The phatic Internet
Networked feelings and emotions across the propositional/non-propositional and the intentional/unintentional board

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The aims of my lecture today...

To propose an extension and re-interpretation of the cognitive pragmatics (relevance-theoretic) analysis of phatic communication and apply it to the so-called “PHATIC INTERNET”

To propose that more features have to be added for online phatic communication and spread across the board in order to make sense of the importance of the massive amount of phatic posts that are sent and exchanged on the Net nowadays.
The phatic Internet (Vincent Miller, 2008: 398)

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. Here communication has been subordinated to the role of the simple maintenance of ever expanding networks and the notion of a connected presence.
General idea of phatic communication...

primarily aimed at establishing and maintaining social bonds between individuals over and above the exchange of information and hence do not necessarily express any particular thought nor aim to exchange facts (Vetere et al., 2009: 178).

But...

...its functionality reveals a complex cultural, normative, cognitive and linguistic structure behind it, which speaks to its importance from communicational and sociological perspectives (González, 2014: 19).
General idea of phatic communication...

primarily aimed at establishing and maintaining social bonds between individuals over and above the exchange of information and hence do not necessarily express any particular thought nor aim to exchange facts (Vetere et al., 2009: 178).

may not aimed at but generated unintentionally

phatic information may lead to the generation of non-phatic implications

interesting information may nevertheless produce phatic effects
Positioning of the user in the world.
Self-expression, self-identity

Group membership, feeling of community

Dialogues, comments on posts, ambient awareness, phatic interactions
Hello Francisco:
Antonio Ortiz has also commented on your post.
The prototypical pragmatic analysis of phatic communication is insufficient to account for what is really at stake when we talk about “the phatic Internet” and why this kind of communication has become so pervasive on the Net, keeping users glued to the screens. Therefore, we need to add more elements across the board.
Chart of cognitive pragmatics research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONTEXTUAL CONSTRAINTS</th>
<th>SPEAKER’S INTENDED PROPOSITIONAL INTERPRETATION</th>
<th>SPEAKER-SUPPORTED NON-PROPOSITIONAL EFFECTS</th>
<th>SPEAKER- OR HEARER-SUPPORTED PROPOSITIONAL IMPLICATIONS</th>
<th>NON-INTENDED NON-PROPOSITIONAL EFFECTS GENERATED IN HEARER BEYOND THE ACT OF COMMUNICATION</th>
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<td>- Weak implicatures (triggered by speaker’s utterance and sometimes supported by him/her, and sometimes extracted by hearer’s sole responsibility)</td>
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<td>- Higher-level explicatures (propositional attitude)</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>OSTENSIVE COMMUNICATION (typical object of cognitive pragmatics research)</td>
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PHATIC COMMUNICATION IS INTENTIONAL

PHATIC INTERPRETATION IS PROPOSITIONAL

PHATIC COMMUNICATION MAY BE UNINTENTIONAL

PHATIC INTERPRETATION IS NON-PROPOSITIONAL
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, 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 (Sperber & Wilson, 1995: 57).
Phatic interpretations are propositional

An interpretation is phatic to the extent that it contains implicated conclusions which do not depend on the explicit content of the utterance

(Zegarac & Clark, 1999)

Phatic communication is still a case of linguistic communication, because the linguistic properties of the utterance do play a role in the interpretation

(Zegarac, 1998: 338)
Phaticness: The relevance theory approach

EXPLICIT INTERPRETATION NOT RELEVANT
(explicit content of utterance provides little or no relevant information)

Ann to her friend:
Oh! You have a new haircut!!!!

COMMUNICATIVE INTENTION VALIDATES EVENTUAL RELEVANCE
(the fact of communication generates an array of propositional weak implicatures)

Desire of connection, of sociability, of sustaining conversation, of being acknowledged by others, of group membership, etc.
Ken: Are you afraid that the price of petrol might go up again?
Ben: I don’t have a car.

(1)  
   a. Ben does not buy petrol.
   b. Ben is not worried about the price of petrol.  
   [strong implicatures]

(2)  
   a. Ben does not think he should be worried about cars.
   b. Ben does not like people who own cars.
   c. Ben cares for the environment.
   [weak implicatures]

(Billy Clark, Relevance Theory, CUP, 2013)
Nice party, isn’t it?
Yes, bit tired, though
Mind if I sit down?
No, no, go ahead
Phaticness: The relevance theory approach

COMMUNICATIVE INTENTION VALIDATES EVENTUAL RELEVANCE
(the act of communication generates an array of propositional weak implicatures)

The hearer may infer the speaker’s phatic intention as
(non-propositional) feelings and emotions held during communication

EXPLICIT INTERPRETATION NOT RELEVANT
(explicit content of utterance provides little or no relevant information)

Ann to her friend:
Oh! You have a new haircut!!!!
On most occasions, the user processes the phatic text for relevance, and may obtain:

An explicit interpretation
(usually not relevant, but may be)

A number of phatic and non-phatic implicatures
(usually weak, since they are not meant or not overtly meant)

and...

Certain non-propositional effects may be leaked, the main relevance often being in these phatic feelings and emotions, rather than in the outcome of the inference of the propositional content.
Phaticness: The alternative approach (sender user)

Inference of the user’s phatic feelings and emotions associated with the user’s attempt to socialise, be connected, etc.

Derivation of non-phatic weak implicatures (triggered by content, the hearer often being responsible for their derivation)

Explicit interpretation not relevant (explicit content of utterance provides little or no relevant information)
Phaticness: The alternative approach (sender user)

INERENCE OF THE USER’S PHATIC FEELINGS AND EMOTIONS ASSOCIATED WITH THE USER’S CLEAR ATTEMPT TO SOCIALISE, BE CONNECTED, ETC.

Tom has a desire of connection, of sustaining a chat with peers, of being acknowledged by others, etc.

DERIVATION OF NON-PHATIC WEAK IMPLICATURES

Tom’s post indicates he is contented with himself...

Weak implicature: Tom has recovered from the recent painful breakup with his girlfriend

EXPLICIT INTERPRET. NOT RELEVANT

Making a yummy sandwich and looking forward to tonight’s film on TV 😊😊😊
Phaticness: The alternative approach (addressee user)

While processing the utterance some phatic effects leak from the act of communication, feelings, emotions, etc. felt by the hearer.

Feeling of connection, of sociability, of sustained conversation, feeling of being acknowledged by others, of group membership, etc. (crucial nowadays)

Inference of feelings and emotions associated with the user’s clear attempt to socialise, be connected, etc.

And/or derivation of non-phatic weak implicatures (triggered by content, even if apparently trivial, the hearer often being responsible for their derivation)

Explicit interpretation not relevant (content of utterance provides little substantive information)
http://historias.repsol.com
Extended chart of cognitive pragmatics research

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## Extended chart of cyberpragmatic research

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<th>Sender User’s Intended Propositional Interpretation</th>
<th>Sender-Supported Non-Propositional Effects</th>
<th>S- or H-Supported Propositional Implications</th>
<th>Non-Propositional Effects Generated in Hearer Beyond Comm.</th>
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| **A: User to system**  |  - Familiarity with the interface.  
  - Expertise in using web-mediated discourses.  
  - Web page usability (good arrangement of text and image, good structure of links, being able to access content without unnecessary effort, etc.).  
  - Reasons for surfing the Net (work, leisure, looking for a specific item of information or using the web to kill time...).  
  - Presence/absence of effort-increasing elements on the page (pop-up advertisements, problems with bandwidth, etc.).  |  - Inferential strategies intended to turn what the user types (or says) into meaningful (and contextualized) explicit and/or implicated interpretations (explicatures and implicatures).  
  - Within Cyberpragmatics (Yus 2011), it is claimed that the characteristics of the different applications for Internet communication (chatrooms, WhatsApp, e-mail, Web pages, etc.) affect the quality and quantity of contextual information accessed by users, the mental effort devoted to interpretation, and the choice of an interpretation. Their "material qualities" (basically their position on the verbal-visual and oral-written scales in terms of options for contextualization) will have an impact on how relevant the eventual interpretation is.  
  - Another aim of Cyberpragmatics is to analyse why Internet users often find relevance in text-based communication even though several options of contextualization (Webcam, microphone) are available.  |  - Much of cyberpragmatic research focuses on the users’ ability to connote their messages with different attributes of orality typically found in the vocal (e.g., repetition of letters and creative use of punctuation marks) and the visual (e.g., emotions) channels of oral interactions. Therefore, cyberpragmatics analyses the challenges that users face when they attempt to compensate for this lack of orality. And very often more effort has to be devoted to tracking down underlying intentions, feelings, and emotions conveyed by text-based utterances.  
  - In a sense, then, many strategies for communication with vocal and visual aspects of communication have to do with the user's willingness to communicate non-propositional effects such as certain feelings and emotions held while the text is being typed (or said, if the interface allows for that).  
  - Connotations typically involve the use of emotions, repeated letters, strategic use of capitalization, etc.  |  - Weak implicatures, some of them not directly backed-up by the "user sender", while others are obtained by the addressee/user’s responsibility.  
  - Analysts are often too focused on judging the effectiveness of communication in terms of objectively interesting information that offsets the effort that it demands. But on the Internet there are many kinds of interactions and ways of processing of content that have little informational value in a purely objective way.  
  - Eventual relevance does not only depend on the information itself but on the derivation of weak implicatures and non-propositional effects that satisfy the user more than pure content.  
  - This is the case of phatic communication, which conveys "social propositional implications" that sometimes are intended by the speaker and sometimes are extracted beyond the sender’s intentions.  
  - 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 2003).  |
| **B: User to User**    |  - Degree of mutual knowledge existing between interlocutors.  
  - Known address(es) versus anonymous address.  
  - Familiarity with topics, jargons, expected background knowledge.  
  - Reason for act of communication (causal chat, formal piece of communication, getting information on a topic...).  |  |  |  |

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**Handout, page 2**
My proposal of extension:

To add the terms **contextual constraint** and **non-intended non-propositional effect** to the chart of the (ir)relevance of (Internet) 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)succesful outcome.
Contextual constraints associated with the use of an interface

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<td>-Blurring of the physical/virtual divide: impact on the current physical activity of the user: providing cognitive reward in the way the system manages to aid the specific user in a physical place.</td>
<td>-Satisfaction from being able to use the interface appropriately and obtain the expected information.</td>
<td>-Needs of personalization: Users expect information in a highly personalized way, adapted to personal profiles and preferences.</td>
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Handout, page 2
Contextual constraints are important, since they have an impact on...

How much discourse is produced

What kind of discourse is produced

What kind of reaction is expected (sender user’s expectations)

What kind of discourse is possible (interface affordances)

What kind of discourse is expected (audience validation)
The term, **non-intended non-propositional effect** refers to feelings, emotions, impressions, etc. which are not overtly intended, but are generated (“leaked”) from the act of communication, and add positively or negatively to the relevance of the interpretation of the online discourse.
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Non-propositional effects associated with the use of an interface

Non-propositional effects associated with the user-to-user interaction
Non-intended non-propositional effects are important, since they have an impact on...

The +/- outcome of one’s acts of communication

The preference for a specific site / medium / channel

Why certain interactions are (un)profitable despite the lack of/existence of interesting information

One’s awareness of personal and social roles (through interactions)

What kind of “residue” is leaked from everyday acts of communication (and how it makes us feel)
Useful to explain today’s tendency towards a more “phatic” quality of Internet communication

<table>
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<th>CONTEXTUAL CONSTRAINTS</th>
<th>DISCOURSE</th>
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<td>USER-RELATED</td>
<td>Formulaic dialogue initiation (hi!), ritualised everyday topics, humour-filled utterances, mocking, teasing, ironical remarks emphasising areas of mutuality, etc.</td>
<td>Feelings of non-stop connection, feeling of being part of the group, acknowledged by peers, feelings of sustained friendship, “presence in the absence”, sense of intimacy, reaffirmation of social presence, etc.</td>
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<td>INTERFACE-RELATED</td>
<td>OFTEN IRRELEVANT (from a purely informational point of view)</td>
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PHATIC COMMUNICATION IS INTENTIONAL

PHATIC INTERPRETATION IS PROPOSITIONAL

PHATIC UTTERANCES MAY BE NON-PHATIC (context-dependent)

PHATIC COMMUNICATION MAY BE UNINTENTIONAL

PHATIC INTERPRETATION IS NON-PROPOSITIONAL

NON-PHATIC UTTERANCES MAY BE PHATIC (context-dependent)
John to Thomas: “Nice weather we’re having!”

Thomas may have told John that morning that it was ok to go to the beach since the weather was going to be fine; but upon arriving there, it starts pouring down. In this case, John would hold an ironical intention, not a phatic one.

Ann to Rose: “Hi! How are you?”

If Ann and Rose share the information that the latter is recovering from a serious illness, then the question will be interpreted as a request for information, rather than as a phatic utterance.
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Very often the sender user holds a phatic intention (or phatic feelings) and resorts to a prototypical phatic utterance that triggers reactions from peers, their acknowledgement, willingness for interaction.

Very often the addressee user may obtain phatic feelings and emotions beyond the sender user’s intention and beyond the propositional quality of interpretation. A suitable term here would be phatic effects.
Do you mind if I strap your phone to my forehead so I can pretend you're looking at me when I talk?
Why is the interlocutor dismissed in physical scenarios?

BECAUSE HE/SHE CAN’T COMPETE AGAINST THE NET!!!

There are far too many positive contextual constraints associated with virtual interactions.

There are far too many positive non-propositional effects associated with virtual interactions.
Positive contextual constraints influence the user’s activity especially **WHEN SENDING** messages

- **Immediacy of communication, constant connection**
- **Lack of imposition on addressee’s reply**
- **Non-compulsory commitment to the conversation, no need to sustain long interactions**
- **Possibility to plan and design messages**
- **Shy users keep control of how much information is provided, especially the non-verbal, “exuded” one**
- **Allows for more playful text-image combinations**
FIRST SMS, THEN CAME WHATSAPP, NOW YOU RECORD AN AUDIO FILE, AND YOUR FRIEND RECORDS A REPLY. IF THEY CONTINUE LIKE THIS, THEY WILL END UP INVENTING THE TELEPHONE.

PRIMERO EL SMS, DESPUÉS VINO EL WHATSAPP, AHORA GRABAS UN MENSAJE DE VOZ, Y TU AMIGO TE GRABA LA RESPUESTA. SI SIGUEN ASÍ VAN A INVENTAR EL TELÉFONO.
Positive non-intended non-propositional effects influence the user’s activity especially WHEN RECEIVING messages

Feeling of connectedness, of mutual awareness

Feeling of being acknowledged by group of peers

Feeling of “connected presence”, in the sense that the feels that he/she is having lots of synchronous conversations despite the physical distance

Feeling of group membership, of being part of a community of users and of socialisation therein
We are desperate for virtual positive non-propositional effects of a phatic kind, addicted to them, gagging for them.
We are desperate for virtual positive non-propositional effects of a phatic kind, addicted to them, gagging for them.
What’s wrong with [face-to-face] conversation? I’ll tell you what’s wrong with conversation! It takes place in real time and you can’t control what you’re going to say... In-person conversation leads to the most emotional connection... The students [in my research] try to ‘warm up’ their digital messages by using emoticons, typing out the sounds of laughter (“Hahaha”)... But these techniques do not do the job. It is when we see each other’s faces and hear each other’s voices that we become most human to each other (p. 22-23)
NON-PROPOSITIONAL PHATIC EFFECTS ON THE INTERNET

FEELING OF CONNECTEDNESS. SOCIAL AWARENESS, FEELING OF BEING ACKNOWLEDGED, PART OF INTERACTIONS AND FRIENDSHIPS

35% of our respondents said they like to use Skype to hang out with someone (...) a significant portion of Skype users are engaging in this form of interaction. Over half of our survey respondents said that they felt closer to someone after Skyping with them. (...) it can be a powerful tool for allowing people to share lives in the mundane everyday along with the more exciting eventful moments (Katz & Crocker 2015).

Analyses of participants’ usage behavior and their experiences revealed that the more time users spent interacting with other users (e.g., commenting on updates), the closer they felt to other people. Interacting with others also predicted users’ positive emotional states after Facebook use; this effect may be explained by the perception of social closeness (Neubaum & Krämer 2015).

Positive and entertaining self-disclosures increase the feeling of connection, especially when reading friends’ updates (Utz 2015).

The trivial nature of the posts makes conversations accessible while of intimacy by being constantly connected online, in real time with others, globally... All these forms have elements of communicative discourse enabling users to get socially engaged through brief, non-formal messages that have meaning and within their context denote something: interaction, connected presence and fostering and maintaining connections (Radovanovic & Ragneda 2012).

Licoppe and Smoreda (2005) propose that the management of social contacts occurs in two distinct modes. The first mode is a replacement for face-to-face contact or existing older technologies. The second mode is "connected presence as another form of mediated sociability", and refers to a particular use of technology as an additional socialisation tool. It is the repetition, rather than the content of these short messages that maintain the relationship tie and form a sense of connectedness. This mode of socialisation primarily consists of frequent short calls and messages, where the discursive content of the communication is less important than the act itself, and hence phatic in nature... The facility to chat idly, to "waste" time with someone you care for was a valuable expression of the care they shared for each other. The substance of their communication was not always important. It was the reassurance that they were connected, that a channel of communication was available to them, and that this somehow strengthened and nurtured the relationship. These phatic exchanges were genuinely valued (Vetere et al. 2009).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Phatic Communication May Be Unintentional</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phatic Interpretation Is Propositional</td>
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<td>Phatic Utterances May Be Non-Phatic (context-dependent)</td>
<td>Non-Phatic Utter. May Be Phatic (context-dependent)</td>
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<td>Phatic Comm. May Be Tied To The Act Of Comm. As A Whole</td>
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</table>
EVENTUAL (IR)RELEVANCE OF THE ACT OF COMMUNICATION

ACTUAL (IR)RELEVANCE OF THE INFORMATION EXCHANGED BETWEEN THE USERS
(MAINLY PROPOSITIONAL INFORMATION)

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

Contextual constraints

Non-intended non-propositional effects
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<td>In Phatic Communication Content Is Irrelevant</td>
<td>In Phatic Comm. Content May Be Relevant and Phatic</td>
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Trivial phatic posts may be relevant

CUMULATIVE PROCESS THAT IS USEFUL...

TO OBTAIN AN NON-STOP “AMBIENT AWARENESS” OF WHAT THE USER IS ENGAGED IN, A KIND OF “PRESENCE IN THE DISTANCE” THAT DILUTES THE FEELING OF SEPARATION BETWEEN THE USER AND THEIR FRIENDS OR FOLLOWERS

TO GENERATE A CUMULATIVE BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON THE USER FROM THE INFORMATION THAT IS PROVIDED IN THESE APPARENTLY TRIVIAL MESSAGES. THIS BACKGROUND IS IMPORTANT AS PRELIMINARY CONTEXT UPON WHICH SUBSEQUENT INTERACTIONS MAY BE CONSTRUCTED
Relevant posts may be phatic

Alicante among the 10 best places in the world to live

Subsequent interactions of these posts may generate phatic effects on the user

Aerial footage shows incredible bumper-to-bumper traffic in Los Angeles as Americans travel for Thanksgiving
New possibilities open up across the board...

**Prototypical:** Content yields little/substantial relevance at the explicit level; but triggers a number of phatic weak implicatures; and a number of (non-propositional) phatic effects may also leak from the act of communication.

(1) **USER’S INTENTION**
- PHATIC
- NON-PHATIC

(2) **(EXPL.) DISCOURSE**
- NOT RELEVANT
- QUITE RELEVANT

(3) **WEAK IMPLICATURE**
- PHATIC
- NON-PHATIC

(4) **NON-PROPOS. EFF**
- PHATIC
- NON-PHATIC
The highest level of phaticness in Internet communication

The “zero level” of phaticness in Internet communication

Handout, pages 5-6
Thanks!