Positive non-humorous effects of humor on the Internet

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ABSTRACT
In this chapter, the term \textit{(non-)intended non-propositional effect} is proposed and applied to the kind of feeling, emotion, impression, etc. that Internet humorous texts generate in the user beyond the proposition-centered humor, and which may not be tightly connected to the act of communication. These effects may be intended as part of the effects of the discourse being interpreted, but the main interest of this Chapter lies in those non-propositional effects which are non-intended, and hence not part of humorous communication proper, but nevertheless leak from humorous communication. These non-propositional, non-humorous and non-intended effects may provide reward to the users at different levels and add to the eventual relevance (or even constitute the main relevance) of Internet-based humorous texts.

Keywords: cyberpragmatics, relevance theory, contextual constraint, non-propositional effect, Internet humor.

1. Introduction: Cognitive pragmatics and relevance theory

This chapter addresses humor on the Internet from a cognitive pragmatics, relevance-theoretic perspective (see Sperber & Wilson, 1995; Wilson & Sperber, 2004, 2012; Yus, 2006, 2010b). This theoretical framework aims to describe the mental processes and inferential strategies that humans engage in while making sense of what people communicate. This sense-making operation is meant to fill the gap between (a) what the communicator intends and what he/she actually says, writes or types (i.e. codes), and (b) between what is coded and eventually interpreted. For this gap-filling inferential activity, addressees rely on an evolved psychological ability to select the most relevant interpretation by making comparative judgments among competing interpretations and opting for the one that provides the highest interest (\textit{positive cognitive effects} in relevance-theoretic terminology) in exchange for the least mental effort devoted to obtaining it.

In general, hearers are expected to opt for the most relevant interpretation that fits these conditions of \textit{effects vs. effort}. However, relevance is pervasive in human cognition beyond the specific application to the interpretation of linguistic inputs. As the so-called \textit{cognitive principle of relevance} states, “human cognition is geared to the maximization of relevance” and therefore we apply this innate predisposition to multiple inputs to cognition. Needless to say, relevance theory (and pragmatics in general) has mainly focused on how intentional propositional content is interpreted in a context, either explicitly communicated propositions (\textit{explicatures}) or implicated conclusions (\textit{implicatures}), or propositional attitudes.

Relevance theory (henceforth RT) has also addressed propositions
that are extracted beyond the communicator’s intentions (but are nevertheless triggered by the act of communication), by means of the term weak implicature or weak implication. Unlike strong implicatures, which are overtly intended and backed-up by the communicator, these weak implicatures/implications are mainly extracted by the interlocutor’s responsibility, but in any case are generated from the act of communication. Clark (2013: 212) illustrates weak implicatures with the following example, in which Ben’s utterance in Example (1) implicates (as strong implicatures) the interpretations in Examples (2a-b); but his utterance also triggers the derivation of weak implicatures such as the ones in Examples (3a-c), perhaps not really intended by Ben but constructed by Ken beyond Ben’s intentions:

(1) Ken: Are you afraid that the price of petrol might go up again?
    Ben: I don’t have a car.

(2) a. Ben does not buy petrol.
    b. Ben is not worried about the price of petrol.

(3) 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.

Finally, RT has provided an explanation to the interpretation of affective attitudes, that is, the intentional communication of feelings, emotions, etc. that are not propositional but nevertheless count as relevant outcomes of the interpretive process. As typical example is quoted in (4) below:

(4) 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, [...] 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. (Sperber & Wilson, 1995: 55)

In my opinion, these three areas of relevance-theoretic research (intended explicit/implicated propositional content, weak propositional implicatures and non-propositional affective attitudes) are not sufficient to explain why humorous acts of communication end up being relevant or irrelevant. This is why two new terms are needed: contextual constraint and non-intended non-propositional effect (see Section 3 below).

The paper is organized as follows: in the next Section, a brief outline of humor under a relevance-theoretic framework will be provided, together with a brief comment on cyberpragmatics. Section 3 deals with a proposal of extension of traditional objects of relevance-theoretic research in order to
account for non-propositional aspects that may play an important part in the eventual (ir)relevance of humorous communication and Internet-mediated communication. Finally, Section 4 addresses non-humorous effects as positive (non-)intended non-propositional effects on the Internet. Basically, the aim is to underline the importance of effects not directly related to the humorous act of communication on the Net (but triggered by it), and which affect the eventual (dis)satisfaction of the user with online communication.

2. Humor, Internet and relevance

RT predicts that humorous effects are generated because speakers can mindread their interlocutors’ minds, predict which inferential strategies they are bound to go through, expect that certain interpretations, sentence arrangements or word senses are inevitably going to be picked up in their search for relevance, which contextual information will be used in order to turn the coded humorous text into a valid interpretation, etc. (see Yus, 2003, 2008, 2011b, 2012, 2013a, 2013b, forthcoming a, forthcoming b, among others). This control over inferential strategies allows for invalidations of apparently relevant interpretive choices for the sake of humor. For instance, in Example (5) the speaker plays with the apparently relevant referent for “it” (the shoe) and invalidates this choice at a subsequent part of the joke (replaced with “the man’s head”):

(5) 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.

Similarly, in Example (6) the speaker plays with the interlocutor’s construction of an appropriate scenario for the joke. This scenario (also called frame, schema or script\(^1\) in different terminological proposals) was labeled make-sense frame in Yus’s (2013a, 2013b) Intersecting Circles Model of humorous communication. In Example (6), the construction of this make-sense frame (roughly “driver being fined by policeman”) makes the choice of “contact lenses” as the intended meaning of the ambiguous word contacts inevitable, only to be invalidated at the end of the joke and replaced with a more unlikely (less relevant) but eventually correct meaning of “influential people one knows about”:

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1. Frames are stereotypical chunks of information that are retrieved from encyclopaedic knowledge in order to understand a new situation. Schemas (or schemata) are basic chunks of information that allow us to engage in daily experiences and classify them as prototypical instances. Finally, the term script is also commonly used in the analysis of this kind of commonsense information, but it refers more to sequences of actions. However, as argued in Yus (forthcoming b), there is a great deal of overlapping among their scopes in the different definitions available in the bibliography.
(6) A policeman in Washington D.C. stops a lady and asks for her license. He says “Lady, it says here that you should be wearing glasses.” The woman answers “Well, I have contacts.” The policeman replies “I don’t care who you know! You’re getting a ticket!”

Concerning Internet-mediated communication, there is a relevance-centered proposal of research named cyberpragmatics that aims to analyze how users interpret online texts (see Yus, 2001, 2010a, 2011a, 2011b, 2013c). Initially, this application of RT to online communication entails two apparently contradictory statements. On the one hand, Internet makes no difference, in the sense that we do not have specific cognitive mechanisms to interpret online discourses that differ from the ones used in face-to-face communication. On the other hand, Internet makes all the difference, since the aforementioned inferential gap-filling intended to turn the schematic coded input (e.g. typed utterances) into interpretations is influenced by the interfaces used for interactions.

Other claims within cyberpragmatics include the following (Yus, 2013c). Much 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., emoticons; see Yus, 2014c) channels of oral interactions. Therefore, cyberpragmatics analyzes the challenges that users face when they attempt to compensate for this lack of orality and its impact on eventual processing. Finally, another focus of cyberpragmatic research concerns how advances in the level of contextualization provided by the interface (e.g. webcam added to the instant messenger) generate (or not) better balances of interest (cognitive effects) and mental effort in the user’s search for relevance. On paper, these improved interfaces should add to relevance by reducing the effort involved in their use and the correct choice of interpretations, but this is not always the case, since users may prefer a more cues-filtered medium if it suits him/her better, for example in terms of control of self-expression on the net and avoiding giving off too much information on himself/herself.

3. Extended relevance-theoretic research

As was mentioned above in passing, RT (and pragmatics in general) typically analyzes how people construct fully contextualized propositional interpretations (explicatures, implicatures, propositional attitudes) from coded content (utterances, written texts, typed messages, etc.). The underlying premise within RT is that comprehension is guided by the presumption that propositional interpretations are bound to be worth the mental effort invested in inferring them, and that our cognitive system will complain if this content does not live up to the expectations of relevance raised initially upon processing it. However, this chapter deals with two
areas of human communication, humor and online communication, which often generate relevant interpretive outcomes beyond the objective interest of their content, that is, these are discourses which typically end up being relevant despite not offering objectively relevant content to the addressees, as will be briefly described below.

In the case of humor, the texts themselves are often uninformative, they interrupt serious conversations and demand unnecessary processing effort from the hearer, since humorous texts often involve ostensive manipulations of polysemy, ambiguity, likelihood of word senses, etc. As stated in Yus (2003: 1314), addressees of jokes usually accept violations of normal conversational rules, the existence of totally irrelevant answers to (sometimes stupid) questions and so on for the sake of humor. The precondition to this attitude is an acceptance that some humorous game is about to be played (in canned or framed spontaneous jokes) or has just been played (in non-framed spontaneous jokes), a game in which they agree to take part even though the content of these jokes is not bound to be relevant. Of course, some other non-propositional effects (besides humorous effects, the explicitly desired ones by the speaker) are also at work and should compensate for the lack of relevance in the content itself (see Section 4 below).

Something similar happens with online communication. Although it is undeniable that there is valuable content on the net, it is highly noticeable that most of the time that users spend interacting online, especially youngsters, involves what for many people (especially adults) might appear to involve a significant phatic component (i.e. this form of communication is occasionally disparagingly referred to as “silly”, “irrelevant” or “meaningless” by these people). Nevertheless, it keeps users glued to the screens (for a number of other reasons that are rewarding for them). Miller (2008: 395/398) explains this as the shift from significantly relevant content to the increasing value of online communication as supportive of phatic connotations that compensate for the lack of quality in the information exchanged:

content is not king, but ‘keeping in touch’ is. More important than anything said, it is the connection to the other that becomes significant, and the exchange of words becomes superfluous. Thus the text message, the short call, the brief email, the short blog update or comment, becomes part of a mediated phatic sociability necessary to maintain a connected presence in an ever-expanding social network [...]. 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.

The qualities of these two forms of interaction (humor, online interaction)
indicate that the objective value of the propositional content of discourses exchanged is often not the primary source of the eventual relevance obtained by the interlocutors. Rather, certain non-propositional qualities may radically influence the satisfaction from the processing of these discourses. In other words, analysts within cognitive pragmatics are often too focused on judging the effectiveness of communication in terms of objectively interesting information that offsets the effort that processing it demands. But in humorous and online communication there are many kinds of interactions and ways of processing of content that may have little informational value. Eventual relevance does not only depend on the information itself but also on the derivation of certain non-propositional effects and the framing quality of certain attributes of the users and their interfaces. These aspects may even be outside the actual act of communication, but nevertheless affect its eventual (ir)relevance.

In previous research, a way to expand the current relevance-theoretic object of analysis has been sought with the proposal of different terms to cover these qualities that affect relevance beyond the value of content (Yus, 2011b, 2014a, 2014b, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2015d, forthcoming b). In latest research, two terms have been added to the ones already covered by RT (namely explicatures, strong implicatures, weak implicatures, propositional attitude and affective attitude), and which will be described and exemplified in more detail in the next Sections: the first term is contextual constraint. It 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. that are not overtly intended by the communicator, but are generated from the act of communication, and add (positively) to the cognitive effects derived from discourse interpretation or add (negatively) to the mental effort required for processing. These effects may be assessed consciously by the addressees, or lie beyond their awareness, but in any case they influence eventual relevance. In sum, the extended relevance-theoretic model would be made up of the following categories:

1. The explicit/implicated propositional interpretation, which is “intended” in the act of communication.
2. The speaker’s feelings and emotions (affective attitude), which are “made manifest” in the act of communication, and also “intended” as part of what is communicated.
3. The propositional implications (weak implicatures), which are “triggered” by the act of communication, some of which may be backed up by the communicator, and some of them probably extracted by the addressee’s responsibility.
4. The positive or negative contextual constraints, which “underlie” or “frame” the act of communication.
5. The positive or negative non-intended non-propositional effects, which “leak” from the act of communication.
In this sense, the RT model of communication, which bases the information-centered eventual relevance on the interest (cognitive effects) provided by the information (a set of assumptions) communicated against the mental effort demanded, as covered by the two conditions of relevance quoted in (a) and (b) below, should be complemented with the act of communication-centered notions of (positive) contextual constraint and (positive) non-intended non-propositional effect, as described in (a’) and (b’). Needless to say, both contextual constraints and non-intended non-propositional effects may also be negative and detrimental for eventual relevance (Yus, 2015b, 2015c):

The information intentionally exchanged between interlocutors is relevant if...
(a) The amount of positive cognitive effects (the interest) that it produces is high.
(b) The mental effort that processing this information demands is low.

The act of communication between interlocutors is eventually relevant if...
(a’) 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).
(b’) the contextual constraints save (or at least 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).

3.1. Extended humor research

The addition of contextual constraints and non-intended non-propositional effects (Yus, 2015c, 2015d, forthcoming b) allows for a more exhaustive account of what is really at stake when a humorous intention ends up successful or unsuccessful (beyond the utterance-centered comprehension of the humorous discourse). Among the constraints, the following aspects may be listed:

1. *Suitability.* If the joke is cunningly inserted into the current topic of the conversation, there will be a relevant offset of non-propositional effects.

2. *Hearer’s background knowledge and beliefs.* Telling jokes entails a risk: The possibility that the joke will sharply contradict the hearer’s store of beliefs and factual assumptions, and therefore, in cases like this, the joke may end up unsuccessful.

3. *Interlocutor’s sex.* For example, women do not usually like to be told highly sexist jokes. There are also issues concerning how jokes are told and received in same-sex versus mixed-sex interactions.

4. *Sense of humor.* The same humorous text may be amusing,
disgusting, offensive, etc. depending on overall sense of humor or humor competence of the interlocutor.

5. **Relationship between the interlocutors.** Humor depends on the relationship existing among the interlocutors. Jokes often occur among friends and colleagues, but also between strangers as a discursive tool to break the ice.

6. **Hearer's mood.** People go through different moods (even in the course of a single day) that may also play a part in the outcome of humorous communication.

7. **Culture and ethnicity.** Different cultures exhibit different senses of humor, different sources of laughter and different topics exploited for humorous purposes. In short, humor cannot be easily exported to other cultures.

8. **Situational factors (context of utterance production).** For example, telling jokes in a very serious meeting, or sexist ones when there are women listening in the group, may drastically reduce the chances of a successful humorous outcome.

Similarly, in humorous communication we can isolate a number of (positive and negative) non-intended non-propositional effects. These are generated beyond the act of communication (but leak from it), and produce an offset of effects within/beyond the communicator’s overt communicative intentions. Among the possible positive effects, the following may be listed:

1. **Enhanced awareness of mutuality existing between interlocutors.** Humorous communication typically demands certain mutuality of information in order to be successful. At the same time, these discourses also foreground areas of mutuality whose existence is vividly made explicit through the successful outcome of the humorous intention. In fact, many instances of humor are only intended to generate enjoyment through the mutual sharing of information.

2. **Feelings of enhanced group membership, group specificity and group solidarity.** Discourse is a useful tool for stressing group membership, especially if this discourse entails the use of specific jargons or demands a number of background assumptions that reveal appropriate membership, which aids in a more intense feeling of community membership. Humorous texts may also underline group membership through an ability to retrieve from context the group-specific assumptions that are required for optimal humorous discourse comprehension.

3. **More fine-grained ability to extract humorous effects.** Being able to perform the expected interpretive strategies leading to a humorous outcome may generate an offset of personal assumptions regarding the ability to engage successfully in the interpretation of this kind of discourse. Similarly, a greater sense of identity and self-esteem arises from adequate reaction to the intended humor, generated from an adequate inferential enrichment of the humorous text and its appropriate contextualization.

Non-intended non-propositional effects may also be negative to the eventual relevance of the humorous act of communication. Among others, the following are worth mentioning:

1. **Increased bad opinion about the speaker.** Often the choice of
certain jokes, the inappropriateness of their use across contexts, etc. may lead to an increased dissatisfaction with the speaker and his/her personality.

2. Reduced self-esteem. This non-intended non-propositional effect arises upon being unable to reach the adequate understanding of the joke and its intended effects.

3. Feelings of non-belonging to group or community. In the reverse of the aforementioned positive non-propositional effect, the inability to master specific discourses or to retrieve the necessary background contextual information may produce feelings of non-membership in the addressee.

4. Disgust upon hearing aggressive or nasty jokes. This negative non-propositional effect is tightly related to the aforementioned hearer’s background knowledge and beliefs. Upon producing humorous texts, there is likelihood that the underlying intention will be ineffective due to personal traits and susceptibility to certain humorous topics or targets.

3.1. Extended cyberpragmatic research

A similar account of contextual constraints and non-intended non-propositional effects may be performed for Internet-mediated communication. However, in this case both terms (either positive or negative) have to be split into those which have to do with the user’s activity with the system (e.g. managing an interface) and the ones taking place with other users (e.g. a conversation on a chat room). Concerning user-to-system interaction constraints, several aspects may be isolated: (a) the familiarity with the interface; (b) the expertise in using web-mediated discourses; (c) the web page usability (good arrangement of text and image, good structure of links, being able to access content without unnecessary effort, etc.); (d) the reasons for surfing the net (work, leisure, looking for a specific item of information or using the web to kill time, etc.); and (e) the presence or absence of effort-increasing elements on the page (pop-up advertisements, problems with bandwidth, etc.).

In the case of user-to-user interactions, contextual constraints include (a) the degree of mutual knowledge existing between interlocutors; (b) the quality of interlocutors (known addressee versus anonymous addressee); (c) the familiarity with topics, jargons, expected background knowledge, etc.; and (d) the reason for the act of communication (causal chat, formal piece of communication, getting information on a topic...).

Concerning non-intended non-propositional effects from user-to-system interactions, we can list the following: (a) 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 user).
specific user in a physical place); (b) satisfaction from being able to use the interface appropriately and obtain the expected information; and (c) individuation or personalization (users expect information in a highly personalized way, adapted to personal profiles and preferences).

Finally, effects related to user-to-user communication include: (a) the user’s feeling of connectedness (social awareness, feelings of being part of interactions and friendships; to be noticed by others on the Net); (b) the user’s identity shaping; (c) the feeling of community membership (the management of social identity usually involves feelings of group or community membership, or being welcomed by others as part of the network of friends or relatives); (d) acknowledgment (from the online community) of the user’s presence/membership in the group; and (e) actions from user to community (feelings arising from one’s presence being felt and acknowledged by other users upon some activity from the user to the community of users).

4. Non-humorous effects as positive (non-)intended non-propositional effects on the Internet

In this Section, I would like to focus precisely on those non-propositional effects that are non-humorous and are generated beyond the humorous acts of communication on the Internet. These effects compensate, in RT terms, for the non-informative quality of humorous texts exchanged and disseminated on the Net, and also for their occasional disruptive quality when produced inappropriately within communicative exchanges. They may also make the interaction turn out eventually relevant, even if the humorous intention itself ends up unsuccessful.

Such non-propositional effects may be intended by the communicators, in the sense that they had in mind the generation of these effects as part of the eventual relevance of the humorous act of communication. However, my main interest lies in the positive non-propositional effects which are “non-intended” and are generated beyond the act of communication, but nevertheless provide an extra offset of processing reward that results in an overall relevant outcome. These effects may be divided into a number of levels depending on which area of the user’s identity is affected by these effects: the personal level (the user as an individual), the interactive level (the user as part of an on-going interaction with other users), the medium-sized group level (the user as part of an Internet group such as a forum, a YouTube channel, a WhatsApp group, etc.) and the large-sized group level (the user as part of a nation or similar large-sized population).

4.1. Positive non-propositional effects at personal level

Humorous texts mainly produce these effects in the specific realm of the user’s identity shaping and self-esteem. For example, being able to master the expected inferential strategies involved in online humor will affirm the
user’s self-assurance (Baym, 2005). These strategies often entail finding the right intertextual links or background information that underlies humorous discourses on the net and which test the user’s humor competence (Laineste, 2013: 32). Besides, mastering the production and the eventual successful outcome of a humorous attempt is typically associated with labels such as extroversion and high self-esteem (Kurtzberg et al., 2009: 390) and are also generated online. In general, mastering humor makes the person be regarded as socially competent and liked by peers (Pennington & Hall, 2014: 2), as aspect also sought for in virtual environments.

4.2. Positive non-propositional effects at interactive level

Online humor produces a number of effects related to virtual interactions and their management. Among others, the following are worth commenting upon:

1. *Value of an environment for interactions*. Humor facilitates the maintenance and desirability of choosing certain environments for online interactions, together with an effect on eagerness to participate. Users, then, feel compelled to cooperate and maintain the group’s interactional activity through sustained humor-centered participation. This is particularly noticeable in sports live text commentaries (Chovanec, 2011: 244; 2012: 142), in which humor is useful to keep the channel open and the audience interested in remaining on the site, even when nothing worth commenting upon is taking place. Similarly, Marone (2015: 76-77) focuses on Internet fora, and remarks that humor can function as a two-way discursive icebreaker: humorous messages are intended to attract comments; but users also produce them as gateways to the conversation. Humorous statements are hence followed up with more comments and this chained discursive reaction keeps the conversation going. In a sense, then, the effects generated are related to the on-going construction and building-up of humorous interactional sequences: “Speakers frequently signal humor appreciation by incorporating or building on the play frame, which can trigger further elaboration in a chain of humor, with humor begetting more humor” (Vandergriff, 2010: 242).

2. *Exploitation of shared discursive conventions*. Online interactions typically exhibit features of orality to compensate for the lack of vocal information (through repeated letters, capitalization, creative use of punctuation marks) and visual information (through emoticons, emoji) in typed messages. Often the playful or explicitly humorous use of these innovative techniques are the sole purpose and they sustain the development of the whole online conversation, with users humorously building and commenting on these creative conventions, thus producing further in-group sharing of how to use these oralizing strategies (Hübler & Bell, 2003: 279-280). This creative play with genre conventions is particularly noticeable in the viral humor of *LOLCats* (Miltner, 2014), in which expectations on text style (so-called Lolspeak) are an integral part of their ultimate humorous (and viral) effect, complemented with text-image combinations and intertextuality. In fact, “participants explained that using the wrong font or diverging from stylistic expectations essentially ruined it for them” (Miltner
3. Encouragement of participation and interaction. Humor on the Net can also produce effects on the users’ willingness to engage and sustain virtual interactions. For example, online journalists have been encouraged to use humor in their interactions with readers because it fosters engagement and participation. Since people often use humor to seek, gain and maintain connections on social networking sites, the role of humor as a connective device should not be underestimated: “A little humor may go a long way in helping them better connect with current and potential followers” (Holton & Lewis, 2011). Similarly, Hübler & Bell (2003: 280) underline the role of what they call *threads of constitutive laughter* in mailing list communities, where interactions are fostered by inter-connected participation simply because humor has a capacity to generate more comments and replies than serious topics. Often, these interactions involve the use of *joint or coconstructed* humor, in which users provide instant humorous reactions to each other (Chovanec, 2011). In North’s (2007: 51) words, the humor needs to be choreographed to fit coherently within the unfolding interaction, and when successful, it both builds on what has preceded it and is further elaborated by what follows. As a result, humorous comments are often tied into a network of cohesive relationships, with ambiguities providing links across different lexical chains. The textual cohesion, like the humor, is jointly constructed, and both reflects and helps to constitute the social cohesion of the group.

In a similar fashion, Mak (2014: 266) studies humor in professional and workplace instant-messaging interactions, and concludes that it has relational purposes and effects; even if the content is plainly humorous, it may produce the effect of improving, maintaining, and enriching interpersonal communication and closeness among colleagues, aiding them in maintaining work life balance through amicable bonding and companionship. The same applies to the interactions by students analyzed in Holcomb (1997: 4), who used joking to accomplish a variety of interactional tasks: “to build rapport with other students, to save face, and to explore and negotiate (in a relatively safe way) thresholds between different ways of thinking and being.”

4.3. Positive non-propositional effects at medium-sized group level

Humor is a constitutive marker of the specificity of medium-sized Internet groups (Internet fora, blog communities, social networking groups, etc.), which often exhibit humor due to their capacity to stress membership, solidarity, social leveling, and areas of mutuality. Among other aspects, the following should be considered:

1. **Marker of group boundaries and membership.** Rules of humor generation and capacity for humor appreciation produce a non-propositional effect of group belonging and an awareness of differentiation with other groups. Norrick (2003) correctly states that joking establishes and enhances
For these authors, individuals strategically construct jokes that feel appropriate within a group. The non-propositional effect of these jokes on the community establishes discursive boundaries for that group. In a way, humor allows users to fit into the community and simultaneously constitutes or reshapes that community. In a similar fashion, Marone (2015: 67) comments on how users of forum-based communities resort to humor in order to avoid disruptions of the bonding atmosphere, to soothe critiques and to foster dialogues. But humor also builds on the information which can be understood exclusively by the members of the community, a sort of insider’s code that needs to be deciphered in order to achieve a knowledgeable and legitimate participation [...] users establish unwritten rules of participation based on specialist knowledge that strengthen the cohesiveness of the community and define its identity by separating insiders from outsiders”. (Marone 2015: 77)

In short, humorous interactions entail social desirability and acceptance of group-marking specificity, producing a group-connoted offset of affinity, trust, shared enjoyment and satisfaction, what Bormann (1972) labels as ingroup-ness.

Besides, the use of certain jargons, styles of text deformation and vocabulary may be used as a barrier of discursive specificity, since only those who “master” the type of discourse exchanged within the medium-sized community will both feel part of the group and accepted by its members. For example, Tunisian youth use combinations of occidental letters and numbers instead of Arabic, forming a striking type of text that only they can understand. A humor-related example would be the LOLSpeak used within LOLCats, which entails the use of very specific jargon and text-deformation, as in this example: “Ohai! I wud lik u b in deh focus groop, if it am alrite wif u” (Hi! I would like to be in the focus group, if that is alright with you; see Miltner, 2014).

2. Awareness of shared knowledge within group. Humor is an ideal test to check who has access to the necessary background knowledge and assumptions of mutuality needed to get the full extent of humorous effects and which, again, generates positive effects of group membership and
identification. Locher & Bolander (2015: 143) are right in pointing out that when humor relies on shared knowledge it creates closeness and an in-group feeling and also maintains a group identity. In the same vein, the same instances of humor can also exclude those who lack access to common ground. Baym (1995) suggests that humor positions members of the Internet forum under her analysis \textit{(r.a.t.s)} as necessarily competent, assumed to have detail awareness of intertextual elements mentioned in the postings. Similarly, Holton & Lewis (2011) comment that

messages of humor often require individuals to have at least some prior knowledge of the subject matter being discussed are more readily accepted by those with shared knowledge and shared emotional constructs who can collectively decipher their meanings. (Holton & Lewis 2011)

The same applies to the “cultural winks” whose tracing is required for the interpretation of Internet memes (Tay, 2012: 62) and which may produce an offset of non-propositional effects upon correct understanding.

A variation of this reliance on mutuality occurs when mutuality is not expected, but rather occurs as a communal discovery. In the same way that, in many stand-up comedy performances, the audience suddenly discover that certain assumptions, habits or ideas are not privately held but widely communal, thus generating a sudden humorous awareness of mutuality (Yus, 2004, forthcoming b), Internet offers the possibility for this sudden realization as positive effect. An example is found in Chen (2014) regarding a website for user-generated comics, where members can express their artistic creativity without technical requirements, and humor is a powerful resource for this mutual discovery, since the members value the community

as a place where they can rant about the issues they face in life and seek solace from a sympathetic audience who also grapple with similar problems [...] [They gather online] to laugh at each other’s misfortunes, not to feel superior to others, but to revel in the fact that many netizens have experienced similar events (Chen 2014: 693-694).

3. \textit{Group bonding and solidarity}. It is tightly related to the requirement or discovery of areas of mutuality in humorous communication, since this mutuality enhances or favors bonding and solidarity among the members of a community, both online and offline. For example, Hancock (2004: 58) states that humor enhances bonds between individuals by highlighting a shared sense of humor or common ground, which may be especially appropriate on the net, where typical methods of demonstrating bonds or ties, as happens with gatherings and casual conversations in physical scenarios where areas of mutuality among friends are emphasized on the fly, are often inhibited in text-based interactions in which these scenarios are virtualized and devoid of much contextual information (Yus,
It seems that humor compensates offline ways of bonding when we do not have the usual trappings of face-to-face interactions to convey interpersonal information and areas of mutuality.

Jocular mockery or self-deprecating humor are particularly useful to create bonding and solidarity. As Hübler & Bell (2003: 281) correctly state, when laughing at the same joke, individuals can identify with each other and keep one another’s interests in mind. And

the goodwill shown in making oneself the butt of a joke de-emphasizes hierarchy and at the same time subtly incorporates the other primary components of ethos by conveying an intelligent resourcefulness and a modest character. Hübler & Bell (2003: 281)

Maíz-Arévalo (2015) also stresses the fact that jocular mockery seems to be essentially phatic and intended to build up solidarity and rapport amongst interlocutors rather than to inform (or perhaps insult). She mainly focuses on social networking sites, where the maintenance of social relationships is their main objective as opposed to other forms of computer-mediated communication like blogs or wikis, whose main goal is often the transaction of information (Maíz-Arévalo, 2013: 50). Similarly, Kurtzberg et al. (2009: 380-381) argue that using a self-deprecating or self-mocking type of humor in an online context helps to de-emphasize the social hierarchy and to signal the ability of a sender to overcome potential adversity. Humor tends to promote positive emotions which, in turn, may encourage greater feelings of trust and satisfaction with online interactions. Needless to say, the capacity of humor to create bonding effects is parallel to its capacity to produce feelings of exclusion for others outside the group (Meyer, 2000: 317).

4. Feelings of being valuable/valued to/by one’s community. One of the trends of today’s use of the Net is the abundance of user-generated content, in which relevance effects mainly lie in the gratification of being productive and useful to the group or community despite the effort involved in the uploading of information. In the case of humor, it is particularly noticeable, since this user-generated content often creates solidarity through audience’s co-construction and acknowledgment, a clear positive non-propositional effect. Sites such as Jokes from Russia, analyzed by Gorny (2009), base their success on user-generated information for the community, a significant feature that enables users to become co-producers, rather than passive readers of the website, and co-responsible for its eventual success.

4.4. Positive non-propositional effects at large-sized group level

Humor generates effects also at large-sized groups such as nations, professions or sexes. These effects may be of a negative quality, when unfair broad stereotypes spread through different online platforms, as happens with sex-role stereotypes (Shifman & Lemish, 2010, 2011). However, humor may also produce positive non-propositional effects at a large scale. The following aspects deserve attention:

1. Cultural specificity of processing information. Humor on the net
may stress broad national values. An example of politics-centered viral spread of memes on the Internet is the discourses analyzed by Baran (2012) on Estonian politics, which can only be understood by those who are aware of the political events which have taken place in that country.

The Internet also disseminates information globally, and the aforementioned specificity may not be well understood across countries, even though jokes often undergo cultural adaptations and translations and the resulting discourses are acceptable if the topic addressed is universal, as happened with the jokes that spread globally in the aftermath of 9/11 (Boxman-Shabtai & Shifman, 2015: 522). In general, however, humor appreciation provides an insight into the peculiarity of a specific culture or society, since it is often tied to the particular context of creation and with a specific audience in mind, in this case a broad group such as one’s own nation.

2. Mutual awareness of broad values. Humor reveals attributes of our social context and produces the effect of an enhancement of their mutuality. An example is the travel blog *Expatriates’ Talk* studied by Cappelli (2008). This blog creates large-group centered solidarity with Italians by laughing at Americans and maintains group solidarity with co-nationals by laughing at Italians. Interestingly, the blog also produces a medium-sized group’s *initiation effect* by increasing commitment to the group of the expatriates who are the only ones who can fully understand the richness of the cultural interplay behind her words, even behind self-deprecation. Through humor and irony, the expatriate confirms that the attitudes expressed are held in common, and affirms the extent of the expat community’s common ground. Much of the humor will inevitably escape the average readers. Cappelli, 2008: 17)

Another example is the humor produced by Tunisians in the aftermath of its revolution (Moalla, 2015: 51): Tunisian users “rejection to the ex-regime in a humorous way reflected a desire for freedom, justice, and democracy and mirrored a deep-rooted desire for societal changes. It is through their social bonds that the goals of freedom and democracy could be accomplished.”

5. Concluding remarks
In this Chapter several positive non-propositional effects have been isolated at several levels (personal, interactive, medium-sized group and large-sized group). These (non-)intended non-propositional effects should be incorporated into the general relevance-theoretic formula of interest (cognitive effects) versus mental effort when judging the effectiveness of humor on the Internet. Both Internet and humor in general often exhibit little informational value in the content of the discourse communicated, but this lack of content-centered relevance is clearly compensated for by this offset of non-propositional effects that generate relevance beyond the actual act of Internet-mediated communication. This addition, to the general relevance-
theoretic (and cyberpragmatic model), of contextual constraints and non-propositional effects opens up promising areas of future research by incorporating to the pragmatic analysis the research undertaken in other disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, ethnography, information science, etc. inasmuch as they shed light on why interactions end up (ir)relevant beyond the objective relevance of the information being communicated. For instance, in Yus (forthcoming c), a proposal of how identity is shaped and expressed online will be proposed, in which it will be claimed that the intentional, discourse-centered (and proposition-sustained) acts of identity have to be complemented with subtler forms of identity shaping that are displayed and acknowledged through these non-propositional effects, as well as constrained by them.

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