

Introduction

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Cyberpragmatics: Internet-mediated communication in context

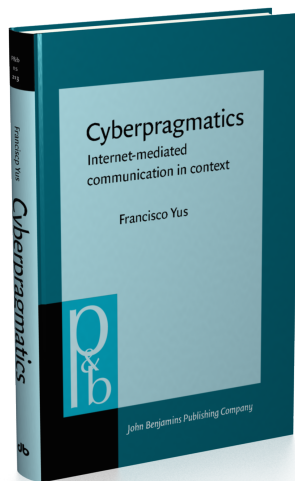
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Introduction

This book is the last stage in my proposal of a cognitive pragmatics analysis of Internet-mediated communication and interaction. For this specific approach to communication on the Net, I coined the term *cyberpragmatics* (Yus 2001a, 2010b). In short, *cyberpragmatics* aims at applying pragmatics to Internet users' interactions, specifically cognitive pragmatics and, within that, relevance theory, which has proved to be useful for the explanation of face-to-face communication and also of asynchronous communication, as happens with literature (Sperber & Wilson 1986, 1995). Today's Internet-mediated communication typically involves massive exchanges of messages of a written, audio-visual and multimodal quality, and most of them with an oral connotation. This is why typed texts often appear to be hybrids between the stability and rigidity of the written (i.e. typed) text, on the one hand, and the spontaneity and ephemeral quality of speech, on the other.

Although this book adopts an explicitly pragmatic approach, it also mentions other studies on Internet communication insofar as they shed light on the quality of interactions on the Net. But the central theoretical framework will be cognitive pragmatics and specifically relevance theory, as I have already pointed out. Hence, throughout the book there is an underlying certainty that although the Internet might exhibit attributes and strategies that are inherent in this medium, all of them can ultimately be explained within cognitive pragmatics. Communication is a human ability, a human resource and there is no difference between interpreting the messages that we are sent in physical contexts and doing so in virtual scenarios. The only thing that varies is the way communication is achieved, together with the means that human beings have devised to engage in interactions. With the Internet, geographical limitations and lack of physical co-presence are overcome.

The Internet is also a broad field of research with a wide range of research options. In this book several of them are addressed, specifically those that, one way or another, have to do with user-to-user communication on the Net. The book starts with a chapter in which several pragmatic assumptions are commented upon and specifically the theoretical foundations of relevance theory.

The second chapter analyses social gatherings on the Internet and how users *present* themselves, in Goffman's sense, in virtual settings. Terms such as *virtual community* will be analysed and related to their physical counterparts, but this

apparently dichotomous approach to community (physical or virtual) is then revised and a more realistic proposal of hybrid personal networks of interactions is proposed (Yus 2007b), with a mixture of physical and virtual properties. This mixture fits today's increasing tendency to spend an important part of our lives in virtual scenarios. It also affects the notion of identity, which is shaped in different kinds of physical-virtual groupings and interactive environments.

Other forms of self-presentation on the Internet will also be studied in this chapter, for example the traditional personal web page and the nickname (*nick*), the *alter ego* of the real person actually typing on the keyboard while interacting on the Net.

The third chapter addresses the quality of the processing of information on web pages or websites. Ever since Tim Berners-Lee devised the "html language" (hypertext markup language)¹ and its implementation on the web page, most of the communication that takes place on the Internet is "html-based." Initially, when the Internet was not so popular, there were different applications for retrieving information and surfing the Net. Nowadays, on the contrary, most Internet resources and interactive applications are located on websites, including social networking sites, library catalogues, chat rooms, online games, *cybernewspapers*, etc.

The chapter starts with the application of terms such as intentionality, cognitive environments and mutual manifestness (typical in relevance-theoretic research) to the apparently uni-directional flow of communication on web pages between authors and readers. Next, I will review relevance-related studies that focus on users' satisfaction obtained from the information that they retrieve from search engines such as *Google*. Since this is a "software-user" type of communication, it is not an area that should be covered by a pragmatics of human communication (user-to-user), within which *cyberpragmatics* is included. However, several studies fitting relevance theory have addressed users' inferences on the output of these search engines, and these can lead to interesting conclusions on how users obtain positive rewards from the output of the search.² This fact justifies the inclusion of a heading in this book.

Later in the chapter a more genuine aspect of *cyberpragmatic* research will be analysed: the (ir)relevance of users' communication using websites, with headings such as the role of "sender users" and "addressee users," the levels or patterns of interactivity, the management of the vast amount of information available on the Net and the parallel danger of *infoxication* (mental *intoxication* due to an excess of

1. Together with his colleagues, he also developed the HTTP protocol (HyperText Transfer Protocol) and the Uniform Resource Locator for websites.

2. See Yus (2000a), thematic section 12, for a list of these relevance-theoretic studies of search engines and information retrieval systems in general.

information to be processed), which often reduces relevance due to a loss of interest provoked by increased mental effort. In this sense, it will be shown how the web page normally demands some kind of reinterpretation of the two variables on which the estimation of relevance depends, because of this massive availability of information that the Internet offers.

Lastly, in this third chapter there is a section devoted to the term *usability* and its conceptualization from cognitive pragmatics, and two additional sections on the transference of offline (i.e. printed) discourses to the Internet and the pragmatic consequences of the adaptation of these discourses to the specificity of the Net (screen size, link-mediated structure, scrolling of text, etc.). Specifically, I comment on printed newspapers turned into *cybernewspapers* and printed advertisements turned into *banners* and *pop-up ads* (among other discursive formats).

Chapter four examines forms of interaction that are relatively new in the history of Internet communication but have had tremendous impact on the way people interact on the Internet, that is, the ones under the label of *Web 2.0*: blogs, social networking sites (such as *MySpace*, *Facebook* or *Tuenti*) and the short-messaging microblog *Twitter*, which combines typical features of SMS (short messages of up to 140 characters) and a social networking orientation.

The fifth chapter is devoted to virtual synchronous conversations. The chapter starts with an analysis of chat rooms and instant messaging (i.e. *Messenger*) and their place in the oral-written and visual-verbal dichotomies. Their most interesting feature is what I call *oralized written text*, that is, the use of several strategies to turn typed text into a more expressive and speech-connoted kind of discourse that allows for the communication, to a certain extent, of the nonverbal behaviour (vocal and visual) that typically accompanies human interactions in situations of physical co-presence and makes it possible to convey not only thoughts, but also the feelings and emotions attached or associated with them in a more effective way.

Chapter five also covers the extension of virtual conversations to virtual worlds where users interact with one another by means of 3D avatars that exhibit a certain ability to convey information nonverbally. Among all the virtual worlds available nowadays, I focus on *Second Life*. This heading is preceded by an analysis of several proposals to enrich the interactions in chat rooms and instant messaging contextually. Finally, a short heading is devoted to videoconferencing, probably one of the most contextualized means of communication on the Internet nowadays.

Chapter six deals with one of the oldest kinds of Internet communication: electronic mail (e-mail). The chapter is divided into two main sections, one devoted to describing the main features of e-mail, sometimes difficult to place in the oral/written dichotomy; and a second section in which the main elements of an electronic message (sender, addressee, subject line...) are studied with special emphasis on their role in the eventual (un)successful interpretation.

Chapter seven is devoted to politeness on the Internet. A review of different theories that deal with this topic is proposed and then applied, where possible, to a medium typically prone to exaltation and unrestricted expression of emotions (due to the lack of physical co-presence of the interlocutors) that often lead to rudeness and impoliteness.

Finally, chapter eight suggests future research within *cyberpragmatics*. It takes into account today's constant technological advances that facilitate human communication and interaction, as happens, for instance, with the mobile phone. In fact, many of these future research issues include the increasingly important role that the mobile phone plays today for people accessing the Net and the different ways in which Net discourses are produced and interpreted on the computer screen and on the small screen of the mobile phone, with interesting pragmatic consequences.