

This article has been published in:

Journal of Pragmatics 47.1 (2013) 128–130

Elsevier

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2012.12.002>

If you want to quote from this document, please consult the page numbers in the right hand margins.

128



Review of: Cyberpragmatics: Internet-Mediated Communication in Context

Francisco Yus, *Pragmatics & Beyond New Series*, Volume 213, John Benjamins, Amsterdam, 2011, 353 pp., ISBN 978 90 272 5619 5, Euro 95, USD 143 (hardback)

Miriam A. Locher

In the monograph *Cyberpragmatics: Internet-Mediated Communication in Context*, the author Francisco Yus works with an approach to computer-mediated communication (CMC) which he terms ‘cyberpragmatics’, defined as the “cognitive pragmatics study of Internet-mediated communication” (p. 13). While drawing on the results of studies on CMC from all kinds of methodological directions, he positions his own contribution within pragmatics and especially within cognitive pragmatics as developed in Relevance Theory, and thus offers a unique perspective.

In Chapter 1, Yus outlines his theoretical framework by first giving a succinct introduction to Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson, 1995) and then broadening this framework to include a discussion of the context(s) particular to CMC. Cyberpragmatics, on which the author has extensively worked during the last decade, with over twenty conference papers and published articles on CMC listed in the references, is offered as an entry point to study how senders and addressees engage in an act of sense-making. Yus highlights in particular how “*cyber-media* can be placed on a scale of contextualization ranging from highly context-saturated media (videoconferencing, internet-enabled phone calls, chat rooms with web cam, etc.) to highly cues-filtered text-based media (traditional chat rooms, e-mail, instant messaging, etc.)” (pp. 17–18; italics in original); and how this influences sense-making processes.

In Chapter 2, Yus turns to the topic of “The presentation of self in everyday web use”, drawing on studies on discourse and social identity, and speech communities. He applies

this knowledge to virtual communities and virtual identity. Arguing that identity can be understood in a three-fold layered way, including “inherited features (nationality, sex, status, race ...),” “acquired features (epistemological communities),” and “personal features (idiolect)” (Figure 2.1., p. 23), he claims that these different types of features gain different importance in CMC and face-to-face communication. Importantly, Yus highlights that ‘physical’ and ‘virtual’ identity construction is multimodal and that the boundaries between online and offline communities, and, as a result, identity construction in these two areas of life, are increasingly blurred. The discussion on identity construction in this brief chapter is continued later in Chapter 4 and in further passages throughout the book.

Chapter 3 on “Relevance on the web page” is the first of several chapters dedicated to an elaboration on how the creation of meaning is achieved in particular computer-mediated contexts. Yus shows how readers interpret textual sources as presented on web pages from a relevance-theoretical point of view. He distinguishes between the author’s point of view (*intentio auctoris*), the textual or discursive point of view (*intentio operis*) and the reader’s point of view (*intentio lectoris*) (pp. 45–50) and elaborates especially on the creation of relevance in information retrieval systems. To illustrate his theoretical observations, Yus discusses the transfer of printed newspapers and printed advertisements to the web.

In Chapter 4 on “Social networks on the internet: the Web 2.0”, Yus turns to a field in CMC linguistics that has not yet been studied in great detail. He elaborates on the term ‘Web 2.0’ and claims that “this new trend of informational dissemination feeds from the users through special interfaces for interactions and content sharing” (p. 92). He reviews literature on blogs, social network sites and microblogging in Twitter. Being interested in how the users employ language and how this use presents evidence of “underlying communicative intentions” (p. 118), he makes a link to linguistic identity construction and community (in-group/out-group) building, so that this chapter continues the discussion of linguistic identity construction from Chapter 2.

Chapter 5 is dedicated to “The virtual conversation” as expressed in chat rooms, instant messaging, virtual worlds and video conferencing, and it presents the most extensive chapter of the book. Yus is especially interested in understanding “how users compensate for the lack of oral features that their typed texts exhibit” (p. 151). An extensive literature review is given on the use of emoticons in chat rooms and the features of oralized written text in all of the above mentioned contexts. The discussion of how interactants communicate in the virtual world Second Life is one of the few linguistic overview treatises published so far on this topic.

↑
128

Chapter 6 is dedicated to e-mail messages and studies them from different angles, paying attention to technological and social features that influence aspects of style. There is an extensive literature review on the well-known controversy about the oral/written continuum of this mode. The elements of e-mail messages (sender, addressee, subject line, the body of the message, signature) are then revisited in light of relevance theoretical questions such as how ostensive communication of relevance is achieved.

129
↓

In Chapter 7, Yus turns to a brief elaboration of “Politeness on the Net”, defining politeness as “a typical human strategy that aims to foster human relations and mitigate the imposition of certain actions on other people”, which varies cross-culturally and on the net (p. 254). He positions his approach primarily within the work of Brown and Levinson (1987) and Leech (1983) and presents a literature review of studies that combine interests in politeness research and CMC. In the final chapter, Yus reviews general tendencies of how CMC might develop in the future. The book ends with forty-five pages of references and a very useful index.

Next to seminal articles on CMC published in journals (e.g., in *language@internet*; *The Journal of Computer-mediated Communication*; special journal issues in non-CMC-dedicated journals) and edited collections (e.g., to name just the recent Thurlow and Mroczek, 2011; Herring et al., 2013; Tannen and Trester, 2013), this monograph adds to the growing list of recent publications that are book-length treaties on practices in computer-mediated contexts (e.g., Baron, 2000, 2008; Beisswenger, 2000; Crystal, 2001, 2008, 2011; Heyd, 2008; Hoffmann, 2012; Janoschka, 2004; Locher, 2006; Markham, 1998; Page, 2012; Richardson, 2005; Zappavigna, 2012) and as such already presents a welcome contribution to the field since monographs allow the authors to go into more details in developing their arguments. In this sense, Yus’ *Cyberpragmatics* allows him to draw on his extensive work of the last decade and to cover a lot of ground.

The book reads well and is impressive in the scope of CMC literature summarized, including very recent work on very diverse CMC practices: Yus reviews existing literature for each field, critically examines this literature, adds the results of his own studies (when appropriate) and then always proceeds to make links to cognitive observations inspired by Relevance Theory. His interest in the sense-making and inferencing processes is always grounded in empirical examples and a critical deliberation of context, and his text works well as an introduction to Relevance Theory. The range of discussed practices goes from the by now classic form of e-mail communication, mailing lists and web pages to recent developments in Web 2.0, such as communication on blogs, social network sites, Twitter, or Second Life. Scholars working on these web interfaces will benefit immensely both from Yus’ literature reviews and his critical reinterpretations of existing studies.

It is evident that Yus’ primary aim is to apply Relevance Theory to Internet data. Maybe it is because of this aim that Yus does not always present his new case studies in detail. More information and contextualization of the methodology of these studies would have been useful. The same comment goes for the summaries of his previously published work and the work by other scholars. The two chapters that are more topic (identity and politeness) than CMC mode driven present interesting starting points for researchers who are exploring these two fields. However, in both cases, the literature review is somewhat on the brief side, missing out, for example, on the interactional sociolinguistic approach to identity construction (e.g., Bucholtz and Hall, 2005), which is well-suited to research CMC. The reader would also have benefitted from a number of pointers to the fact that ‘identity’ re-emerges as a topic in many of the later chapters. The more recent developments in the politeness and especially the impoliteness field (e.g., Bousfield and Locher, 2008;

Culpeper, 2011) are not incorporated, and Yus presents hardly any insights from his own data and research in Chapter 7, so that it appears somewhat weaker than the others. Finally, while identity and politeness are clearly suitable topics for a discussion, it is not made transparent enough how they are related and why they have been singled out for presentation from the vast field of potential topics.

Having listed these few critical points, there is no doubt that Yus' *Cyberpragmatics* will be an important and valuable reference work for many future scholars working on CMC. It is an exciting read written by a scholar who has an exemplary overview of the literature and who manages to bring different research strands together in a meaningful and unprecedented way.

References

- Baron, Naomi S., 2000. *From Alphabet to E-mail: How Written English Evolved and Where it's Headed*. Routledge, London.
- Baron, Naomi S., 2008. *Always on: Language in an Online and Mobile World*. Oxford University Press, New York.
- Beisswenger, Michael, 2000. *Kommunikation in virtueller Welt Sprache Text und Wirklichkeit: eine Untersuchung zur Konzeptionalität von Kommunikationsvollzügen und zur textuellen Konstruktion von Welt in synchroner Internet-Kommunikation exemplifiziert am Beispiel eines Webchats*. Ibidem-Verlag, Stuttgart.
- Bousfield, Derek, Locher, Miriam A. (Eds.), 2008. *Impoliteness in Language: Studies in its Theory and Practice*. Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin.
- Brown, Penelope, Levinson, Stephen C., 1987. *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Bucholtz, Mary, Hall, Kira, 2005. Identity and interaction: a sociocultural linguistic approach. *Discourse Studies* 7 (4–5), 585–614.
- Crystal, David, 2001. *Language and the Internet*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. ↑
- Crystal, David, 2008. *Txting: The Gr8 Db8*. Oxford University Press, Oxford. 129
- Crystal, David, 2011. *Internet Linguistics*. Routledge, London. 130
- Culpeper, Jonathan, 2011. *Impoliteness: Using Language to Cause Offence*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. ↓
- Herring, Susan C., Stein, Dieter, Virtanen, Tuija (Eds.), 2013. *Pragmatics of Computer-Mediated Communication*. Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin.
- Heyd, Theresa, 2008. *Email Hoaxes: Form, Function Genre Ecology*. John Benjamins, Amsterdam.
- Hoffmann, Christian R., 2012. *Cohesive Profiling: Meaning and Interaction in Personal Weblogs*. John Benjamins, Amsterdam.
- Janoschka, Anja, 2004. *Web Advertising: New Forms of Communication on the Internet*. John Benjamins, Amsterdam.
- Leech, Geoffrey N., 1983. *Principles of Pragmatics*. Longman, New York.
- Locher, Miriam A., 2006. *Advice Online: Advice-giving in an American Internet Health Column*. John Benjamins, Amsterdam.
- Markham, Annette N., 1998. *Life Online: Researching Real Experience in Virtual Space*. Altamira Press, Lanham.

- Page Ruth, E., 2012. *Stories and Social Media: Identities and Interaction*. Routledge, London.
- Richardson, Kay P., 2005. *Internet Discourse and Health Debates*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York.
- Sperber, Dan, Wilson, Deirdre, 1995. *Relevance Theory*. Blackwell, Oxford.
- Tannen, Deborah, Trester, Anna Marie, 2013. *Discourse 2.0 Language and New Media*. Georgetown University Press, Washington.
- Thurlow, Crispin, Mroczek, Kristine (Eds.), 2011. *Digital Discourse: Language in the New Media*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Zappavigna, Michele, 2012. *Discourse of Twitter and Social Media: How We Use Language to Create Affiliation on the Web*. Continuum, London.

Miriam A. Locher is Professor of the Linguistics of English at the University of Basel, Switzerland. She has published on politeness and disagreement (e.g., *Power and Politeness in Action*, Mouton 2004), impoliteness (e.g., *Impoliteness in Language*, Mouton 2006, co-edited with D. Bousfield), on computer-mediated practices (e.g., *Advice Online*, 2006, Benjamins; editor of a special issue in the *Journal of Politeness Research*), *Standards and Norms in the English Language* (Mouton, 2008, co-edited with J. Strässler), *Interpersonal Pragmatics* (Mouton, 2010, co-edited with S. L. Graham) and *Theorising Disagreement* (special issue, *Journal of Pragmatics*, 2012, with J. Angouri). She is currently working on a project on identity construction in Facebook and on reflective writing texts by medical students.

Miriam A. Locher
Universität Basel, Departement Sprach- und Literaturwissenschaft, Englisch Seminar,
Nadelberg 6, CH-4051 Basel, Switzerland
Tel.: +41 61 267 27 83; fax: +41 61 267 27 80 ↑
E-mail address: miriam.locher@unibas.ch 130