Should relevance theory analyse what is non-propositional, non-intentional but yet affects the eventual relevance?

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SAUSSURE’S STRUCTURALISM

Langue / System
(safe, stable area of research)

Parole / Talk
(unsafe, unstable area of research)

CHOMSKY’S GENERATIVE GRAMMAR

Competence
(safe, stable area of research)

Performance
(unsafe, unstable area of research)
1. Prototypical scope of cognitive pragmatics:

Recovery of intended explicit and/or implicated interpretations (propositions) plus higher-level explicatures (propositional attitude)
PRAGMATICS

Communication of propositions
(safe, stable area of research)

Communication of non-propositional effects
(unsafe, unstable area of research)
There is a very good reason for anyone concerned with the role of inference in communication to assume that what is communicated is propositional: it is relatively easy to say what propositions are, and how inference might operate over propositions. No one has any clear idea how inference might operate over non-propositional objects: say, over images, impressions or emotions. Propositional contents and attitudes thus seem to provide the only relatively solid ground on which to base a partly or wholly inferential approach to communication (S&W 1995: 57).
There is more to the relevance or irrelevance of an act of communication than the objective value of the propositional information communicated which is intended by the speaker to be recovered by the interlocutor.

Although relevance theory has made important progress in including non-propositional effects under its scope of research, there are certain non-propositional elements that are not part of communication proper, are non-ostensive and non-intended, but which play an important role in the eventual (ir)relevance of the act of communication.
The aim of this paper is

(1) To propose a chart of different aspects pertaining to the analysis of communication, some of them already covered by relevance theory, and to add other aspects that, in my opinion, should be brought under the umbrella of an analysis of why communicative exchanges end up being relevant or irrelevant.

(2) To exemplify this chart with the specificity of humorous communication and Internet-mediated communication.
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<th>NON-INTENDED NON-PROPOSITIONAL EFFECTS GENERATED IN HEARER BEYOND THE ACT OF COMMUNICATION</th>
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<tr>
<td>- Positive or negative aspects that “frame”, as it were, the act of communication altering its eventual quality and the scope and range of balances of effects and effort</td>
<td>- Explicature</td>
<td>- Affective attitude (feelings and emotions associated with the production of the utterance)</td>
<td>- Weak implicatures (triggered by speaker’s utterance and sometimes supported by him/her, and sometimes extracted by hearer’s sole responsibility)</td>
<td>- Positive or negative effects on the hearer beyond the interpretation of the utterance</td>
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<td>Framing the actual act of communication and affecting its eventual (ir)relevance, even if prior to communication, by adding effects and/or effort</td>
<td>- Strong implicature (implicated premises) (implicated conclusions)</td>
<td>- Higher-level explicatures (propositional attitude)</td>
<td></td>
<td>A: Within hearer’s awareness</td>
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<td>B: Beyond hearer’s awareness</td>
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<td></td>
<td>OSTENSIVE COMMUNICATION (typical object of cognitive pragmatics research)</td>
<td>Derived from the speaker’s utterance but often not overtly intended to be recovered</td>
<td>Extracted or derived by the hearer beyond utterance interpretation, but affecting eventual (ir)relevance of the act of communication</td>
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SPEAKER’S INTENDED PROPOSITIONAL INTERPRETATION

- Explicature

- Strong implicature
  (implicated premises)
  (implicated conclusions)

- Higher-level explicatures
  (propositional attitude)
Tom: Did you buy the table I told you about?
Ann: It’s too wide and uneven.

Reference assignment: It
Concept adjustment: uneven
Unarticulated elements: too wide for?

Explicature:
The table that I told Ann about is too wide to go through the bedroom door and its surface is uneven.

Strong implicature:
Ann didn’t buy the table I told her about.
2. Extension of scope of research:

**Affective attitude**: feelings, emotions and impressions felt by the speaker upon producing the utterance (and intended to be communicated)
SPEAKER-SUPPORTED
NON-PROPOSITIONAL
EFFECTS

- Affective attitude
  (feelings and emotions associated with the production of the utterance)
Mary and Peter are newly arrived at the seaside. She opens the window overlooking the sea and sniffs appreciatively and ostensively. When Peter follows suit, there is no one particular good thing that comes to his attention: the air smells fresh, fresher than it did in town, it reminds him of their previous holidays, he can smell the sea, seaweed, ozone, fish; all sorts of pleasant things come to mind, and while, because her sniff was appreciative, he is reasonably safe in assuming that she must have intended him to notice at least some of them, he is unlikely to be able to pin down her intentions any further (S&W 1995: 55).
**John calls Mary on the phone.**

**Mary:** Hi John! How’re things?

**John:** I am fine! I’ve just thought... Since Mary is always calling me, today for a change I’ll make the call.

**Mary:** Hahaha. Poor thing... You are right, I should call you more often, but you seem soooo happy to call your friend, don’t you? hahaha.

**John:** Hehehe... Of course, Mary... A pleasure.

**John calls Mary on the phone.**

**Mary:** Hi John! How’re things?

**John:** I am fine! I’ve just thought... Since Mary is always calling me, today for a change I’ll make the call.

**Mary:** I am sorry... I do call you every now and then... Don’t be so angry.

**John:** Yeah, once a year more or less. I just think I deserve better.

**John calls Mary on the phone.**

**Mary:** Hi John! How’re things?

**John:** I am fine! I’ve just thought... Since Mary is always calling me, today for a change I’ll make the call.

**Mary:** Hahaha. Poor thing... You are right, I should call you more often, but you seem soooo happy to call your friend, don’t you? hahaha.

**John:** Actually, I am pissed off with having to call you all the time. You could make the effort to call me, couldn’t you?

**Mary:** I am sorry... Don’t be so angry. I never thought you’d be so upset.
3. Extension of scope of research:

**Weak implicatures**, some of which are backed up by the speaker and some are extracted by the hearer’s sole responsibility
SPEAKER- OR HEARER-SUPPORTED PROPOSITIONAL IMPLICATIONS

- Weak implicatures

(triggered by speaker’s utterance and sometimes supported by him/her, and sometimes extracted by hearer’s sole responsibility)
We have argued that there is a continuum of cases, from implicatures which the hearer was specifically intended to recover to implicatures which were merely intended to be made manifest, and to further modifications of the mutual cognitive environment of speaker and hearer that the speaker only intended in the sense that she intended her utterance to be relevant, and hence to have rich and not entirely foreseeable cognitive effects (S&W 1995: 201).
4. My proposal of extension:

To add the terms contextual constraint and non-intended non-propositional effect to the chart of the (ir)relevance of communication.
The term **contextual constraint** is restricted to aspects that underlie or “frame” communication and interaction (i.e. they exist prior to the interpretive activity) and constrain its eventual (un)successful outcome.

By contrast, the term **non-intended non-propositional effect** refers to feelings, emotions, impressions, etc. which are not overtly intended, but are generated from the act of communication, and add (positively) to the cognitive effects derived from utterance interpretation or (negatively) to the mental effort required for processing the utterance.
EVENTUAL (IR)RELEVANCE OF THE ACT OF COMMUNICATION

ACTUAL (IR)RELEVANCE OF THE INFORMATION EXCHANGED BETWEEN INTERLOCUTORS

- Intended explicatures
- Intended implicatures
- Higher-level explicatures
- Intended feelings, emotions, impressions
- Intended/unintended weak implicatures

Contextual constraints

Non-intended non-propositional effects
AN ACT OF COMMUNICATION IS EVENTUALLY RELEVANT IF…

(A) The contextual constraints do not add to the addressee’s mental effort devoted to the processing of the information in a specific context (to the extent that they threaten the eventual relevance of the act of communication).

(B) The non-intended non-propositional effects add to the positive cognitive effects that the information produces in a specific context (to the extent that they make the act of communication relevant even if the actual content is itself irrelevant).

THE INFORMATION OSTENSIVELY EXCHANGED BETWEEN INTERLOCUTORS IS RELEVANT IF…

(A) The amount of positive cognitive effects that it produces is high

(B) The mental effort that processing this information demands is low
In a nutshell,

If relevance is pervasive in all kinds of human reasoning and, specifically, in all aspects of communication, why not bring into the picture aspects that affect the eventual relevance of the acts of communication even if they are not tightly linked to what is communicated?
The explicit/implicated propositional interpretation is **INTENDED** in the act of communication.

The speaker’s feelings and emotions (affective attitude) are often **MADE MANIFEST** in the act of communication.

The propositional implications (weak implicatures) are **TRIGGERED** by the act of communication.

The positive or negative contextual constraints **UNDERLIE** or **FRAME** the act of communication.

The non-intended, non-propositional effects **LEAK** from the act of communication.
SPEAKER’S INTENDED PROPOSITIONAL INTERPRETATION

Jokes based on the construction of an explicature (reference assignment, disambiguation, concept adjustment, etc.) and/or the derivation of implicated premises and conclusions
## SPEAKER’S INTENDED PROPOSITIONAL INTERPRETATION

### Reference assignment.
The village blacksmith finally found an apprentice willing to work hard at low pay for long hours. The blacksmith immediately began his instructions to the lad, "When I take the shoe out of the fire, I'll lay it on the anvil; and when I nod my head, you hit it with this hammer." The apprentice did just as he was told. Now he's the village blacksmith.

### Disambiguation.
Arnold Schwartzenegger and Sylvester Stallone are making a movie about the lives of the great composers. Stallone says "I want to be Mozart." Schwartzenegger says: "In that case... I'll be Bach."

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### Implicated premises and conclusions.
A woman in bed with a man. The phone rings and she answers it. "Yes darling... No problem... OK... See you later." The man: "Who was it?"
The woman: "It was my husband. He said he's going to come home very late today because he is in an important meeting with you."

a. The man and the woman are lovers.
b. The woman's husband has a lover.
c. She knows that her husband has a lover.
d. Her lover and her husband know each other.
e. Her husband does not know that this man is his wife's lover.
HUMOROUS COMMUNICATION

SPEAKER’S INTENDED PROPOSITIONAL INTERPRETATION

Jokes based on the construction of an explicature (reference assignment, disambiguation, concept adjustment, etc.) and/or the derivation of implicated premises and conclusions.

SPEAKER-SUPPORTED NON-PROPOSITIONAL EFFECTS

Humorous effects (main effect desired), relaxation of tension, hearer’s increased liking, feeling of camaraderie and group cohesion, relieved hearer’s mood, etc.
SPEAKER’S INTENDED PROPOSITIONAL INTERPRETATION

Jokes based on the construction of an explicature (reference assignment, disambiguation, concept adjustment, etc.) and/or the derivation of implicated premises and conclusions

SPEAKER- OR HEARER-SUPPORTED PROPOSITIONAL IMPLICATIONS (WEAK IMPLICATURES)

Often the speaker simply wants to convey a number of implications, none of which is overtly intended, but are the hearer’s choice to a greater or lesser extent.
**S- OR H-SUPPORTED PROPOSITIONAL IMPLICATIONS**

| Harry invites his friend John home for dinner. At the dinner table, Harry talks to his wife using terms such as Honey, My Love, Darling, etc. John leans over and says, "I think it's wonderful that, after all these years, you still call your wife those loving pet names. What is the secret?"

Harry replies: "To tell you the truth, I forgot this woman's name a couple of years ago and it's a bit awkward to ask now." (Jodłowiec 2015) |
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<td>a. Husbands often exhibit a careless attitude to detail of everyday life.</td>
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<tr>
<td>b. Husbands often take it for granted that their wives are part of their lives.</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. Husbands and wives often find it difficult to talk to each other about important issues.</td>
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<tr>
<td>d. Married couples do not spend much time sharing what they think.</td>
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<td>e. As the marriage lasts longer, true affection in the marriage decreases.</td>
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<td>f. After several years, married couples forget what affection is.</td>
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Few (if any) of these assumptions will end up being represented by the hearer, so a number of assumptions become suddenly manifest (or more manifest) to the hearer, with none or perhaps very few of them being actually represented.
All of these are covered by relevance theory. But are these elements sufficient to explain why a humorous act of communication ends up being successful or unsuccessful?

In my opinion, we can only analyse the effectiveness of this kind of communication by adding contextual constraints and non-intended non-propositional effects to the overall relevance-oriented analysis.
CONTEXTUAL CONSTRAINTS

- Suitability (in the current conversation)
- Hearer’s background knowledge and beliefs
- Interlocutor’s sex
- Sense of humour
- Relationship between the interlocutors
- Hearer’s mood
- Culture and ethnicity
- Situational factors (context of utterance production)
NON-INTENDED NON-PROPOSITIONAL EFFECTS

POSITIVE

Enhanced mutuality, enhanced group membership, increased ability to understand jokes, identity shaping and self-esteem, awareness of group specificity, etc.

NEGATIVE

Increased bad opinion of speaker, reduced self-esteem, feelings of non-belonging to group, disgust towards nasty or sexist jokes, etc.
INTERNET-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION

- Positive/Negative Contextual Constraints
- Positive/Negative Non-Intended Non-Propositional Effects

- Related to the Use of an Interface (System-to-User Communication)
- Related to the Use of an Interface (System-to-User Communication)

- Related to the Exchange of Information Among Users (User-to-User Communication)
- Related to the Exchange of Information Among Users (User-to-User Communication)

Effects on Sender User
Effects on Addressee User
We see a shift from dialogue and communication between actors in a network, where the point of the network was to facilitate an exchange of substantive content, to a situation where the maintenance of a network itself has become the primary focus... communication has been subordinated to simple maintenance of networks and the notion of a connected presence. This has resulted in a rise of ‘phatic media’ in which communication without content has taken precedence (Vincent Miller 2008).
(INTENDED) PHATIC IMPLICATIONS THAT MAKE USELESS CONTENT EVENTUALLY RELEVANT

POSITIVE CONTEXTUAL CONSTRAINTS (ADD TO THE EVENTUAL RELEVANCE OF THE INFORMATION COMMUNICATED)

(aid in eventual relevance mainly by reducing processing effort)

NON-INTENDED POSITIVE NON-INTENDED NON-PROPOSITIONAL EFFECTS (ADD TO THE EVENTUAL RELEVANCE OF THE INFORMATION COMMUNICATED)

(aid in eventual relevance mainly by generating additional cognitive effects)