Relevance from and beyond propositions. The case of online identity

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ABSTRACT
In recent research, it has been argued that an extension of the relevance-theoretic (and also cyberpragmatic) scope of research is necessary in order to account for elements of communication that do not have a direct link to the relevance of the propositional information being transferred among Internet users, but which are important to determine the eventual (ir)relevance of the act of communication as a whole. Using the relevance-theoretic terminology, ostensive acts of communication online would be covered by the communicative principle of relevance, whereas other non-propositional effects and contextual constraints, not directly linked to this information transfer, but which matter in the eventual (dis)satisfaction with the outcome of communication, would be covered by the more general cognitive principle of relevance. In this paper, I will show how this extension offers a nice potential for explaining the discursive management of online identity.

Keywords: online identity, propositions, relevance theory, non-propositional effects, contextual constraints.

1. Introduction

Where does the relevance lie in an act of communication? According to the relevance-theoretic proposal (Sperber/Wilson 1995), the relevance of an input (an utterance, a gesture...) lies in the fact that it offers the highest informational reward (positive cognitive effects in its terminology) in exchange for the least amount of mental processing effort. As such, relevance is claimed to stem mainly from information shaped as propositions. As Sperber/Wilson (1995, 57) state, “there is 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”. However, in my opinion addressees may find relevance in a myriad of interpretations, conclusions and effects, sometimes not utterly intended and often non-propositional. These added sources of information and reward might even constitute the main relevance of the act of communication as a whole. This addition to the main “propositional relevance” is a key aspect if we want to explain why Internet users are glued to their screens and, specifically, to explain why certain effects “leaking” from Internet-mediated acts of communication end up relevant for the users’ discursive management of their identity (offline and online). The label “Internet-mediated communication” comprises a whole range of types of interactions, including asynchronous interfaces (blogs, web fora, email, comments to Facebook entries…) and synchronous ones (chat rooms, desktop or mobile instant messaging, Internet-mediated phone calls, videoconferencing, 3D virtual worlds...). Of course, a high speed of transference may generate the feeling that asynchronous forms of communication are quasi-synchronous. And vice versa, typically synchronous interfaces may be used asynchronously, as happens with mobile instant messaging applications, whose users often do not expect immediate replies to their messages.

The chapter is organized as follows: In the next Section, a brief overview of relevance theory is provided. Section 3 is devoted to my proposal of adding two terms to the relevance-theoretic model, namely contextual constraints and non-intended non-propositional effects. The next Section is devoted to general issues concerning identity and its discursive management. Section 5 is devoted to intentional and propositional acts of online identity.
management. Finally, Section 6 deals with the role of contextual constraints and non-propositional effects in the eventual relevance of identity-related acts of communication on the Net.

2. Relevance and cognition

Human cognition is relevance-oriented. It dismisses potentially irrelevant inputs and focuses on what might yield benefits for the individual. On an ordinary basis, we unconsciously focus only on what is relevant and draw relevant conclusions by combining new information and existing (i.e. background) information. And this general tendency to focus on relevant inputs is also applied to communication. Indeed, addressees inevitably tend to select the interpretation that produces the highest amount of cognitive effects in exchange for the least effort, often not realizing that other possible interpretations were also possible (but initially not as relevant). This relevance-seeking procedure guides the addressee when turning the schematic literal meaning of the utterances into a fully contextualized and relevant interpretation of an explicit and implicated quality (called explicature and implicature respectively in relevance-theoretic terminology). But even if verbal communication is the main focus of relevance theory, there is an emphasis that human cognition constantly focusses on what might be relevant, combines existing and new information, and derives conclusions both in communicative and non-communicative scenarios. As Sperber/Wilson (2002: 6) summarise, “the human cognitive system is automatically set up to attend to relevant information in the environment. Our perceptual mechanisms are geared to monitor and select relevant stimuli, including utterances, from the environment. Memory is programmed to select from its vast databases only relevant assumptions that would enable comprehension”. This general tendency is covered by the Cognitive Principle of Relevance: “Human cognition tends to be geared to the maximisation of relevance”.

The main idea underlying the cognitive Principle of Relevance is that our perceptual systems are constantly trying to pick up the stimuli which are bound to be relevant; similarly, our background information is accessed in a relevance-driven way, retrieving relevant information in specific contexts, and our inferential systems are geared to the maximisation of the cognitive effects. And inside this general cognitive principle of relevance, there is a sub-principle that is directly applied to ostensive verbal communication (instances of intentional communication whose underlying intentionality is also identified by the hearer), the Communicative Principle of Relevance: “Every ostensive stimulus conveys a presumption of its own optimal relevance”. This principle is at work when selecting explicit and/or implicated interpretations. And concerning the latter, they may be arranged on a continuum between strong and weak. Consider this example (adapted from Carston, 2010):

(1) Tom: How was the party? Did it go well?
    Ann: There wasn’t enough drink and everyone left early.

(2) a. There wasn’t enough alcoholic drink to satisfy the people at the party and so everyone who came to the party left it early, roughly before 2 o’clock.
    b. The party did not go well at all.
    c. Parties in which alcohol is scarce and people leave early are not good.
    d. Ann thinks alcohol is essential in parties.
    e. Ann only enjoys herself at parties when she is surrounded by many people.
When Tom interprets Ann’s utterance, the literal meaning of her words is not relevant enough and has to be enriched at the explicit level. In this case, the concept *drink* is adjusted (narrowed) into specifically *alcoholic drink*; the scope of *everyone* is narrowed to “everyone at the party”, and *early* has to be interpreted as the time in their culture in which leaving a party at a certain time is considered early (for instance, 2 o’clock). The resulting proposition would be the explicature in (2a). Of course, as an answer to Tom’s question, she also strongly implicates (2b) (an implicature), in the sense that it is clear that she backs up the derivation of this implicature. This is obtained by pairing the explicature in (2a) with encyclopaedic information about what it takes for parties to be successful (the information in 2c). However, Tom may also derive further implicatures, this time weaker ones (Ann probably did not intend to communicate them, but these are anyhow triggered by her utterance), such as (2d) or even more unlikely ones such as (2e), this time derived by his sole responsibility.

3. Beyond propositional relevance

Relevance is a comparative notion. Human cognition is capable, on every occasion, of assessing the interest and mental effort of competing propositional interpretations and automatically opts for the most relevant one in a specific context. However, relevance is also variable and subject to contextual features. On the one hand, it may be affected by a number of factors that alter the intended relevance of an input even before it is produced (e.g. said, typed). On the other hand, addressees may find relevance in some inferred information that “leaks” beyond the propositional interpretation intended by the speaker. In order to account for these elements, in previous research an extension of research has been proposed by adding two elements that play a part in the eventual relevance of Internet-mediated communication, but which are not specifically tied to the content being communicated (see Yus 2011b, 2014a, 2014b, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2016a).

Firstly, the term non-intended non-propositional effect refers to feelings, emotions, impressions, etc. which are not overtly intended by the “sender user”, but are nevertheless generated from the act of communication, and add (positively or negatively) to the cognitive effects derived from the interpretation of propositional content.

Secondly, Internet communication is also affected by a number of interface-related and user-related qualities that may also alter the eventual relevance of the act of communication, and have an impact on the eventual (un)succesful outcome of Internet-mediated communication. These are mainly related to the users’ management of the interface, the kind of relationship existing between interlocutors, the user’s personality, etc. To account for the mediation of these qualities, the term contextual constraint was proposed, restricted to aspects that underlie the acts of communication and the users’ interactions (i.e. they exist prior to the interpretive activity) and constrain their eventual (un)succesful outcome. They frame, as it were, communication and have an impact not only on the quality of interpretation, but also on the willingness to engage in sustained virtual interactions. Constraints are placed outside communication (i.e. they precede it, framing it), but their influence makes it necessary to include them in whatever analysis is carried out to determine the eventual relevance of Internet-mediated communication. Specifically, constraints have an impact on (a) how much discourse is produced; (b) what kind of discourse is produced; (c) what kind of discourse is expected (audience validation); (d) what kind of discourse is possible (interface affordances); and (e) what kind of site is preferred (to channel communicative needs).
Needless to say, both non-propositional effects and contextual constraints exist in every act of communication, not only in Internet-mediated ones, but their influence is much more noticeable on the Internet, where interactions are often devoid of physical co-presence and typed utterances often exhibit a cues-filtered quality. And these terms allow us to explain frequent situations such as the one under analysis in this chapter: the management and shaping of online identity (see below).

4. Discourse, identity, and the Net

Identity has been broadly defined as the ways in which individuals and collectivities are distinguished from other individuals and collectivities in their social relations (Jenkins 1996). In this chapter, identity will be conceptualized as typical constructed, shaped and adapted to different contexts (and exhibiting parallel discursive variability), rather than as inherent, stable and unique (Tagg/Seargeant 2016; Georgalou 2015, 25), although some effects on identity may be exerted unintentionally, see below. This idea of “constructed identity” is in line with theoretical stances such as the ethnomethodological stress on “doing identity” (Bucholtz/Hall 2005, 588). As Tagg (2015, 221) summarises, “identity is not a predetermined, stable property of an individual, but a set of resources on which people draw in presenting and expressing themselves through interactions with others. People actively co-construct and negotiate ‘who they are’, and present themselves in different ways depending on the contextual circumstances in which they are interacting”.

Needless to say, discourse is an essential tool for the shaping and management of identity, both offline and online (Chatora 2010, 21). Human beings tend to get together in social groups providing an essential sense of belonging and involving particular discursive features which work as inherent sources of intra-group identity and also as a means for inter-group differentiation. Also from constructivist approaches such as the one assumed in this chapter, identity has been regarded as a non-stable but inherently interactive phenomenon, since it takes place in specific interactional occasions, yields an array of identities instead of unitary selves and mainly results from processes of discursive negotiation that are eminently social (Yus 2014c, 2015d, 2016b, 2016c; Shophocleous/Themistocleus 2014).

Concerning the relationship and cross-breeding of (discursively managed) online and offline identity, up to five stages have been isolated in previous research:

(a) *Online identity as irrelevant.* Mainly in the 90s of last century, when Internet had hardly any impact on users’ identity, since identity in virtual scenarios played hardly any role in people’s overall identity.

(b) *Offline inverted triangle vs. online re-inverted triangle* (Yus 2001). This was typical at the end of last century, in which offline sources of identity can be pictured as an inverted triangle. The broad top part would be related to broad “inherited” sources of identity such as nationality, race, or sex. The middle part would be related to interactions within groups that the person chooses to belong to and interact. Finally, the narrow bottom part of the triangle would signal the user as holder of a unique identity. As was claimed in Yus (2001), on the Net, this triangle would be re-inverted, as it were, since the former broad top of the triangle is narrowed due to the capacity of Internet to filter out or mask “inherited” social aspects. The middle part would roughly be the same though this time these groups would be sustained online. Finally, the former narrow bottom part of the triangle would now be broadened, due to the possibility to play with different identities online.

(c) *Real virtualities.* At the beginning of this century a process of growing virtualisation
of physical places for interaction was perceived in parallel to a growing importance of online sources of identity management (Yus 2007). Indeed, typical scenarios such as bars and streets started to lose importance for identity shaping (i.e. they became virtualised) while, at the same time, people started to rely more and more on the Net for their interactive and socialising purposes, with an increasing impact on these people’s identities.

(d) The user as a node of intersecting online-offline interactions. This stage is typical nowadays, with the users seamlessly shaping their identities online and offline without differentiating them in terms of strength (Yus 2010, 2011a). Users log onto the Net for socialisation and interactions and then continue these interactions offline, seamlessly jumping from online to offline scenarios.

e) Presumption of online-offline congruence. This is roughly the same pattern as (d), the difference being that now the user is expected to remain the same unique person in both environments, online and offline. As Zhao et al. (2008, 1819–1820) correctly state, “users regard their online presentations as an integral part of their overall identity production and seek to coordinate their online identity claims with their offline self-performance”.

5. Propositional online identity management

A cognitive pragmatics (and cyberpragmatics) of the relevance of identity management for Internet users has to focus on propositionally managed information (Yus 2011a), but also on how non-propositional effects have an impact on the user’s self-concept, and on why certain constraints alter the estimation and extent of the relevance of identity-centred acts of communication (see next Section).

Intentional acts of communication are mainly propositional, typically coded as different kinds of verbal discourse, many of which act as tools for identity management (Vásquez 2014, 68). However, there is no reason why the propositional quality of verbal utterances could not be extended to images and pictures such as the ones uploaded on users’ profiles, which are devoid of verbal content (Grzankowski 2015). For instance, in Yus (2008), it is claimed that readers also engage in inferential operations in order to work out the intended interpretation of pictures and images. The reader has to infer whether the image has a purely denotative purpose (e.g. linking its decoding to the viewer’s mental referent), in which case it would be a visual explicature, or it has a non-coded (and wholly inferential) connotative meaning beyond denotation, this time called visual implicature. The former is easy to process: the reader simply identifies the visual information and matches it to the most appropriate referent. The latter, on the contrary, is fully inferential and has to be obtained by linking the denotative interpretation of the image and context in order to yield the intended implication. Saraceni (2003, 32) provides an interesting example in a series of panels in a comic portraying a couple celebrating their anniversary:

(3) Scene 1: The couple is sitting, watching TV. She is wearing a striped jacket. He is wearing striped trousers and a checked shirt. The sofa where they are sitting is also striped, as well as the TV.

Scene 2: The couple are in bed. She is wearing striped pyjamas; the wallpaper is also striped. She gets up, looks at her husband sleeping, goes to the window (which has a Venetian blind), pulls down one of the strips of the blind and looks out.

A reader of these panels may well process all of this visual information, identify the
prototypical referents of all the images (in terms of visual explicatures) and get his/her expectations of relevance satisfied. But these scenes contain a deeper symbolic (i.e. implicated) interpretation that cannot be simply inferred denotatively from the images but requires a connotative layer of processing: All the striped lines in the panels represent the tedious monotony in the couple’s relationship and since the Venetian blind is also drawn as a series of straight lines, the girl’s bending of the strips of the blind “represents a break in the mechanical regularity that pervades the relationship between the two characters. Also, this break allows the girl to gaze outside and this acquires an extra significance: All the straight lines inside can be seen as the bars of a cage in which she feels trapped”.

By means of different types of uploaded (verbal-visual-multimodal) discourse, users position themselves as unique individuals (Davies/Harre 2001) and upload content on their profiles with expected audiences and interpretations, a kind of identity performance (Chatora 2010, 20–21); and thanks to the affordances of new media, “addressee users” also co-construct, co-produce text in a joint generation of content (Dayter 2016, 17). The user’s profile is, therefore, the area where identity is exhibited, shaped and co-constructed socially (Boyle/Johnson 2010, 1392; Bolander/Locher 2015, 100; Cover 2016, 40). As boyd (2008, 129) summarises, profiles can be seen as a form of digital body where individuals must write themselves into being in order to express and represent salient aspects of their identity for others to see and interpret.

Actually, the eventual relevance often lies in this mixture of propositional content creation and propositional reactions to this content. For instance, users often assess another user’s Facebook profile and his/her entries by looking at the comments that the user gets, which are regarded as more realistic sources of information about the user than the “enhanced” version that the user often uploads.

5.1. Personal identity

Personal identity is conceptualised in this chapter as the person’s awareness of their uniqueness both in physical terms (body shape, inherited bodily traits) and psychological terms (personality, beliefs, opinions, moods). Users manage and shape their personal identities with the aid of uploaded content and the impact that this content has on friends and acquaintances in terms of verbal replies, non-verbal reactions, etc., constituting a very relevant source of information for users beyond the information communicated by this self-related content.

Self-disclosure and self-presentation are essential for personal identity shaping and discourse is essential for this task, especially on social networking sites, since the cues-filtered quality of typed texts demands a greater depth and breadth of self-disclosing behaviour (Trepte/Reinecke 2013, 1102–1104). In fact, according to the Internet-Enhanced Self-Disclosure Hypothesis, adolescents tend to disclose more through typed text than face-to-face, and the support they get from their peers contributes to their well-being (Gonzales 2014, 198; Huang 2016, 123). Besides, self-presentation is influenced by the qualities of social media and their respective audiences (Bazarova et al. 2013, 122). Papacharissi/Gibson (2011, 46) correctly comment that users edit their discursive self-presentation in a kind of “coherent and polysemic performance of the self that makes sense to multiple publics without compromising one’s authentic sense of self”.

Visual discourses are also essential for personal identity management. An obvious case is the selfie and the relevance of the comments that these photos trigger on the user’s profile.
Users -especially young ones- use photos in order to promote a desired or hoped for identity, and their friends evaluate and leave comments in response to these photos, providing feedback for these displays (Salimkhan et al. 2010). In Zappavigna’s (2016, 273) words, “a user’s stream of images is an unfolding construal of identity in which the particular phenomena photographed are a presentation of personal style”.

5.2. Social identity

Together with personal identity, social identity is also essential (and relevant) in everyday interactions, both online and offline. Tajfel (1972) defined it as the individual’s knowledge that the person belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance that this group membership exerts on this person. The individual, by being acknowledged by others, gets his/her identity continuously validated in a society of peers and acquaintances (Xinaris 2016, 64).

As suggested in previous research concerning social networking sites (Yus 2016c), the list of friends provides users with the extent and quality of their social identities (Wang et al., 2010, 321). This is particularly noticeable in profiles owned by adolescents. As Mallan/Giardina (2009) underline, this “friends list” list is extremely important for students, “because it demonstrates popularity, proves membership of a social group, marks one’s status and also provides a way of getting to know new people”. Informants in Schwarz (2010) also stressed the importance of the Friends list, arguing that the number of contacts implies that one is socially successful. In a similar fashion, boyd (2011, 43) adds that “by serving as the imagined audience, the list of Friends serves as the intended public. Of course, just because this collection of people is the intended public does not mean that it is the actual public. Yet, the value of imagining the audience or public is to adjust one’s behaviour and self-presentation to fit the intended norms of that collective”.

Furthermore, although users exhibit and manage their social identity by uploading verbal, visual or multimodal content that links the user with activities involving peers and collectivities (photos of friends having a meal, teachers gathered at a conference…), very often the main source of relevance lies in the “audience validation” (i.e. its positive reaction), rather than in the quality of the content uploaded. This is so essential that when users upload content, they are constantly predicting their peers’ reaction and also expecting it (Stern 2008, 106; Maghrabi et al. 2014, 370; Vitak/Kim 2014, 466; Greitemeyer 2016, 185). This is especially pervasive in content uploaded by youngsters, always desperate to get legitimation through comments and reactions (Salimkhan et al. 2010). In Manago et al. (2008, 454), several theories are mentioned that fit this idea of selective self-presentation and audience validation: shared reality theory (aspects of one’s sense of self derive from public displays of behaviour) and theory of social comparison (individuals are more likely to rely on the consensus of others in situations where physical reality is ambiguous).

5.3. Interactive identity

Identity is typically divided into personal and social. However, in previous research the term interactive identity was also proposed (Yus 2014c), a kind of hinge that feeds the other two identities. For example, fruitful interactions arising from a user’s new profile photo will impact the user’s personal identity; similarly, a successful interaction involving jargons and innovative vocabulary whose meaning is only available to the group will impact the user’s
social identity. In this sense, Koller (2010) proposes a four-block matrix for the analysis of identity that may clarify the role of interactive identity: (a) *individual-personal* (the self as a person, the individual self, who exhibits a specificity and a personal kind of discourse); (b) *individual-social* (the self as a person who interacts with others in the everyday dialogues in which he/she participates); (c) *collective-personal* (interactions of the person in a delimited group, emphasising the in-group discursive features of the participants; and (d) *collective-social* (interactions with other groups that reveal discursive differences and stress the intra-group bonds). Interactive identity would cover blocks (b) and (c), thus feeding the other identities (a) (mainly personal) and (d) (mainly social) with information arising from sustained interactions.

Several studies have underlined the importance of interactions for identity management. Xinaris (2016, 59) comments that users’ identity needs a network of others for recognition, to the extent that “identity is now, more than ever, located not in an essential self or a fixed body, but rather in one’s relations and communications with others”. Gheorghiu (2008, 67) conceptualises identity as a product of interaction, and in order to differentiate ourselves from others, we have to spend quality time with others. And the experiences arising from these interactions shape the person’s identity. In Bolander/Locher’s (2015, 102) words, by engaging in interactions individuals “construct their own identities and make assumptions about the identities of others. This process is fundamentally relational in that ties between interactants are created and recreated, shaped, challenged and confirmed” (see also Tagg 2015, 146).

Interactions are initiated and sought either by the user or by the user’s friends on his/her profile. Concerning the former, in previous research the term *interactivity trigger* was proposed (Yus 2014c), to account for the fact that very often certain entries are uploaded for the sole purpose of obtaining interactions which shape the user’s identity. In Yus (2016c, 79) the following example is proposed, taken from a user’s Facebook profile entry and the comments generated by this initial utterance:

(4) User A packs warm clothes.
User B: where to?
User A: to Minnesota...
User C: Say hello to Tom’s folks from me!!
User A: I will. Will you be visiting during the holidays?
User D: Hoy lucky and glamorous! Some go to Minnesota and others to Córdoba. We should add "city" so that it becomes more glamorous ;)
User A: Montilla City, lawless city. . .
User E: Have a wonderful trip!
User F: hahaha, you’ll never stop!!! hehehe. Enjoy it

In (4), user A provides information about packing the suitcases, but her intention is specifically to raise some replies on the reasons for the trip, destination, etc. Several users join in the good wishes for the trip and user A’s identity is immediately enhanced.

Concerning the user’s friends’ initiated interactions, social media usually include in their affordances a certain amount of non-verbal signals of intended interaction or, at least, of the user’s awareness of the initial entry, for example “pokes” on Facebook. These are part of what is generically labelled *paralinguistic digital affordances*, that is, cues in social media associated with a single icon, including also “likes”, which facilitate communication and
interaction without specific language associated with their messages and which possess phatic connotations (Carr et al. 2016, 387). As happens with other elements in social media, users often ascribe identity-related meanings beyond the initial purpose of this interface affordance.

6. Online identity: A non-propositional account

If we base the eventual relevance of Internet-mediated acts of communication only on the interest and value aroused by the propositional content transferred to other users, we will be unable to explain much of the appeal and the specificity of the Net in terms of user satisfaction and engagement. The aforementioned additional terminology aims to complement propositional relevance so that a valid explanation of user (dis)satisfaction with online interactions may be provided.

As was pointed out above, relevance is centred upon an interplay of interest (i.e. “cognitive effects”) and mental effort, but the extent to which a piece of information ends up relevant depends on a number of elements that are located beyond the interpretation of the propositional content inferred from coded discourses. These elements may decrease the eventual relevance by adding mental effort, or by making the discourse inadequate, and also increase it by adding relevant effects that cannot be obtained only from this propositional information (and which are managed by the cognitive principle of relevance, since human cognition is always geared to obtaining relevance, even if it is located non-propositionally).

On the one hand, we can state that relevance is prone to being affected by a myriad of aspects beyond the information contained in the utterances transmitted virtually, which “frame” the interaction and alter the eventual formula of “cognitive effects vs. processing effort”. These contextual constraints, as they were labelled above, may be divided into interface-centred constraints (when the design of the interface for interactions has an impact on the user’s mental effort when producing or interpreting Internet-mediated discourses) and user-centred constraints (when aspects such as the user’s personality, among others, influence the eventual relevance formula).

On the other hand, users often do not obtain relevance simply from the information provided by the content itself, but also (and nowadays especially) from the feelings and emotions that this content produces in addressee users, often beyond the interlocutors’ awareness. In fact, a lot of the information that is currently sent through the Net is informationally useless. As Miller (2008, 398) correctly claims in his seminal paper on the so-called *phatic Internet*, “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 kind of effect that is important in this case is the one which exhibits a non-intentional and non-propositional quality, sometimes adding to the relevance of the propositional information and, crucially, often making up for the “objective irrelevance” of the information contained in the discourse communicated, that is, the lack of relevance that the actual information contained in the text provides to the user. Again, these effects may be produced from interactions with the interface or from interactions between users. These will be briefly commented upon below.
6.1. Interface-centred contextual constraints

The design of the interface and its usability have an important impact not only on the effort that has to be devoted to obtaining information from the site, but also on the willingness to interact with other users through that interface. The arrangement of links, the congruence between the link-mediated discourses, the existence of tabs or frames directing navigation, etc., influence the final relevance by increasing or decreasing mental effort (Yus 2014a).

In general, identity-related acts of communication are constrained by the site’s affordances and the changes introduced by the company to make it more interactive or social (Marwick 2005). This is the case of Facebook, which initially only had the “wall” for interactions on content uploaded, but now has an integrated area for instant messaging. Graham (2016, 310) points in the right direction when stressing the link between technological constraints of the interface and identity management, since certain digital environments offer more options for the interactive co-construction of identity and relationality.

6.2. User-centred contextual constraints

The eventual relevance of Internet-mediated acts of communication may also be affected by the user’s attributes and motivations. Somehow in-between interface-centred and user-centred constraints we can list the user’s familiarity with the interface and its menus, frames, etc., together with the user’s task when using the web (the expectations of relevance are different when one is looking for a specific piece of information or just browsing content without a purpose).

Undoubtedly, the most important contextual constraint is the user’s personality and its online/offline interface. As was pointed out above in passing, nowadays, the user is expected to exhibit some congruence between online and offline identity (Zhao et al. 2008, 1817). However, users tend to present an enhanced version of their selves and the act of presentation, even if faithful to the user’s offline identity, is always constrained (qualitatively and quantitatively) by the user’s personality, self-esteem, strength of ties, feelings and emotions (Manago/Vaughn 2015, 198; Michikyan et al. 2014, 180; Emanuel et al. 2014, 147; Scissors et al. 2016, 1502–1503). Hollenbaugh/Ferris (2015, 458) write that extroversion is typically linked with publication frequency, and narcissists are likely to use Facebook intensely in order to get the feedback that they need for satisfaction. The same applies to users with lower self-esteem, typically using Facebook in order to obtain a stronger emotional connection to the social network. Winter et al. (2014, 195) also comment that extraverts benefit the most from using social media since they are able to extend their networks and pursue their communication needs (so-called rich-get-richer hypothesis), whereas introverts have also been assumed to benefit since these platforms allow for a compensation of their communicative deficits in the management of interpersonal contacts in a comfortable way (as claimed by social compensation hypothesis).

Finally, the user’s content uploaded is also constrained by general expectations of conformity to norms and group-related expectations. This is especially the case of young users, always eager to find ways to leave a positive impression on their audiences and in the process they are constantly monitoring what their peers expect from them (Siibak 2010). This idea is related to two kinds of self-construal: independent self and interdependent self (see DeAndrea et al. 2010, 427). The former underlines the need of being autonomous and
different from other people, whereas the later emphasizes desire of conformity and assimilation with the group. Needless to say, these kinds of self-construal influence the quantity and quality of self-related information, with users typically complying with other user’s expectations (Cheung et al. 2015, 286; Mascheroni et al. 2015; Shim et al. 2016, 532). As Chatora (2010, 19) summarises, “identification with others depends on individuals subscribing and adhering to the modes or codes of acceptable behaviour of that group. People evaluate and monitor themselves in relation to the people around them and because of this self surveillance people become conscious of their behaviour in relation to societal norms and values”.

6.3. Interface-centred non-propositional effects

The use of an interface may produce a number of non-propositional effects in the user. In general, the ability to use the menus, frames, tabs, links, etc. properly generates an offset of positive effects in terms of self-concept, while an interface lacking the necessary degree of usability may increase mental effort gratuitously, thus affecting the user’s feeling of control over the interface.

6.4. User-centred non-propositional effects

In a pragmatic analysis of virtual communication, non-intended non-propositional effects are often the key to an explanation of why Internet-mediated interactions turn out (ir)relevant regardless of the actual value of the content transferred to other users. Several of these effects have an impact of the user’s self-concept or overall sense of identity. Among others, the following may be listed:

1. Feeling of connectedness, social awareness, feeling of being part of the interactions and friendships. Many users engage in “chained” acts of communication (typically trivial ones) because they eventually obtain an awareness of friends and peers and a feeling of connectedness. What used to be obvious in situations of physical co-presence, is managed nowadays through persistent online interactions, many of which are casual and the information transferred through these interactions often lacks interest from a purely objective point of view. The notion of ambient awareness (Thompson 2008) points in this direction, since it refers to an awareness of the others arising from non-stop dialogues and uploaded content, often fragmentary, which nevertheless gives users a more or less thorough picture of their friends (Lin et al. 2016). According to Levordahska/Utz (2016, 147), the term “ambient” emphasizes “the idea that the awareness develops peripherally, not through deliberately attending to information, but rather as an artifact of social media activity”. In this sense, although it is assumed that browsing social media is sufficient for awareness to develop (typically non-consciously) even in the absence of intentional communication directed at others, my opinion is that today’s pressure to send messages compulsively also has to do with an attempt to obtain other users’ awareness of the initial user. This would be the case of text messages, but also of images and photos (e.g. selfies or photos of dishes, landscapes, etc.) that are meant to generate a sort of “presence in the absence” (Zappavigna 2016, 272).

Furthermore, there is a fear in users of being unnoticed, of not being acknowledged and of missing the conversations that are taking place somewhere on the Net, what has been generally labelled “fear of missing out”, which also triggers massive postings as indicators of presence and of the user’s non-stop connection.
2. Feeling of being noticed by the network of friends, by the user’s community, of feedback, of social support. Sustained interactions not only generate connectedness, but also feelings of in-group membership and communal support, of being “attached” to the other members of the group (Yus 2007), that is, an awareness of “the group members’ affective connection to and caring for a virtual community in which they become involved” (Cheng/Guo 2015, 232). Carr et al. (2016, 386) emphasize the importance of social support for Internet users, conceptualized in this chapter as a genuine non-propositional effect. This is especially the case of adolescents, with a need of being socially valued.

3. Generation of social capital. The term refers broadly to the benefits we receive from our social relationships (Steinfield et al. 2008, 435), the resources linked to membership in a group or network of relationships, facilitating actions among these members (Quinn 2016, 584). It is typically divided into bridging and bonding. The former is accumulated from interactions with weak ties, whereas the latter is found in strong ties and relations, for instance close friends and relatives. In this sense, virtual interactions aid in producing social capital that would otherwise be impossible if people only relied on physical co-presence for its generation. Indeed, one’s ability to form and sustain relationships lies at the heart of the capacity to offset social capital, and nowadays the Net is the main scenario for its generation.

4. Feeling of increased mutuality of information among friends and acquaintances. According to relevance theory, the goal of human communication is not so much the mere transfer of information to others, but to generate a mutuality of this information (a mutual manifestness, in its terminology). The mutual satisfaction at sharing may be itself a source of satisfaction beyond the quality of the information exchanged (Parks 2011, 139).

5. Feeling of enhanced/decreased self-esteem and generation of positive/negative emotions. Finally, another positive/negative non-propositional effect has to do with self-esteem as managed and shaped through virtual interactions. On the positive side, virtual interactions may be increase self-esteem. Barker (2009, 210) comments that Facebook may be of particular benefit to users experiencing low self-esteem, since they are usually less secure in face-to-face contexts and therefore feel more relaxed in cues-filtered virtual scenarios. Besides, the aforementioned “enhanced self” may aid in increasing self-esteem. As Cho (2014, 203) asserts, users usually post their good aspects in a kind of self-verification process. Eventually these good aspects will generate a good image of a person and be more attractive among their close friends as well as their weak acquaintances. Furthermore, in several studies cited in Song et al. (2014, 447), Internet use was associated with decreased depression and loneliness and with significantly increased both self-esteem and social support.

On the negative side, the user may end up with an offset of effects related to decreased self-esteem. For example, Manago (2015) mentions that the typical emphasis on popularity that abounds on the Net could devalue the importance of close, intimate relationships as contexts for identity development, especially in the case of young people’s lives. Instead of seeking belonging within smaller, intimate groups, young people may increasingly seek acceptance within large, shallow networks, which demand the promotion of a socially desirable self, thus turning into a pressure for their identity management. Similarly, unhappiness tends to result from users negatively comparing themselves with other people’s status updates, making them feel envious or depressed (Korpijaakko 2015, 27; Greitemeyer 2016, 185; Stronge et al. 2015, 202).

Concluding remarks
The interplay of propositional relevance, contextual constraints and non-propositional effects is, in my opinion, an important means to understand why certain, apparently irrelevant acts of Internet-mediated communication arouse so much interest in Internet users. As has been analysed in this chapter, the relevance of identity-related acts of Internet communication are also at work across the propositional/non-propositional and intentional/unintentional board.

Furthermore, the analysis proposed in this chapter allows for a pragmatic explanation to several social issues that are a focus of sociological attention nowadays. Take, for instance, the tendency to use instant messaging texts instead of phone calls when communicating with others, or the tendency to look at the mobile phone screen constantly instead of paying attention to the person sitting opposite us (phubbing). The interplay of constraints and sources of relevance, both propositional and non-propositional, allows us to explain these phenomena. In a nutshell, as was proposed in Yus (2016d), an explanation would be that, compared to one-to-one face-to-face communication, mobile-mediated communication entails more positive contextual constraints and generates more positive non-propositional effects associated with that virtual interaction. Indeed, using typed text instead of oral communication is positively associated with constraints such as (a) immediacy of communication, constant connection; (b) lack of imposition on addressee’s reply; (c) non-compulsory commitment to the conversation, no need to sustain long interactions; (d) ability to plan and design messages; (e) chance for shy users to control how much information is provided, especially of the non-verbal, “exuded” one; and (f) ability to engage in playful text-image combinations.

Besides, typed text generates a number of positive non-propositional effects, some of them identity-related and often beyond the user’s awareness, which are absent or at least not so strongly felt in face-to-face interactions, including (a) feeling of connectedness, of mutual awareness; (b) feeling of being acknowledged by group of peers; (c) feeling of “connected presence” from having lots of synchronous conversations despite the physical distance; and (d) feeling of group membership, of being part of a community of users and of socialisation therein.

References


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