Social media

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Introduction

A generally accepted view of pragmatics is that it studies human-to-human communication and how hearers (or readers) turn what speakers (or writers) code (e.g. an utterance, a text, a multimodal discourse) into meaningful interpretations with the aid of contextual information. In a prototypical situation, hearers will try to trace (i.e. metarepresent) speakers’ underlying communicative and informative intentions and access the intended amount and quality of contextual information, so as to reach an adequate interpretive outcome. However, as the so-called cyberpragmatics addresses (Yus, 2010, 2011a) and as will be briefly commented upon below, Internet alters this prototypical situation due to a number of factors including the cues-filtered quality of some discourses, or the fact that there are cognitive rewards and environmental constraints that play a part in the eventual quality of understanding (Yus, 2011b) and are not so prominent in face-to-face interactions. Furthermore, in the case of social media, concepts such as “author”, “reader” or “discourse” shift into innovative forms of communication on the Net. This chapter is devoted precisely to the constraints that social media impose upon traditional pragmatic research.

Historical perspective

Pragmatics and cyberpragmatics

Pragmatics studies the role of context when humans fill the gap between what is said (or written or typed) and what is meant, and between what is listened to (or read) and what is interpreted. As such, it goes beyond what is coded (the realm of semantics) and moves into what is actually interpreted (and why). Therefore, context plays a crucial role in pragmatics, but the conceptualisation of context has evolved from an initial view of context as static or taken for granted (i.e. a stable source of information within which the utterance is inserted and an interpretation is reached), to the current, more dynamic view of context, whose quality and quantity depends on the interpretive requirements of the utterance. The branch of pragmatics that best suits this dynamic view is cognitive pragmatics and, specifically, relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson, 1995). It pictures hearers/readers as actively seeking interpretations according to a cognitive balance of interest (“cognitive effects” in relevance-theoretic terminology) and mental effort that humans invariably weigh down in the selection of interpretations.

When choosing an interpretation for utterances or texts, human cognition is constantly gathering information from decoded content and combining it with as much contextual information as necessary to yield relevant conclusions. For this to happen, the potential interest of the input should not demand excessive mental processing effort in return. In this sense, if extra effort is demanded (for instance, when the interpretation is communicated as an implicated conclusion which requires a lot of contextualisation), this effort should be compensated for by an offset of cognitive effects.

How has pragmatics been applied to Internet-mediated communication and, specifically, to social media? I agree with Herring (2013a) when she states that in the last few years not many published works on Internet communication could be classified as pragmatic first and foremost, as opposed to the many studies that could be classified as discourse
analysis, conversation analysis, sociolinguistics, and the like. One exception is the so-called cyberpragmatics, which takes relevance theory as the underlying theoretical framework and hence provides a truly pragmatic approach to communication on the Net. As summarised in Yus (2013), there are several aims of cyberpragmatics, among them to analyse why and how Internet users find relevance in cues-filtered, text-based communication; and how users fill the gap between what is coded (i.e. typed) and what is interpreted, together with the role of technological aspects of Internet in the eventual assessment of relevance (interest -cognitive effects- vs. processing effort, as mentioned above). Besides, in Yus (2011b) several relevance equations of Internet communication were proposed. These contain a number of non-propositional cognitive rewards that the user may obtain when engaging in communication on the Net (feelings of empathy, of connectedness, of identity shaping, of community membership, etc.) and which might produce supplementary interest that offsets the processing effort. These are contrasted to a number of environmental constraints that may also play a role in the eventual assessment of relevance in Internet-mediated communication (familiarity with software; usability of the interface; type of navigation that the user is currently engaged in; current position --typically evolving-- of the medium in the scales of oral-written, visual-verbal, and synchronous-asynchronous; etc.).

Crucially for social media (whose foundations are made of several evolving discourses of the Net in the just-mentioned scales, see below), is the fact that the characteristics of the different applications and environments for Internet communication and interaction (social networking profiles, Twitter, web-based fora, video-mediated sites, etc.) have an impact on the quality and quantity of contextual information accessed by users, the mental effort devoted to interpretation, and the eventual choice of an interpretation. And 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) channels of oral interactions. Therefore, cyberpragmatics analyses the challenges that users face when they attempt to compensate for this lack of orality and the reasons for this kind of textual alteration.

Another area of research within cyberpragmatics concerns precisely the social side of Internet communication, especially the way (visual, verbal or multimodal) discourses are used to sustain and assess identities and manage (personal) social networks. A growing number of social uses of the Internet are centred upon language as part of the effort to keep a profile in a blog or in a social networking site, to inform people of daily activities via Twitter, to use content generated in collective achievements such as Wikipedia, to manage virtual communities, and so on. In these cases, the “social benefit” obtained from these social applications of Internet communication offsets the effort required to keep this level of commitment to the other users.

Social media

“Social media” is, precisely, a very generic label that is applied to all of these socially connoted uses of Internet communication. Herring (2013b) defines social media as web-based platforms that incorporate user-generated content and social interaction, often alongside or in response to structures and/or (multimedia) content provided by the sites themselves. The generation of content by users, the availability of areas for its publication and sharing, and the options for commenting on other users’ uploaded information cross-cuts many popular sites such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc. In this sense, Wang et al. (2012: 1829) propose a preliminary classification of these media into (a) social networking sites (e.g., Facebook); (b) tools for communication with others (e.g., email, instant
messaging), and (c) sites for the sharing of information, which generally can be commented on or altered by others (e.g., blogs, YouTube). In my opinion, though, (b) is so embedded in (a-c) as part of the actual design of the page (as happens in the option for chatting within Facebook) that it probably does not deserve being an autonomous item in the classification. Finally, Kietzmann et al. (2011: 243) propose seven functional blocks of social media which, in my opinion, should also be addressed by a pragmatics of Internet communication: (a) Identity, the extent to which users reveal their identities in a social media setting. In my opinion, social media have more to do with identity shaping than with simply identity revealing. Discourse, of course, is an essential tool for this shaping and pragmatics would be interested in this effect of communication that generates a “leakage” of social information that often compensates for the lack of informative content in interactions within social media, typically criticised for being too casual, phatic and lacking informative quality (see below). (b) Conversations, the extent to which users communicate with other users in a social media setting. Conversations are, undoubtedly, a central object of analysis within pragmatics, i.e. how users make sense of other users’ utterances and the role that the “material” qualities of discourse (oral-written, visual-verbal, synchronous-asynchronous) influence, alter or affect eventual interpretations. Pragmatic interests would also include the role of context and shared assumptions between interlocutors (more on this below). (c) Sharing, the extent to which users exchange, distribute, and receive content. Pragmatics would be interested in how this shared content generates areas of mutuality that can be used as preliminary contexts upon which further interactions are sustained, as well as the challenges of interpreting content that is continuously altered not only by the users’ re-interpretation of this content, but also by how this content is tagged, contextualised and distributed. (d) Presence, the extent to which users can know if other users are accessible. This includes both offline and online scenarios. Location is essential in new-generation social networks that, far from discarding physical location, use it as a natural consequence of the growing time that we spend on the Net. Pragmatics would be interested in the role that the content uploaded offline/online and interactions play in the overall effectiveness of communication between users and in the role that (again offline/online) context accessibility plays in this outcome. (e) Relationships, the extent to which users can be related to other users. This is very important for a pragmatics of social media since interaction is the most typical form of information transfer between humans. As addressed by cyberpragmatics, a lot of elements may alter the normal inferential procedure of obtaining an interpretation, including the cues-filtered quality that many conversational interactions on the Net still exhibit, despite the availability of much richer media such as video-chat or video-mediated phone conversations. (f) Reputation, the extent to which users can identify the standing of others, including themselves, in a social media setting. This is linked to identity shaping and how users’ content and popularity lead to higher trust and hence to increased reputation in the group. A subsequent phase would be the generation of user-related mutuality of content that shapes the quality of virtual interactions. (g) Groups, the extent to which users can form communities and sub-communities. Pragmatics has mainly addressed communities in terms of sustained interactions inside the group that facilitate the creation of “cultural representations” that are so often processed that end up being regarded as part of the community, that is, as just another “leakage” of information that social belonging that interactions generate.

Therefore, a pragmatics of social media should address how sharing and commenting upon user-generated content, as well as repeated interactions between users, alters the quality of their eventual interpretation and contextualisation. Besides, weblogs and social networking sites, as well as micro-blogging services such as Twitter, satisfy the user’s individual and social communicative needs and provide interesting insights into how optimal relevance may be obtained not only in the interpretation of messages but also in group-related assumptions
and mutual awareness of group membership. Profiles in social networking sites are an excellent place for monitoring one’s personal and social identities in terms of number of contacts, access to personal news items, and embedded interaction facilities. For pragmatics, this new environment for (normally text-based) interactions and user-generated content offers new challenges since the typical unidirectional flow of information is altered and even the predictability of interpretations is no longer backed up by the authors of this content, but sustained and constrained by the readers and their interpretive choices among the whole range of verbal, visual and multimodal inputs within these sites.

If we address this new trend from cognitive pragmatics and relevance theory, we can conclude that, on paper, the proliferation of user-generated content may be detrimental to the users’ assessment of relevance. To start with, the high quantity of available information may alter the user’s willingness and ability to filter it and process it in an efficient way. Besides, information on the Internet is often not structured in a hierarchical way, in the sense that there is no “authority” backing up the relevance and trustworthiness of what is about to be read (by filtering the potentially irrelevant information, trusting the source, etc.), and therefore the effort devoted to processing such information may be too high.

Current work

Within pragmatics and, specifically, within cyberpragmatics, two areas of social media raise special interest. On the one hand, web interfaces play a crucial role in the use of the sites where social media are managed. Web usability constraints the processing of information and may alter the quality and quantity of information being interpreted and either encourage users to use them or discourage them from engaging in fruitful interactions and content generation. Besides, cyberpragmatics is interested in the role that the options for contextualisation and the position that the discourse being uploaded or exchanged occupies in the aforementioned oral-written, visual-verbal and synchronous-asynchronous scales. Furthermore, pragmatics is interested in media convergence and the constraints that this convergence imposes on users’ inferential procedures when turning coded discourses into meaningful interpretations. For instance, interested in how semiotic codes imbricate and hybridize forming inputs for processing, how comments are tightly tied to the posts and constrain their interpretation, etc.

On the other hand, pragmatics is interested in the informational gap between what is typed and what is interpreted, the reasons for text oralisation and the impact that this oralisation has on eventual processing of these non-verbally connoted texts.

Web interfaces and media convergence

The foundation of social media is the new discourses that, unlike the newspaper or the advertisement, have not been imported from their offline counterparts. Besides, one of the most prominent features of social media sites is that they comprise, within the boundaries of the computer (or mobile or tablet) screen, a whole range of possibilities for interaction, uploading content, commenting on other users’ posts, facilities for editing profiles and managing contacts, etc. Therefore, the design of the site plays a crucial role in the quantity and quality of communicative activity therein, to the extent that the willingness to devote effort to processing information and the accessibility to the intended interpretations depend on an adequate design of the interface or, in short, they depend on web usability.

Cyberpragmatics claims that the general balance that users make when selecting and processing information on websites (i.e. the search for an adequate balance between the interest that information might provide and the mental effort needed to process it appropriately) is affected by web design in both quantitative and qualitative terms. The
premise is that users have a cognitive need of information, and will try to get it by clicking on the right links. Reduced effort will be obtained by as few clicks as possible (quantitative approach) or by as much inter-link coherence as possible (qualitative approach). Certainly, one of the most typical complaints by Internet users is their frustration at being unable to find the information that they are looking for. This difficulty, which is directly related to processing effort, can be measured as the number of clicks required and also as the level of coherence maintained after clicking on links and processing, in a non-linear way, chunks of discourse in sequence. The user will expect that the new piece of discourse just accessed after clicking on a link will combine, in a relevant way, with the information already processed (Yus, 2011a: 69). For this relevance to be achieved, the information on the website has to be arranged clearly, with appropriate links that allow users to find, create and process social information easily. In this sense, social media sites range from those which impose an interface upon their users with limited room for innovation or creativity (e.g. Facebook) and those in which users have greater freedom to change the layout, position of sections, etc., as in some blogging interfaces. Pragmatics would be interested in the effect of profile stability (which means that users know exactly what type of information they can find and where it is located, thus saving effort) versus profile innovativeness (which increases mental effort since the location of information is no longer so predictable). This effort due to profile design may also be increased by deficient web usability, or problems to share content efficiently, and overall dissatisfaction may be generated by the lack of typical social media services such as in-built chat room facility, online forms for comments on posts, etc.

Specifically concerning synchronous chats, social media still relies a lot on typed text on a special form within the website. Pragmatics analyses the problems involved in managing typed interactions and also addresses the constraints that the chat-room design imposes on the user’s understanding and the level of coherence achieved between turns. In fact, synchronous interactions on social media resemble instant messaging rather than typical chat rooms, since users normally chat with friends in one-to-one conversations (even though they do have several conversations simultaneously and pragmatics also studies the effect that managing all of these conversations has on the eventual quality of understanding). As a consequence, they do not suffer from the processing burden of mixed conversations (i.e. the fact that several utterances belonging to different conversations end up mixed up in the main area of the chat room because the server copies the utterances in succession as they reach the system). However, other effort-demanding qualities of chat rooms do appear in this synchronous conversations on social media, among them (a) turn disruption, when an utterance -for example an answer- regarding a topic appears on the screen after a new conversational topic has been initiated; and (b) broken turn, when a whole utterance is broken into several pieces of discourse that appear in succession on the screen but may end up mixed with the other user’s utterances.

Web interfaces and usability are also intimately linked to an important quality of social media sites: the trend towards media convergence. Initially, all Internet communication was mainly text-based. Nowadays, several semiotic modes of communication share the space of the screen, ranging from photographs, videos, audio files, graphs, multimodal combinations of text and image, etc. But the important feature for pragmatics is that users now “act upon” discourses and alter them and, as a consequence, their activity becomes part of the inputs for the interpretation of discourse. This is the case of users who comment on YouTube videos and influence other users’ perceptions and opinions of the quality of that video. In fact, users can even insert comments on the video itself and therefore these comments are so tied to the video that they become an inherent part of its interpretation. This convergence is also found in comments on posts in social networking sites, which are typically made of text, but within which users can easily integrate links to videos, photos etc.
This new kind of discourse that combines formats and coding systems involves new usage patterns, and user collaboration in its production and interpretation (Herring, 2013b).

This convergence of media discourses and users’ comments on other users’ generated content is a challenge for pragmatics, since pragmatics claims that addressees metarepresent addressers’ underlying intentions in order to get an appropriate interpretation, but in social media discourses are often generated by a collectivity and their interpretation is tied to the contribution of many users. At the same time, the interpretation of these discourses is also influenced by these contributions, to the extent that eventual interpretations vary radically depending on the quantity and quality of other users’ comments on the initial discourse uploaded. For example, DeAndrea (2012, 510) concluded that “communicative behaviour that occurs on new, participatory social media featuring content from both webpage owners and other viewers can cloud judgments of intent and intentionality.” The reason is that content is co-created by profile owners and their readers, to the extent that they end up forming a discursive blend and this is what subsequent users process as a unit. Therefore, attributions of profile owners are biased by the quality and quantity of the comments that these owners’ posts receive. In a similar way, Walther et al. (2008, 2009) also demonstrated that the kind of comment that Facebook profiles receive influence viewers’ ratings of the profile owner’s physical and social attractiveness.

In sum, social media entail a reinterpretation of what constitutes authorship, what constitutes a text, what is intended as an interpretation of it, and what role participation plays in the alteration of the prototypical act of communication and into a re-shaping of author, text/discourse and audience. Besides, the social media themselves are subject to alterations by users, to the extent that users devise new forms and capabilities of these media that were not predicted by the designers of the media. This happened with mobile phone texting, a marginal service by design, but whose massive usage surprised mobile manufacturers. In the case of Twitter, users have redesigned this service in order to be able to engage in short-message conversations by using the ad hoc nomenclature “@username” at the beginning of the typed message, and also group tweets by topic by using the hashtag (#).

Communicating more than is typed

Pragmatics is also interested in how and why users connote their texts with signals or oralisation ranging from repetitions of punctuation marks, emoticons, repeated letters to reflect intonational patterns and strategic use of capital letters, as well as their implications for understanding and the choice of interpretations. This strategy, often labelled text deformation or oralised written text, is the logical outcome of communicative situations within social media that stir exacerbated feelings and emotions in the users which are hard to express by simply resorting to normal text typed on the keyboard. Take, for instance, comments on Facebook. These are typically pieces of advice, or acts of congratulating or sympathising and, as such, users tend to connote them textually so that a further layer of emotional intensity in the act is felt by the initial user who posted the entry. This is a supplementary pragmatic task that is added to the default informational gap that exists between, on the one hand, what is typed and what is meant and, on the other, between what is typed and what is eventually interpreted with the aid of contextual information. This is particularly prominent in micro-blogging services such as Twitter, in which users have to compress their utterances into a number of characters. Initially, tweets look simple and hardly informative, but as studied in Yus (2011a: 144f), they actually exhibit a huge gap between what is coded and what is interpreted, and readers are expected to use contextual information to engage in typical inferential strategies such as reference assignment (as in (1a)), disambiguation (sometimes tweets contain polysemous words whose intended sense has to be
inferred, as happens with “banco” in (1b)), conceptual adjustment of coded concepts (very often the prototypical concepts coded by the words, as we would find in a dictionary, for instance, are inadequate in the specific context in which these words are uttered and have to be adjusted inferentially to meet the speaker’s intended concepts, as happens with bestial and pesado in (1c)), free enrichment (takes place when the utterance demands from the hearer the “inferential filling” of some elided part; despite being a grammatical utterance, it makes no sense unless this non-coded part is inferred correctly, as in (1d)), and sub-sentential utterances (users tend to suppress all the coded content that they expect their readers will be able to recover by themselves, as in (1e)):

(1)  a. Wow, yo de eso no sé nada. Pero eso es lo tuyo. Te irá muy bien. :)  
    [Wow, I know nothing about that. But that’s your stuff. You’ll be alright].
  b. #FAIL veo la pagina del banco
    [#FAIL I see the page of the bank/bench].
  c. Senderos de Traición es el mejor… pero El Espíritu del Vino es bestial y
      Avalancha el más “pesado”… son 3 joyas en realidad
    [Senderos de Traicion is the best… but El Espíritu del vino is huge and
      Avalancha is the “heaviest”… They are three jewels in reality].
  d. Pobrecica Pero ya te queda menos, ya te queda menos!!
    [Poor girl But there is not much left (for what?)].
  e. Gran juego ;-)  
    [Great game].

Critical issues and topics

Constraints and rewards in the processing of social media discourses

Social media are environments in which users share content, engage in interactions and shape their identities according to the social affordances of these sites. As such, the benefit that their users obtain reaches beyond the mere interpretation of information and into more subtle sources of satisfaction involving emotions, feelings, sociability, group membership, etc. It comes as no surprise that many texts uploaded on these sites have, on paper, little interest or provide little information, but play an important part in the user’s self identity and produce emotions or feelings that compensate for this lack of informational worth.

In Yus (2011b) it is claimed that several aspects of communication in these media have to be taken into account, even though they seem to be marginal in the act of communication. On the one hand, there are alternative sources of user satisfaction that may add to (or overlap with) the actual information exchanged on the Net (called “cognitive rewards”). Among them, the entertainment of feelings and emotions, the fostering of empathy and phatic connotations, the feelings of group, network or community membership and the reward arising from being connected and interacting with others. On the other hand, there are potential sources of user (dis)satisfaction on the Internet that may reduce or increase the eventual relevance of the information being processed (called “environmental constraints”). These include familiarity with the rules of the medium, which may arise as one potential source of added (dis)satisfaction related to higher/lesser levels of mental effort and to a certain (in)ability to reach the expected information and its intended interpretation. Other constraints include: (a) The type of search or interaction. It is not the same to engage in aimless surfing (browsing) than trying to find some specific information (focussed search). (b) The quality of the medium in the oral /written, visual /verbal and synchronous/asynchronous scales. The extent to which the medium exhibits a cues-filtered
quality affects the effort to pick up the intended interpretation and derive positive cognitive effects. And (c) the quality of the interface. As was mentioned above, web usability (whether or not the design of the web page allows - or not - for an easy access to the information that is interpreted, allows for user participation and interaction and facilitates the uploading of content and commenting on it) is an important constraint in the eventual quality of interactions in these social media.

Social “leakage” out of interpretations: Shaping identities in social media

In Yus (2011a) it is argued that social media and, specifically, social networking sites are an ideal environment for identity shaping in its three main varieties: (a) social identity, made up of broad social qualities and group membership, and reflected upon language in local, national, sex- and race-connoted language; (b) interactive identity, that shapes the individual through sustained interactions, often within groups that exhibit a certain degree of discursive homogeneity shaped by jargons; and (c) personal identity of the person as an individual entity exhibiting a personal way of speaking or idiolect.

These three varieties are reproduced in virtual scenarios and nowadays a substantial amount of the time spent online is devoted to shaping and moulding identities through communicative practices with other users. This is what I label the “social leakage” of these practices, a relevant outcome of interactions that pragmatics should also address. Humans have an inherent need to check their status and position within collectivities or groups of friends, and communication is a perfect tool for shaping these attributes. We all want to be acknowledged in the group, that our messages are reacted upon, that others show an interest in engaging in interactions with us, and social media are the perfect scenario for checking all that information and, in parallel, for shaping our triple identities. As Wang et al. (2012) stress, social media serve a primary function of allowing users to connect, communicate, and interact with one another, a primary source of interest for pragmatics because, as an important side effect of these interactions, users’ identities are shaped and managed discursively on these sites, normally by posting, sharing, or co-producing information that is subsequently commented upon or leads to heated-up discussions and dialogues. As a consequence, although Wang et al. (ibid.) are right in suggesting that social media provide “unprecedented convenience and efficiency for creating, maintaining, and strengthening social relationships” (p. 1830), the identity-shaping potential of these interactions should also be addressed by pragmatics.

Take, for instance, profiles in social networking sites and the automatic software that manages interactions and uploaded content therein. They provide users with a clear picture of how much impact one’s content has on other users, how many replies it has, and we are reminded through email that a number of friends have commented upon the post, that several of them like one’s content, etc. Besides, different areas are devoted to the aforementioned three-fold identity. Firstly, the users’ main profile exhibits a picture of themselves and their posts reveal facets of their identity (likes, dislikes, tastes, opinions) which build up a useful background context upon which subsequent interactions with the users can be sustained. Secondly, users expect that their uploaded content will generate replies and clicks on “Like.” In fact, many entries are actually not intended to provide factual information on the user’s opinions, likes, tastes, etc. but are, rather, what I call “interactivity triggers,” pieces of text that are meant to stir the audience into reacting with comments and in that way fulfilling the user’s need for interactive identity shaping. In (2), for instance, the initial post by User 1 is a clear attempt to get feedback in terms of sympathy and support, and the dialogue generated by this post (interactive identity) enhances the user’s social identity (feelings of belonging, of
being part of a group, of being noticed by friends) and also her personal identity (Yus 2011a, 121):

(2) User 1. I am still pissed! Tomorrow on the wagon, but am 7 pounds heavier! Why does it take months to lose half a stone but only a week to put it on?!
User 2. You are a Piss Pot :) xxx
User 3. he he lol! xx
User 4. Bless ya honey…. Managed to keep it to 2lb but only because I was down the gym most days over xmas…. Don’t 4get the planner on tues x x x
User 5. Keep drinking and find yourself a nice young man to work off the calories :) it works for me x
User 6. I lost 4 due to being ill, but reckon I’ve put 7 on in the last 2 days
User 1. Its shit isn’t it! But have had a good time, well I think I have!!
User 7. Don’t go on the wagon Hun, just stick with the workouts and it will fall off :-)
User 8. that’s all that gets me through my workouts, the thought of having a beer as soon as I’m done :-)
User 1. I think if I have a month off the wine it will come off quicker! Feel like a little teletubby
User 7. Good luck x

Finally, as has just been suggested, all the interactions generate an insight into the user’s personal identity. This identity shaping is enhanced by a textual quality of other users’ replies to one’s uploaded content, what call be labelled “the enhanced reply.” Normally, replies by users to “interactivity triggers” are not simple chunks of plain text, but are filled with text deformation (emoticons, repetition of letters, connotative use of punctuation marks, etc.), as if the users felt that the initial user posting the text needed a substantial amount of reciprocity, agreement and support. This opens up interesting areas for pragmatic research into how and why emotional connotations are added to plain text in order to produce an enhanced response to the user’s posts. In (3), for example, User 1 uploads a new photo of herself that works as an invitation to get replies from her friends on how nice she looks in her new photo. Her friends’ comments cannot be plain text, but have to be connoted with text deformation so as to get an appropriate transcription of the underlying feelings and emotions that the photo has provoked in her friends (my translation):

(3) [User 1 has just uploaded a new main profile photo of herself in her profile]
User 2: Pretty!!
User 3: Smashing girl!!!!!! :-) 
User 4: gorgeous! :-) 
User 1: thanks :-) you’ve lifted up my self-esteem
User 5: You are a born beauty!
User 6: Yeahhh :-) 
User 7: precious!!!
User 1: You even more, my darling!!, we’ve got to talk!! I need you! :-)

Future directions

Automatic actions by system software

All human activity on the Net is monitored by the software that we use in daily activities on social media such as searching for information on engines such as Google or uploading
content, commenting on it, exchanging it, interacting about it, etc. Our actions and the quality of the information uploaded, read or commented upon is a valuable source in terms of a personal data storage that can be later used for targeting the users with advertisements that are tailored to suit their likes, needs or desires, as they have been exhibited by them in their (apparently private) activity on the Internet. Needless to say, pragmatics analyses user-to-user communication and therefore this kind of software action upon the user’s activity on the Net should be outside its scope of analysis. However, automatic actions by software do play an important role in which amount of content is available for processing, what kind of content is actually processed and why, how much attention is paid to it and how this content is (or not) fruitfully combined with the user’s background knowledge to yield interesting conclusions. A number of software-related actions should be addressed in some detail in the future and their role in user processing further analysed by pragmatics, among them the following:

(a) **Filtering of content in social networking sites and notifications.** Users do not have access to all the information that contacts upload, since it is actually filtered by the system according to automatic relevance-related criteria and then the user is warned via “notifications” of the availability of this previously filtered information. Facebook, for example, filters information according to three criteria: (a) By affinity. The more we access other users’ profiles and the more we interact with them, the more likely it is that information uploaded by these users will appear on our screen. (b) By status. Certain information is more prominent by default. For instance, a user’s change of status from married to single is given maximal priority within the site. (c) By time. Obviously, recent entries have prominence over older ones. Similarly, suggestions for purchases in sites such as Amazon also filter offers according to a browsing or purchasing record that is automatically managed by the system. As a consequence, much of what users interpret and much of how they interpret information is biased by automatic filtering by the system software, thus affecting the quality and quantity of interpretations, a genuine object of research for pragmatics.

(b) **RSS feeds.** These are interesting ways of accessing information that inevitably alters the final relevance of its processing. Instead of the users clicking on potentially relevant links, it is the site that feeds the user with pre-established topics of interest. The RSS feed is re-written automatically whenever some updating takes place in the content of a website. In this way, the RSS file makes it possible to know whether the website has added new content or texts, but without having the need to go to the actual website unless one wants to read the “extended version” of the potentially interesting content (Yus 2011a, 85). As a consequence, instead of looking for the information that might be more relevant to the user, it is the software that bombards the user with potentially interesting information. Again, the system decides which information is processed, which also has implications for pragmatics.

(c) **Users’ tagging of information, social bookmarking and folksonomy.** Users of social media are constantly uploading content, commenting on it and tagging it with labels that are used later by special software to retrieve and filter content according to specific search criteria. This content may later become widely shared within the group of friends or even acquire a viral status as the reference to this content spreads across platforms and social media sites. Once again, content is made available by users’ tagging and hence influences processing and the quality of interpretations.

**Mobile social media**

In the near future, pragmatics will have to take a closer look at the implications of the increasing trend in accessing and managing social information through mobile devices (phones, tablets, etc.). As commented upon in Yus (2011a: 294), many Internet documents uploaded within social media sites are filtered and adapted to the peculiarities of the small
mobile phone screen, with many small texts linked to one another, rather than lengthy documents that the user has to scroll down manually to read on the screen. This attribute of specificity of content for mobile phones is an interesting object of study for pragmatics, because the different ways of presenting information and the cutting and re-shaping of texts to adapt web content to mobile formats certainly affect the eventual balance obtained between the interest of the information (cognitive effects) and the mental effort required to process it, an effort that may increase due to the size of the mobile phone screen and may even affect the user’s willingness to process the information in the first place (obviously, smartphones have much larger screens and even full keyboards, minimizing mental effort).

Conclusion

Social media are non-stop evolving environments for social interaction, content uploading and identity shaping. The sites for social media are constantly adapting their design and usability to the users’ demands for sociability and interaction. In this sense, we cannot predict which future lies for social media. However, we do know that access to these media will increasingly be mobile and ubiquitous and, since they involve the interpretation of content and the engagement with other users through text-, audio- or video-based interactions, it will remain a genuine object of analysis for pragmatics and cyberpragmatics in the future.

Suggestions for further reading


References


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