions in places (such as bars, squares, etc.) that were not part of their neighbourhoods. In that decade, the Internet was playing no major part in the formation and development of identities and communities as alternatives to the ones fostered in physical contexts. The Internet was something that one had to log onto, with a poor virtual scenario compared to the physical materiality of classic spaces for social interactions.[13]

By contrast, in this decade of the twenty-first century the changes in both physical and virtual interactions have been enormous. It can be stated that nowadays the communities in physical spaces are suffering from a process of *virtualization*, that is, they are becoming *virtual realities*, since they have definitely lost the physical anchorage that tied them to a delimited space and the prominent role that they used to play in the past. Physical communities have fragmented, extended, disintegrated, losing the boundaries that made it possible to identify them. Now, more than ever, people search for their physical social networks in scattered places. And they massively use technologies such as the mobile phone, which removes the person from the physical anchorage and stresses, instead, the importance of the person regardless of his/her location. Traditional community-

13. This view of "physical better than virtual" can still be found in contemporary research on communities and social networks. For example, Galindo Cáceres (2010) argues that social networks on the Internet are only a configuration of options for individual contact, not for communal relationships. The centre is the individual, the satisfaction at finding someone who fits our interests, which indicates a poor or inexistent social network.

fostering spaces such as the local bar, the main square, the neighbourhood, etc. are no longer important for the communal or interactive needs of the citizens.

At the same time, Internet-mediated interactions are immersed in a process of *materialization* or *physicalization*, since they are no longer spaces which one has to log onto but are, instead, essential options for interactions with other people and they even compete in intensity with face-to-face interactions in physical settings. All the range of options for Internet-mediated interactions that are available to the user in this decade (among others, the 3G services for the mobile phone, chat rooms, videoconferencing, virtual worlds – such as *Second Life* or *World of Warcraft* –, blogs, SMS texting, Twitter, instant messaging, social networking sites, interactive websites and e-mail, among others) are now massively used by people who cannot often differentiate them from physical interactions in terms of communicative satisfaction. Besides, many ties and gatherings on the Internet reach levels of communal intensity that are difficult to find in physical communities. In short, we are heading towards a gradual hybridization between traditional physical spaces for communities, which tend to be more and more virtual, and Internet-supported communities, that are increasingly "physical" and important in today's interactions.

Table 2.1 Media for communication with friends (survey, 2008)

	Men	Women	Total
Instant messaging	19 (90,4%)	56 (86,1%)	75 (87,2%)
Telephone	11 (52,3%)	25 (29%)	36 (41,8%)
SMS	9 (42,8%)	41 (63%)	50 (58,1%)
Skype	3 (14,3%)	6 (9,2%)	9 (10,4%)
E-mail	6 (28,6%)	20 (30,7%)	26 (30,2%)
Mobile phone	17 (81%)	49 (75,3%)	66 (76,7%)
Chat room	----------	1 (1,5%)	1 (1,1%)
Social networking site	----------	12 (18,4%)	12 (13,9%)

In December 2008, a survey form was given out to university students from the University of Alicante (Spain).[14] It confirmed this tendency to hybridization, since young people today massively use technologies in parallel to their physical interactions and do not consider them deficient means for keeping in touch with their friends (see Table 2.1). They systematically use instant messaging (87.2%), SMS (58.1%) and the mobile phone (76.7%), and these are not supplements or complements to their physical social networks, but primary sources for managing them and their daily interactions. Indeed, for young people today,

14. 21 male, 65 female, aged 17 (16.2%), 18 (40.6%), 19 (16.2%) and 20 or more (26.7%).

> online and offline lives are connected to each other. Digital worlds are very real to youth – and within their subjective experiences, the "real" and "virtual" may even blend with each other. Therefore, we refrain from using the term "real world" to contrast with "online" or "digital worlds." Instead we will use the terms physical/digital and offline/online to capture both ends of the continuum representing online and offline worlds. (Subrahmanyam & Šmahel 2011: 35)

Besides, there is an increasing number of people with friendships (sometimes very intense ones) that are only sustained virtually on the Internet, without ever meeting face-to-face. As can be seen in Table 2.2, more than 80% of informants hold and sustain social relationships exclusively on the Net. For that purpose, the most typical *cyber-medium* was instant messaging (specifically *Messenger*) (68.6%) and social networking sites (*Facebook, Tuenti…*), although nowadays the percentage of the latter is surely much higher. What is surprising, though, is the low percentage of e-mail use for maintaining friendships (23.2%), a medium that is usually considered to be "too cold" or "too serious" by today's youngsters (see Chapter 6).

Table 2.2 Contact only through the Internet

Contact only through the internet?					
	Men		**Women**	**Total**	
YES	17	(81%)	53 (81,6%)	70	(81,3%)
NO	4	(19%)	12 (18,4%)	16	(18,6%)
Which medium do you use for communication?					
Messenger	15	(71,4%)	44 (67,6%)	59	(68,6%)
Social networking site	9	(42,8%)	11 (16,9%)	20	(23,2%)
Skype	1	(4,76%)	4 (6,1%)	5	(5,8%)
SMS	----------		1 (1,5%)	1	(1,1%)
Chat room	----------		1 (1,5%)	1	(1,1%)
E-mail	6	(28,5%)	14 (21,5%)	20	(23,2%)
Avatars	1	(4,7%)	----------	1	(1,1%)

The consequences of the current state of hybridization of physical and virtual networks, of the *materialization* of Internet-mediated interactions and the *virtualization* of physical interactions are multiple and, to a certain extent, contradictory. Just as there are still nowadays highly homogeneous neighbourhoods in terms of race, religion or country of origin, with a parallel homogeneous use of language, we can also find interactions with a diffuse, multiple, virtual or physical, but especially hybrid quality. However, the prospects for the future indicate a tendency, in Western technified societies, towards a full mixture of physical-only interactions, Internet-mediated ones and hybrid ones (the

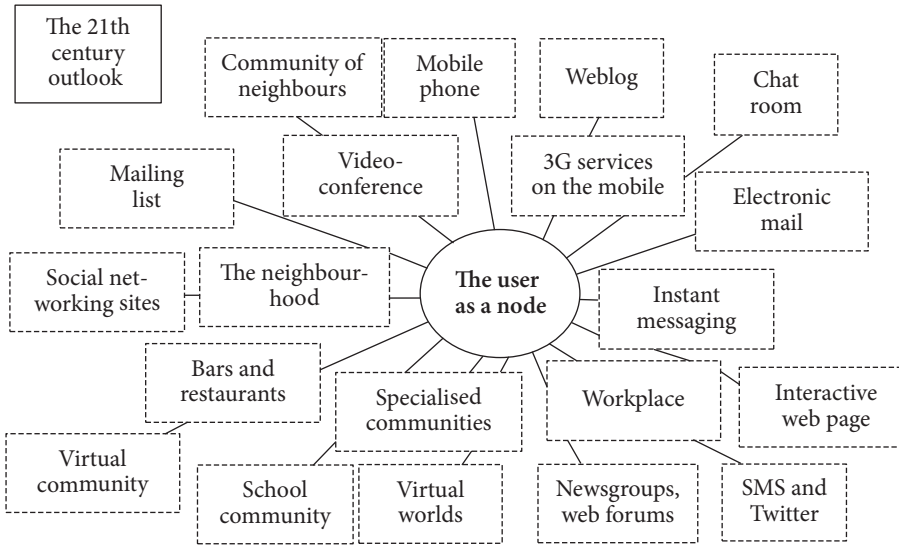

Figure 2.2 Hybridized physical-virtual interactions in the future

latter being increasingly frequent).[15] The image of the user of the future is that of "the person as a node," through whom these types of interactions form intersections, as represented in Figure 2.2. And this picture overlaps with other physical-virtual options for interaction and community bonding. For example, with the aid of *smart phones*, so-called *situated wireless communities* can be created, where the mobile phone aids people in getting "more closely bound with each other through a sense of sharing common physical and/or social contexts" (Sun & Poole 2010: 122). And in these phone-sustained communities we can see clearly the aforementioned physical-virtual hybridization, since in these gatherings "sharing a common physical context leads to stronger joint attention, and sharing a common social context leads to stronger social linkage. As a result,

15. This hybridization does not mean that the user's identity invariably remains identical in physical and virtual scenarios even if the users experience genuine forms of bonding in both types of community, especially if interlocutors do not know each other offline. As Mitra (2010: 60) correctly points out, "the crossover from the cyber community to real life poses a significant concern. There is no guarantee that cyber community identities are completely truthful, so it would be unwise to assume that the online *persona* is the same person in real life. The lack of face-to-face contact, other than through video cameras, removes the best way of judging the true identity of the other person. Relationships and identities are based completely on digital representations, suggesting that sufficient caution is needed before cyber community relationships move into real life."

the sense of physical and social coexistence helps to bind people more closely in wireless communities, leading to 'contextual communality' (ibid.: 123)." Similar ideas will have to be developed for the role of public wi-fi connections in community building (see Hampton et al. 2010).

Of course, being the node at an intersection of hybrid networks entails the non-stop assessment of one's identity and status inside these networks. In this sense, the language and the discursive roles that users adopt in interactions on the Net (for example by assuming or controlling the conversational floor, exhibiting strategies of textual oralization, etc.) are useful ways to undertake this assessment. Examples would be the role of language in instant messaging, what in Chapter 5 will be labelled *ambient awareness*. And the same applies to social networking sites, where the number of posts, the times a post is commented upon, the impact of one's photos and texts on other users in the network of friends, etc. shape users' identities and their prestige in their networks. This obsession with determining one's position in the networks explains why (especially) adolescents engage in the time-consuming and absorbing routine of checking people's profiles and revising their own (Livingstone 2010: 476).

6. Virtual identity

In general, it can be stated that a virtual identity is shaped by using and exchanging texts, pictures or multimodal discourses with other users.[16] This entails a challenge for these users, who have to pay special attention to group demands for an optimal exchange of information, often beyond personal identity construction (Foster 1997).[17] For analysts such as Gheorghiu (2008: 60–61), the social

16. In previous research (for example Yus 2001a), the exchange of texts between users was emphasized as a main source of identity formation. But it is obvious that the evolution in the different *cyber-media* for Internet-mediated communication has favoured the increasing role that other discourse types (e.g. pictures, videos or any multimodal combination) play in today's identity on the Net. See, for instance, Davies (2007) for a study of the role of exchanged pictures (through *Flickr*) in the formation and assessment of identity, both in its social and individual application.

17. This group/individual dichotomy is related to the two most basic forms of characterization that humans use for labelling others. According to Goffman (1983: 176), the characterization that an individual can make of other people thanks to the ability to see and hear them directly is organized around two basic forms of identification: one of a *categoric* quality (which implies placing them in one or several social categories), and the other of an *individual* attribute, which assigns a unique identity to those people based on physical appearance, tone of voice, proper name or any other source of personal differentiation. This double source – categoric and individual – is essential for interactive life.

or cultural component of identity is essential, since it provides individuals with a feeling of belonging and a number of patterns for behaviour. The users can, in this sense, understand each other according to specific rituals, interpersonal interactions and social prestige. Gheorghiu concludes that collective identity surpasses personal identity and that the Net generates, above all, "mass human prototypes."

This "social requirement" affects several aspects of Internet-mediated communication, for example turn-taking in synchronous online conversations (Kollock & Smith 1996: 115), thematic maintenance in asynchronous fora (Fernback 1997: 43–44) or the assumptions that are supposed to be mutually manifest to all the members of the community (Bruckman 1996). In short, then, the social context and the personal contribution to the community by using certain discursive forms (of a textual, visual or multimodal kind) define one's virtual identity. Moreover, the inherently human tendency to form social networks as an *anchorage* of identity (Milroy & Milroy 1992; Milroy 1978, 1992) is also present in virtual communities (Paolillo 1999; Garton et al. 1997).

Several studies have analysed the process of multiplicity (and the parallel effect of fragmentation) of identities in the online/offline divide, and emphasis should be placed on the pioneering research by Turkle (1994, 1996a, 1996b, 1996c, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2011; see also Wortzel 1998, Brody 1996, Davis 1999). Analysts such as Newitz (1995) suggest that, in fact, people do not turn into *different people* in either of the environments (offline/online), but provide a different image, divide their identity into physical and virtual sides of the self. The virtual self may exhibit attributes that the user does not want to show in physical settings, without losing the core identity. This is what happens, for instance, to people for whom the suppression of their "body anchorage" on the Net produces a liberating effect (see Ardèvol & Vayreda 2002, Ellison et al. 2006: 418). This lack of corporeality in virtual scenarios underlies Subrahmanyam & Šmahel's (2011: 62) claim that users do not have a physical presence when they are online:

> individuals have a "virtual representation" rather than an actual physical presence within digital contexts. A virtual representation is a "cluster" of digital data about a user in a virtual context and includes a name or more accurately, a nickname/username, email address, online history, and status within that virtual setting. In other words, it is simply a user's face and body within that particular digital context. Individuals can have different digital representations in different online contexts.

Turkle (in Brody 1996) draws a dividing line between people who suffer from split personality, with non-overlapping and fragmented physical/virtual identities, and those who are fully aware of which virtual identities they have created.

These users combine different aspects of their selves and easily shift from physical to virtual identities, thus experiencing a fruitful combination of both that challenges the traditional idea of the self as unitary and unique (see Wynn & Katz 1997, Sweeney 1999). As I have pointed out above, the tendency nowadays is towards an amalgamation or hybridization of physical-virtual interactions with the user as a node in a dense intersection of mixed interactions.[18] The user's identity should also undergo a similar process of hybridization depending on the environment in which it is exhibited.

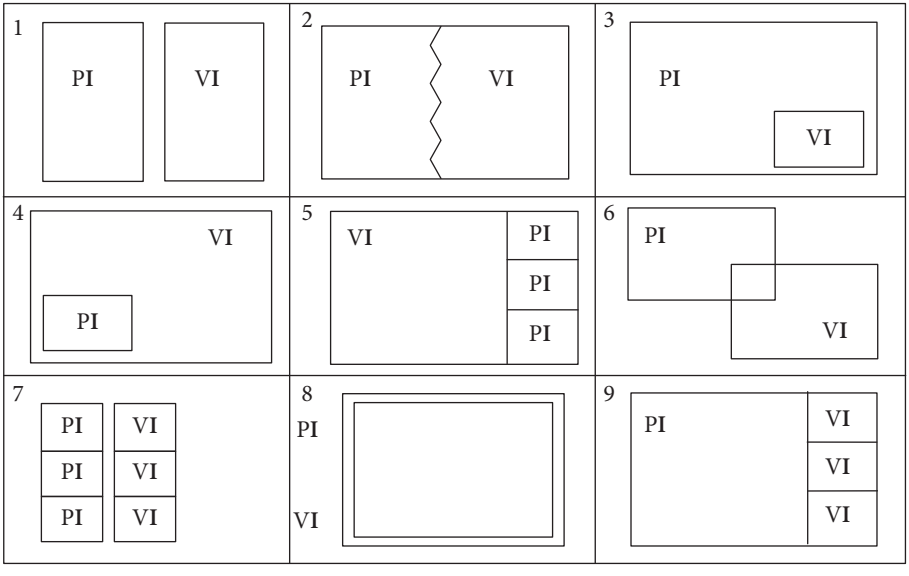

Figure 2.3 Relationships between physical identity (PI) and virtual identity (VI)

18. In this sense, N. Jones (1997: Chapter 3) proposes a classification of the virtual self into (a) *Self*, the human being in front of the computer in the physical world; (b) *Metaself*, the presentation of self in the virtual world, the self that other users perceive, a version of the physical self that the user varies and modifies at will or unconsciously; and (c) *Metafictional self*, a manifestation of a portion of one's self inside a fictional environment such as the MUDs (multi-user dungeons, or more recently multi-player online games), created consciously as a form of alternative (meta)self within the boundaries of the virtual world. Another division is Brewer & Gardner's (1996, quoted in García Gómez 2010: 140) into *the individual self* (those personal characteristics that make the self different from all others); *the relational self* (defined by the dyadic relationship that assimilates the self to significant others; and *the collective self* (the group characteristics that differentiate 'us' from 'them').

The term *faceted identity* also fits this scenario. As Farnham & Churchill (2011) stress, cultural representations of the self tend to favour more individualistic notions of protagonists who struggle to achieve their one "true" identity across situations. But for many people their identity is *faceted*, in the sense that different aspects of identity are performed depending on context, and this is transferrable to this process of physical-virtual hybridization of identities. In this sense, in Figure 2.3 several possible combinations of physical identity (PI) and virtual identity (VI) are provided:

In (1) the user has perfectly delimited physical and virtual identities. There is no overlapping between them and the user values both forms of identity with the same strength. A similar case is (2), where certain aspects of physical and virtual identities *invade* each other, with qualities of each type of identity fitting specific aspects of the user's overall identity.

By contrast, (3) portrays the case of users whose identity is shaped mainly in physical scenarios, with minimal sources of identity on the Internet. This is the case of occasional users of the Net, who still have not benefited from it and hence the role that the Net plays in their identity shaping is minimal. The opposite would be case (4), in which users hardly find any sources of identity in physical contexts but feel at ease on the Internet, where they can "be themselves" and their identities are shaped accordingly.

In (5) the virtual identity occupies most of the identity formation of the users, with several more fragmented and *ad hoc* physical identities. It is on the Net where these users find their main sources of identity. An example could be users who interact in different physical contexts and adopt *ad hoc* instrumental identities for these scenarios, none of which really shapes the individual's main identity. And it is on the Internet where these users find the true medium of expression, consolidation and support of their identities, which are much stronger than those fragmented *ad hoc* physical identities.

In (6) users have physical and virtual identities with similar weight in their daily lives and with a certain amount of overlapping between them. These users are aware that several interactions (and sources of identity formation) are only available online, and that certain interactions among users will probably never happen offline. At the same time, several interactions and several areas of their identity are valid for both scenarios, which justifies the overlapping area.

In (7) users have a number of fragmentary identities that form their global identity. These partial identities apply to both physical and virtual environments. As Androutsopoulos (2006) argues, users do not necessarily have to reproduce their offline identities when they are online, but stress or favour certain aspects of their identities depending on the environment where they are interacting. This opinion is shared by Turkle (in Davis 1999: 72), for whom playing with identities

in several computer windows on the screen is a parallel phenomenon to the multiplicity of identities adopted in physical contexts.

In (8) users do not differentiate between physical and virtual sources of identity, maybe because they live both as equally natural and valid sources, and neither of them is prominent. Many adolescents fit this case, since they "jump" from physical to virtual contexts without even noticing that they are changing environments or feeling that there is a loss when moving from the physical context to the virtual one.

Finally, case (9) is the opposite of case (5), since it is now the physical identity that occupies most of the source of identity for the users, with a few fragmented and partial online identities meant for specific purposes. This is a frequent case, since it is difficult to avoid the physical anchorage of the person even when logged onto the Net.

As we can conclude from Figure 2.3, there are many possible combinations between physical and virtual sources of identity, and for many Internet users the virtual sources may be a valid (rather than added) alternative to the physical ones, and they may even overcome the latter in terms of strength or fill the gap of poorly-developed physical identities, as exemplified in the opinion of a user quoted below:

(1) I didn't really have a social life before. But now I've got one, I don't leave my room. (quoted in Welford 1999)

In the past, this multiplication or diversification of identities was clearly supported by text-based communication. Even nowadays typed text is still important in the shaping of users' virtual identities (for example chat room messages, instant messaging, comments and posts in blogs and social networking sites, e-mail, etc.). Of course, the evolution of the discursive properties of *cyber-media* has made visual sources of identity more prominent and important (as in *photologs*), together with multimodal combinations of text, sound and pictures (as in *YouTube*). For example, Schwarz (2010) comments on how self-pictures in *Flickr* have an identity-shaping role for adolescents in terms of public awareness of one's presence there: "*Flickr* may be described as a social space in which users compete for other users' attention (represented by each photo's view-counter); for public recognition of their technical and artistic competence […] and even for a specific form of social capital (a web of contacts, objectified in each user's 'contacts list')." Similarly, social networking sites contain multimodal profiles that "function as 'digital bodies' which identify a person and constitute the end product of self-reflexive identity production" (Georgalou 2010: 42; see also Kim & Dindia 2011).

A pragmatic consequence of the variability in *cyber-media* is that, depending on the informative richness of the medium and its evolution in the oral-written, verbal-visual and synchronous-asynchronous dichotomies, the addressee users will have to make a greater or lesser effort to compensate, inferentially, for the loss of contextual information in the messages being processed. The presumption of relevance that every text holds must be complemented with a *presumption of honesty* in the way users present themselves to other users on the Net and influence their identity-shaping through sustained interactions.[19]

7. The personal web page

In the late 1990s, one of the most common forms of self-presentation on the Internet was to own a personal web page, with the aim of providing users with information about one's life, interests, hobbies, etc. (see Wynn & Katz 1997). Nowadays, by contrast, personal web pages are being replaced with other forms of self-expression on the Net, such as blogs or profiles in social networking sites, which are easier to edit and with more options for interactions. Personal web pages only remain in academic or scientific contexts. They are used, for instance, by university teachers to list their publications, etc. (see Lamb & Davidson 2002, Thoms & Thelwall 2005).

In general, but to different degrees depending on the options for *real* interaction between authors and readers, the manifestness of information on the personal web page rarely reaches a true level of mutuality, that is, there is no certainty that the information on the personal page will end up mutually manifest to both the author and the reader. An exception would be the e-mail address on a page that allows for certain feedback on its content (Miller & Mather 1998, Jackson 1997, Margolis & Resnik 1999). However, for Miller (1995) this lack of mutuality between authors and readers may have a liberating effect on the users when presenting themselves on the Net: "on the Web you can put yourself up for interaction without being aware of a rebuff, and others can try you out without risking being involved further than they would wish."

On the other hand, the web page is "published," it acquires a certain autonomy from the author, just like novels. This quality allows for the creation of what

19. I agree with Androutsopoulos (2008) when he makes a distinction between the analysis of "static" sources of identity (screen-based), such as self-presentations in blogs and social networking sites, and interaction-centred participatory sources of identity (face-to-face or mediated), and both sources are inherent objects of an ethnography of Internet communication.

has been called the *autonomous media identity*, common to all forms of discourse transferred to other people through media discourses. A web page designer (quoted in Chandler 1997) comments: "my web page […] mediatively interacts with other people in my absence […] The images we have of ourselves and which others have of us gain a life of their own independent of our presence" (see Yus 1996a: 24–29, 1996b).

8. The nickname (*nick*)

The nickname (or *nick*) is another form of self-presentation on the Internet. In synchronous *cyber-media* such as chat rooms, nicknames are frequent and often compulsory, and it is logical to ask ourselves what relationship holds between the *nick* and the real user, or whether there are connotations that the choice of a *nick* makes manifest, perhaps beyond the user's will, that is, whether the *nick* plays a role of *opaque mask* behind which it is impossible to guess what the person using it is like or, rather, whether it works as a *translucent filter* that allows for the inference of certain information about the user who has chosen it (see Diago Marco 2002).

The *nick* is, to a certain extent, similar to the proper name.[20] In general, proper names may function referentially ("I've seen *Peter*") or connotatively ("Peter is an *Einstein*"). Within the framework of this book, proper names, in their referential function, entail the formation of a number of encyclopaedic assumptions related to the referent of the name. Besides, if there are several competing referents for the same proper name, the hearer will have to disambiguate them as one of the inferential operations leading to the explicit interpretation of the utterance (*explicature*), and contained in a process of interpretation guided by the search for relevance in the utterance being processed (see Marmaridou 1989). In their connotative function, proper names activate in the hearer a number of implicated assumptions prompted by the information that the name makes manifest. These implications are beyond mere reference, but the hearer will be willing to extend

20. There are intense philosophical debates on proper names. For instance, there is a discussion between the Fregean and the Kripkean approaches. As Rivas Monroy (1996) summarizes, for Frege the referent of proper names is mediated by the sense, and hence any individual or object that satisfies the definite description associated with the proper name is its referent. For Kripke, by contrast, the proper name is a rigid designator, that is, it always designates the same individual in any possible world in which the individual may exist. There are also discussions on the scope of the reference of proper names, with Recanati's (1993) research on *direct reference* as one of the main analyses. However, these discussions go beyond the scope of this heading on *nicks*.

context to yield them as part of his/her interest in obtaining the highest relevance from the speaker's utterance.

In this way, the hearer of (2a), where the proper name is used referentially, will develop its logical form to reach a fully contextualized proposition (2b), often after a process of disambiguation:

(2) a. Peter: "I've seen Tom this morning."
b. [Peter] has seen [Tom Smith?] [during the morning of the day in which he has uttered (2a)].

In (2a), the hearer will take the proper name as part of an ostensive communicative act that carries the presumption of its eventual relevance, an act in which Peter is trying to make mutually manifest to himself and the hearer some information (a set of assumptions) concerning the referent of the proper name, Tom Smith. Similarly, the hearer of (3a), which contains a proper name used connotatively, will extract the necessary contextual assumptions that allow him/her to derive implications such as the ones listed in (3b–c) (adapted from Marmaridou ibid.). The eventual extensions of context and the responsibility for the derivation of these implications will be subject to the relevance-related balance of cognitive effects and mental effort while processing (3a):

(3) a. Peter: "Thomas is an *Einstein*."
b. Thomas is very clever.
c. Thomas is very good at maths.

It should be noted that in this case Peter does not intend his interlocutor to find a referent for Einstein, but hopes that he/she will manage to find the necessary contextual information that makes it possible to derive the intended interpretation of the proper name. Besides *strong* contextual implications (*implicatures*) such as (3b–c) that (3a) makes highly manifest, the hearer may also derive other *weaker* implications, perhaps not supported by Peter, and for whose derivation the hearer would be partly (or wholly) responsible, but which are also initiated by the processing of (3a), such as the implications listed in (4a–c):

(4) a. Thomas used to fail when he was at school but he turned out to be very clever.
b. Thomas' haircut is a mess.
c. Thomas thinks that everything is relative.

As will be commented upon below, the nickname does not seem to fulfil the same referential function as proper names since it does not link the name to the identity/referent of the person who uses it. Instead, it is used with the intention of masking one's identity. However, this is not always the case. Concerning the connotative

function, a nickname can convey information on a number of assumptions that the person using it intends to make manifest in a specific context.

Nicks are of course omnipresent on the Internet and are often a requirement for entering conversations in chat rooms. Moreover, nicknames are used in physical scenarios. As de Klerk & Bosh (1999: 2) stress, the nickname allows one to manipulate social conventions when naming people, and therefore it is not surprising that they are particularly frequent among adolescents. For them, the nickname is a symbol of group membership, and provides a feeling of familiarity, of belonging.

On the Net, the *nick* is often used with the intention of concealing the user's identity (Jaffe et al. 1995, Macdougall 1999), but sometimes it is possible to draw conclusions from the choice of a *nick*. For example, in Ruedenberg et al. (1994), Danet (1996a) and Danet et al. (1998), among others, several *nicks* are analysed and several conclusions are obtained from them. My opinion is that this *exuded* information is more these researchers' responsibility than information intentionally made manifest by the user holding a specific *nick*.

Finally, according to Liu (1999) the instability in the use of *nicks* (and parallel instability of identities behind them) comes from the loose rules that govern their choice and use. The lack of restrictions for using them opens up possibilities of which users can take advantage. They can use a different *nick* every time they enter a chat room or keep a single one throughout the sessions. They can change it at will and for any reason (Reid 1994: 35–36). They can do it on purpose (to avoid an unwanted interaction). Finally, although each participant can use only one single *nick* and every *nick* is linked to a single user in one session, it is possible for several users to choose the same *nick* in different sessions.

Nevertheless, there are also chat rooms whose participants have to register their *nicks* and, together with their e-mail addresses, they become linguistic markers of identity that resemble the referential function of proper names (see some users' opinions and comments in Gómez 1998). The software even warns new participants that a *nick* just chosen belongs to another user.

Nicks may also make (mutually) manifest between users the intention to communicate a number of assumptions related to the choice of a certain word as a *nick*, that is, they can also be used connotatively. This use is subject to the existence of contextual information of an encyclopaedic (and often stereotypical) kind that is accessible to all the users in the synchronous conversation (it belongs to their mutual cognitive environment) or else the *nick* might be misinterpreted. But even in this hypothetical case, the users will never be sure of the other users' honesty in using a *nick* or of the underlying intentionality in making these connotations manifest.