Cyberpragmatics. Internet-mediated Communication in Context

Francisco Yus Ramos.
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The book under review builds on and expands extensive earlier work by the author on the pragmatics of Internet-mediated communication (IMC). After a brief Introduction (xi-xiv), the book is effectively organized into eight chapters, followed by a comprehensive bibliography (46 pages in length). In the Introduction, the author defines "Cyberpragmatics" as the cognitive pragmatic analysis of Internet interactions and advances the specific theoretical framework on which the research is based. Yus Ramos claims that Sperber and Wilson's (1986 & 1995) relevance theory (RT) is a useful framework for the explanation of user-to-user communication on the Net, and specifically of how the accessibility to contextual information is constrained by the quality of the different channels of communication inherent to IMC (oral/written, visual/verbal and synchronous/asynchronous) and how these alter the way in which relevance is achieved.

In Chapter 1, "Pragmatics, context and relevance" (pages 1-20), after providing a detailed overview of RT, the author defines Cyberpragmatics as a cognitive pragmatic study of IMC whose main scope is "the analysis of how information is produced and interpreted within the Internet environment" (page 13). In other words, a central objective of Cyberpragmatics is to determine how the assessment of the cognitive effects achieved and the mental effort required is influenced by the specific qualities of cyber-media.

In Chapter 2, "The presentation of self in everyday web use" (pages 21-44), Yus Ramos examines the virtual community and the presentation of self-identity in virtual settings. The author points out that Internet users easily shift from physical to virtual identities, thus showing a tendency towards "hybridisation" of physical-virtual interactions (page 38). Challenging the traditional idea of the self as unitary and unique, he concludes that "there are many possible combinations between physical and virtual sources of identity, and for many Internet users the virtual sources may be a valid (rather

than added) alternative to the physical ones, and they may even overcome the latter in terms of strength" (page 40).

In Chapter 3, "Relevance on the webpage" (pages 45-92), RT is convincingly applied to the analysis of Web environments from three different perspectives: the author's, the textual and the reader's point of view, and the way in which the interaction between the "addresser user" and the "addressee user" takes place is accounted for. In Section 3.3, Yus Ramos discusses what he terms "infoxication", the mental intoxication due to excessive information available online, and its potentially negative effects on the estimation of relevance. The author proposes that in IMC "the basic conditions for relevance are present but with the addition of "cognitive rewards" (positive to the user) and "environmental constraints" (positive or negative to the user)" (page 66). The latter term refers to all the non-propositional aspects of IMC.

In Chapter 4, "Social networks on the Internet: The Web 2.0" (pages 93-149), the author focuses on the analysis of asynchronous web environments such as blogs, social networking sites and Twitter. In his description of blogs, the author adds a fourth perspective, namely, the interaction between bloggers and readers to the above-mentioned perspectives of cognitive pragmatics analysis.

In Chapter 5, "The virtual conversation" (pages 151-218), RT is applied to account for the interpretation process of synchronous virtual conversations such as chatrooms. In this case, the comprehension procedure is aided by special strategies in a context-poor environment of text-based, as opposed to face-to-face, interaction. The author rightly argues that, because of the new developments on the Net, "users have to assess to what extent they are willing to let other users perceive their vocal and visual nonverbal behaviour (…) and which impressions they want to convey" (page 156). Despite these developments, he claims, users can still resource to plain-text-based communication in order to avoid revealing information they are reluctant to give.

Chapter 6, "You've got mail" (pages 219-254), focuses on the e-mail genre, including the private e-mail, newsgroups, and e-mail distribution lists. E-mail is still amongst the most widely used varieties of cyber-media, but is still perceived to a great extent as a more formal and colder medium than instant messenger, SMS or chatrooms, especially by young people. From a relevance-theoretic viewpoint, Yus Ramos characterizes e-mail as an

ostensive technological medium whose arrival carries the presumption of its eventual relevance. The author analyzes the different elements of an electronic message (sender, addressee, e-mail address, subject line, body of the message, and signature) and provides an insightful account of how the context for its interpretation is built.

In Chapter 7, "Politeness on the Net" (pages 255-285), the pragmatic analysis is enriched with a look at politeness. Yus Ramos invokes the concept of "netiquette" (politeness on the Net) and reviews a number of politeness theories. In the end, he notes that the multicultural nature of the Net has led users to abandon specific intra-cultural strategies and points out a tendency to a default level of politeness which is, in fact, the hyper-polite Anglo-Saxon standard, this fact being "a consequence of the increasing use of English as a *lingua franca* on the Internet" (page 285).

In the last chapter, "Conclusion: Prospects for cyberpragmatic research" (pages 287-295), Yus Ramos emphasizes the idea that the communicative principle of relevance can explain IMC exactly in the same way as it accounts for offline verbal communication. The chapter closes with the claim that cyberpragmatics "should provide an answer to the puzzle of cognitive satisfaction that often defies the equation of cognitive effects against processing effort predicted by relevance theory" (page 295).

This book is an extremely interesting and insightful contribution to the study of human communication on the Web. The research is exemplary and the results rewarding. It includes a comprehensive review of existing literature and useful suggestions for further research. Boasting an extensive bibliography, this work will clearly be an extremely valuable resource for those interested in computer-mediated discourse analysis, language on the Internet, and pragmatics in general. I recommend this book highly to all serious scholars as a fine example of pragmatic research.

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