Internet pragmatics and the future: A reply to Fetzer, Jucker and Page

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Anita Fetzer, Andreas Jucker and Ruth Page raise a number of important issues in their comments to my paper on some future research interests in internet pragmatics, with which I mostly agree. Basically, these comments may be grouped into two categories: the blurring of traditional dichotomies in today’s internet communication and the problems involved in methodology and data gathering from the myriad of possible kinds of interactions and discourses that may be found on the Net.

Concerning the first category, Jucker is right in pointing out that traditional clear-cut dichotomies such as “spoken/written” and “synchronous/asynchronous” are no longer valid. The former has been object of extensive pragmatic research especially concerning the oral connotations that typed texts exhibit nowadays through text deformation (Yus 2005) or strategies for text oralisation including repetition of letters, strategic use of punctuation and the use of emoji (Yus 2011, 2014). These added connotations have an impact on the eventual interpretation, thus deserving pragmatic research. The latter is also true: nowadays there is no clear dividing line between synchronous discourses (e.g. instant messaging) and asynchronous discourses (e.g. email). For example, one of the reasons why users prefer to send an audio file or type a text instead of engaging in a phone call is that these are felt to be less disruptive and demanding to the addressee, and therefore there is a feeling of asynchronous quality to what was supposed to be a synchronous means of internet communication. A third dichotomy that Jucker rightly considers fuzzy nowadays is that of online/offline. Especially in mobile-mediated communication, users constantly enter and leave the Net and seamlessly sustain interactions that are performed both online and offline, and also the user’s (offline) physical location has become important in today’s (online) interactions, and pictures taken on the spot are typically used for sustaining interactions. Finally, Jucker correctly points out that the notions of speaker and listener (or addressee) are also blurred in today’s internet communication. I also mention that in my paper, both in the prediction that dyadic dialogues may soon be predominantly polylogues (an issue also addressed by Fetzer in her comments), and in my emphasis on the fluidity of the traditionally clear-cut categories of author and reader, for example in today’s dynamic online narratives (Yus 2015).

However, I am reluctant to do away with the distinction between utterance and text and replace it with communicative act, as Jucker suggests. It is true that the qualities of both labels, utterance (Jucker: “typically dialogic and spontaneously produced in a synchronous interaction”) and text (Jucker: “typically longer than utterances, more carefully planned, context free and monologic”), have become significantly blurred in the last few years, but I think it is more the users’ feelings about their discourses having utterance-like connotations, than actual properties of utterances or texts. In my opinion, users clearly distinguish between their oral discourses (internet-enabled phone calls, audio files through messaging applications), their visual discourses (emoji, images, videos, GIFs, stickers, Facebook reactions such as “like”) and their written (i.e. typed) texts. Nevertheless, they do feel that their texts are more dynamic and synchronous, thus having utterance-related connotations. Therefore, I think that the oral, visual and typed are still clearly identifiable, but not so much the feelings that these arouse in the users. For example, users may know that repeating letters and using punctuation marks creatively add an oral connotation to their messages, but they
are still fully aware that they are typing the texts. The term *communicative act* would, in fact, be a higher-level term comprising these three categories (oral, visual, typed). This relates to the issue of multimodality and the need to analyse the different resources involved and their combinations, as Fetzer correctly remarks.

Concerning the second category, the issue of methodology data gathering systems, both Jucker and Page hit the nail on its head. It is true that the constantly changing landscape of internet-mediated communication is a challenge for traditional pragmatics, well anchored in the propositional mould of texts and utterances, and having to reinvent itself in order to provide an appropriate account of today’s innovative interfaces and discourses, together with non-propositional feelings and emotions that play a substantial part in the user’s willingness to engage with other users through specific interfaces. This emphasis on propositional communication is also typical of relevance theory (Sperber & Wilson 1995), a foundation of *cyberpragmatics*, and Fetzer is right in pointing out that this cognitive pragmatics foundation permeates the issues addressed in my paper, and that the theory itself needs a re-interpretation to adapt to new kinds of interaction on the internet beyond the dyadic one-to-one typically addressed by the theory. Indeed, “the concepts of relevance, informative intention and communicative intention may need to be adapted to the contextual constraints and requirements of CMD [computer-mediated discourse], in particular to communication conveying substantive propositional, interpersonal, and social content simultaneously.”

Page is right in pointing out that today’s discourses such as conversational threads in internet fora transcend the focus of linguistic units that are typically found in pragmatic scholarship. And dichotomies such as “substantive” vs. “phatic” apparently clear in face-to-face scenarios, need reanalysing, to say the least, as Fetzer correctly underlines. My proposal of *visual explicatures* and *visual implicatures* (Yus 2016) goes, I think, in the right direction towards a more comprehensive account of what is at stake in the multi-layered forms of internet communication, but the challenges are immense, especially concerning data gathering. Jucker mentions a good example, *Pokémon GO*, which requires a sophisticated combination of screen capture, video recording and head-movement tracking to capture all the relevant information that needs to be gathered. The challenge is therefore how to use the huge amount of data produced by this location-based mobile game for subsequent analysis. The same applies to the use of non-verbal communication in social media, which Page correctly labels as “difficult to tackle.” I completely agree, for example, that “emoji and selfies are two types of visual resource that are ubiquitous in social media communication, and both use non-verbal communication in the form facial expression to convey meaning. However they are quite different in their affordances,” and therefore they raise problems in methodology and data gathering. Page is right in mentioning that these new discourses of ever-changing internet interactions create a myriad of methodological issues. And she also raises a final interesting step in the future internet pragmatics: how to test empirically the emerging concepts that are mentioned in my paper. This is indeed an important issue to tackle, and it really needs to be addressed in the near future, otherwise internet pragmatics will fall short of its foundational research objective: to analyse how more gets communicated through the Net than is said or typed, rewriting in this case the famous definition of pragmatics by Yule (1996).

To conclude, it is undeniable that listing a number of issues linearly -as in my paper- may inevitably lead at times to a feeling of lesser interrelatedness between the topics addressed that would have been welcome, since a merging of issues is needed for a proper analysis and pragmatic understanding of today’s discourses exchanged on the Net. Fetzer
would have welcome an analysis more focused on multilayering and inter-connection of issues, and correctly mentions some of these possible inter-relations, for instance the possible merging of non-propositional effects and phatic communication. Jucker similarly underlines that the analysis of new forms of internet communication entails using “a framework that takes account of fuzzy categories and sliding scales, rather than clear-cut dichotomies.” These are welcome steps when taking on the challenge of using pragmatics to analyse today’s and future forms of internet-mediated communication.

References

Yus, Francisco. 2016. Humour and Relevance. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. doi: 10.1075/thr.4