1. Introduction

Pragmatic failure, as Thomas defines it, is “[…] the inability to understand what is meant by what is said” (1983: 93). It occurs when a hearer fails to understand the exact proposition that the speaker intended to communicate with a contextualised utterance or when he fails to capture the intended pragmatic force of an utterance. Two types are normally distinguished: ‘pragmalinguistic’ failure, which arises when a non-native speaker or L2 learner inadequately transfers linguistic strategies from her L1 to the L2, and ‘sociopragmatic’ failure, which is caused by differing perceptions of what counts as appropriate linguistic behaviour in specific contexts (Thomas 1983: 99). While in the first type of pragmatic failure strategy selection, frequency, order or content of strategies or intonation patterns used, among many others, play a crucial role (Riley 2006; Tran 2006), in the second type L2 learners may transfer their L1 rules of speaking or sociocultural competence when performing or understanding communicative acts in their L2 (Takahashi and Beebe 1987; Wolfson 1989; Beebe et al. 1990; Riley 2006). This clearly indicates that there is a cross-linguistic influence in the learners’ L2 discourse and comprehension (Takahashi and Beebe 1993), for their knowledge of a language and culture other than the L2 affects their linguistic production and understanding (Kasper 1992: 207; Kasper and Blum-Kulka 1993: 10). Such an influence can surface when learners lack knowledge of the L2 rules of use and hence have to rely on their L1 pragmatics to apply it in their interlanguage (Olshtain and Cohen 1989; Tran 2006).

Over the past decades, pragmatic failure has received due attention from many researchers, who have examined the L2 performance of learners of many different languages and cultural backgrounds in an overwhelmingly rich variety of speech acts that includes, but is not limited to, apologies (e.g. Cohen and Olshtain 1981; Olshtain 1983; García 1989; Kasanga and Lwanga-Lumu 2007), compliments (e.g.
Nelson et al. 1996), refusals (e.g. Beebe et al. 1990; Kwon 2004), requests (e.g. Blum-Kulka 1982, 1988; Tanaka 1988; Færch and Kasper 1989; Hong 1997; Kasanga 1998), or the expression of gratitude (e.g. Eisenstein and Bodman 1993) in many different interactive contexts (e.g. Hale 1996; Arent 2000; Kasanga 2001). Most of these works focus on the effects that the linguistic behaviour of more or less competent L2 learners may have upon their (non-)native hearers. Their authors seem to agree that, while in some circumstances pragmatic failure may have relatively unimportant consequences and lead to (very) hilarious misunderstandings, in others it does have more serious repercussions and may result in misunderstandings leading to surprise, amazement, frustration, dissatisfaction or even interactive conflict and communication breakdown, since deviations from the expected or appropriate communicative practices in a community “[…] will immediately be regarded as ‘strange’ or –depending on the degree of ‘error’– inexplicable, stupid, crazy, and so on” (Riley 2006: 314). Regarding hearers, what can be found in those works are brief analyses and reflections about their possible or actual reactions to a linguistic behaviour or a style that differs from what they would have expected for a certain context in their culture or sociocultural group.

This paper does not centre on learners’ performance, but on hearers, regardless of whether they are native or non-native. As opposed to the many existing works on pragmatic failure, it reflects on the ways in which hearers can overcome conversational misunderstandings arising from the (mis)use of phatic utterances by L2 learners of English or from an insufficient processing of those utterances. It argues that one of the interpretive strategies available to hearers described by Sperber (1994) and Wilson (1999) –namely, ‘cautious optimism’– can satisfactorily help (non-)native hearers overcome conversational misunderstandings and pragmatic failures when processing utterances that their non-native interlocutors would have expected them to assign a phatic interpretation. It firstly explains what phatic utterances are, how and why utterances receive a phatic interpretation, their importance for social interaction, the tendencies in their usage in the UK and USA and the possible risks that they may involve for interaction. Secondly, based on some of the tenets of relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson 1986, 1995; Wilson and Sperber 2002, 2004), it discusses how hearers may achieve phatic interpretations and recover social information using the simplest interpretive strategy used in comprehension. Finally, it reflects on how hearers may overcome two types of pragmatic failures arising from the occurrence of those utterances in conversations.
2. The importance and risks of phatic utterances for social interaction

Initially, utterances are assigned a phatic interpretation or taken to be tokens of phatic communion when their propositional content is obvious or trivial, as it does not transmit factual information that significantly improves the hearer’s world view (e.g. Malinowski 1923; Turner 1973; Leech 1974; Hudson 1980; Coulmas 1981; Edmondson and House 1981). For this reason, phatic utterances have been customarily considered linguistic devices that are mainly aimed at maintaining the interactive contact between interlocutors, and one of the most frequent examples of interlocutors’ communicative behaviour when they meet and do not really have anything interesting to say, or just want to avoid the uncomfortable tension that silence may originate (Malinowski 1923).

In relevance-theoretic terms, utterances receive a phatic interpretation when they only ‘make manifest’ assumptions that are already manifest to interlocutors\(^1\), or, in other words, when interlocutors are already acquainted with the information that they transmit (Žegarac 1998; Žegarac and Clark 1999). Therefore, the relevance of phatic utterances does not lie on their propositional content, or on the speaker’s ‘informative intention’, but on the very act of speaking. Their relevance resides in the speaker’s ‘communicative intention’, in the fact that she says something to the hearer and thus shows her want to interact with him\(^2\).

Phatic utterances are very important linguistic devices for social interaction because they create ties of union between interlocutors (e.g. Leech 1983; Silva 1980; Schneider 1988; Coupland, Coupland and Robinson 1992; Coupland, Robinson and Coupland 1994)\(^3\) and transmit indexical information about their social roles, attributes, etc. (Laver 1974, 1975). In addition, they may also implicitly communicate information about the politeness system in which interaction takes place (Padilla Cruz 2004a, 2007b).

Laver (1974, 1975) has shown that the use of phatic utterances in the UK and US obeys various tacitly established interactive norms. When interlocutors are interacting in what Scollon and Wong-Scollon (1995) label a ‘solidarity politeness system’, they normally resort to ‘personal’ phatic utterances, i.e. phatic utterances about themselves (their look, clothes, likes, dislikes, etc.) (1-2). When they are

\(^1\) The relevance-theoretic notion of ‘manifestness’ alludes to the potentiality of being mentally represented by an individual (Sperber and Wilson 1986, 1995).

\(^2\) A speaker’s ‘informative intention’ is her intention to make manifest a series of assumptions to the hearer, whilst her ‘communicative intention’ is her intention to make manifest to the hearer that she indeed has that first intention (Sperber and Wilson 1986, 1995).

\(^3\) For a relevance-theoretic account of these communicative effects, see Padilla Cruz (2005, 2007a).
interacting in a ‘deference politeness system’ (Scollon and Wong-Scollon 1995), they tend to use ‘neutral’ phatic utterances, i.e. utterances about different aspects of the spatio-temporal setting where the conversation is taking place (the weather, sports, recent news, etc.) (3-4). Finally, when interlocutors are interacting in a ‘hierarchical politeness system’ (Scollon and Wong-Scollon 1995)\(^4\), individuals seem to abide by two other norms. On the one hand, when the more powerful interlocutor addresses the less powerful, the former individual appears to be allowed to use phatic utterances about the latter individual, what Laver (1974, 1975) terms ‘other-oriented’ utterances (5-6). On the other hand, when it is the less powerful individual that addresses the more powerful individual, the inferior may use phatic utterances about herself, i.e. ‘self-oriented’ utterances (7-8), but should avoid other-oriented ones. This enables her to avoid invading the other’s psychological space and originating a possible interactive conflict.

(1) Oh, Mary! I do love your new apartment.
(2) That skirt is cute, isn’t it?
(3) Boring match yesterday!
(4) It seems as if it is going to rain.
(5) Wow! What a flat!
(6) Oh, my God! Look at that chandelier! Isn’t it great?
(7) I prefer a cup of tea in the mornings.
(8) Oh, I do not like those muffins.

Norms like these must be part of the wide set of cultural metarepresentations that the individuals belonging to a certain socio-cultural group, in this case the British and the Americans, possess (Sperber 1996; Padilla Cruz 2004b, 2004c), just as they store information about what counts as an offence in their community, how they should apologise for it, how they can thank someone for something, welcome someone, etc. Such metarepresentations considerably influence their communicative behaviour and condition their interpretation of subsequent linguistic (or other) behaviour, as they enter and feed the inferential processes intervening in utterance interpretation. Thanks to them, the processing of utterances which, apparently, do not significantly modify their knowledge of the world can induce hearers to draw conclusions about the social reality in which they interact, which makes those utterances worth processing (Padilla Cruz 2004a, 2004b, 2004c). Elsewhere, following recent relevance-theoretic work, I have called

\(^4\) Politeness systems are defined on the basis of the values that the sociological variables ‘power’ and ‘social distance’ acquire in interaction. Thus, a solidarity politeness system is characterised by a low value of both variables [-P, -D], a deference politeness system is characterised by a low value of the former variable and a high value of the latter [-P, +D], and a hierarchical politeness system is characterised by a high value of the former and a low or high value of the latter [+P, +/-D].
those conclusions ‘social effects’ (Padilla Cruz 2008).

Communication is an extremely risky activity because utterances can have many interpretations, even if the speaker intends to communicate only one of them and that interpretation may be clear and straightforward to her. Prompted by the expectations of relevance that an utterance generates, the hearer decodes it, pragmatically enriches the ‘logical form’ that he obtains from its decoding, assigns a speech-act or propositional-attitude description to it and recovers any implicit content in order to arrive at a specific interpretation. Under normal circumstances, he does so by following the interpretive path that requires the least cognitive effort possible and results in a satisfactory amount of ‘cognitive effects’. When he arrives at an ‘optimally relevant’ interpretation of an utterance, he stops his processing and may think that that is the interpretation of the utterance that the speaker may have intended to communicate (Sperber and Wilson 1986, 1995; Wilson 1999; Wilson and Sperber 2002, 2004).

Concerning the phatic interpretation of utterances, there are some linguistic routines or formulae that in many cases make it possible for utterances to be regarded as phatic almost automatically, which consequently facilitates their correct understanding (Edmondson and House 1981; Schneider 1988). Moreover, their appearance in specific conversational phases such as the opening or the closing phase of conversations, or as constituents of fixed or frozen adjacency pairs in those phases, increases the likelihood that hearers perceive them as phatic and correctly interpret them as such (Kasper 1984). That an utterance is correctly interpreted as phatic is also possible because of the activation of the appropriate interactive frames and the selection of an adequate processing strategy –bottom-up or top-down (e.g. Kasper 1984).

This notwithstanding, there is no specific type of utterance that can be said to be inherently phatic. Individuals resort to many comments, remarks or statements with rather diverse contents or topics to engage in phatic communion (Schneider 1988). Besides, phatic utterances are not exclusively restricted to the opening and closing phases of conversations. Therefore, the ‘phaticity’ of utterances is a characteristic that interlocutors have to negotiate as a conversation takes place and unfolds (Coupland, Coupland and Robinson 1992; Coupland, Robinson and Coupland 1994). If phatic utterances do not constitute a class of utterances

5 In relevance-theoretic terms, a ‘logical form’ is a structured set of concepts (Sperber and Wilson 1986, 1995).

6 Although enumerated in this order, these processes need not be performed sequentially, but can take place simultaneously.

7 These are the strengthening of previous information, the contradiction and subsequent rejection of previously held information, or the derivation of new information from the joint interaction of recently processed and already possessed information (Sperber and Wilson 1986, 1995).
characterised by special formal properties and do not appear in predictable places in conversations, they may give rise to many misunderstandings and pragmatic failures. To illustrate this, consider the following examples:

(9) This bus is always late!
(10) Your new coat is cute.
(11) This way is so long!
(12) It is cold in here.
(13) My legs are not fit for these slopes!

Each of these utterances may be interpreted as phatic in a suitable context. (9) may be perfectly interpreted as phatic, for instance, in a bus stop where two individuals are waiting for a specific bus and they equally know that it is delayed. (10) may be assigned a phatic interpretation if it appears at the opening phase of a conversation or if the hearer is aware that the new, recently bought coat he is wearing at that moment is one of the kind the speaker likes. (11) can have a phatic interpretation in a situation in which two individuals have been walking for a more than reasonable time and the speaker has previously mentioned that it is taking them longer than expected to get to their destination. (12) may equally be phatic if the two interlocutors are already acquainted with the fact that the room where they happen to be is cold. Finally, (13) can be perceived as phatic if the two individuals interacting know that it is hard for the speaker to go up the slopes in question. Nevertheless, in addition to having those phatic interpretations, and provided the necessary contextual factors obtain, (9) can be perfectly understood as an genuine complaint about the delay of the bus, (10) as a sincere compliment on the hearer’s new coat, especially if he did not expect the speaker to like it, (11) as an indirect suggestion or request to go a different way, (12) as an indirect request to switch the heater on or to close the window, and (13) as an apology for not being able to follow the other interlocutor’s pace. Under such interpretations, these utterances may also result in cognitive effects that the hearer might not obtain from their phatic interpretations.

These examples show that in many situations any individual may hesitate about the exact interpretation that his interlocutor could have envisaged for utterances like these. They can perfectly have both a phatic and a non-phatic interpretation, if the necessary conditions apply, as a consequence of the pragmatic ambivalence of utterances (Leech and Thomas 1990; Thomas 1995). If native speakers of a language can certainly have problems when assigning a (non-)phatic interpretation to utterances like these, problems may also arise in interaction between native speakers and learners or in interaction between learners. Consequently, both native and non-native hearers may fail to correctly process utterances that their interlocutors intend to be interpreted as phatic and, in fact, they do so in many circumstances.
The occurrence of some utterances at specific conversational phases can help hearers correctly process those utterances as phatic, but not so in many other cases. Their (non-)native interlocutors may not follow norms and behavioural patterns like those that Laver (1974, 1975) identified when using phatic utterances and choose types of phatic utterances that would not be expected in some social contexts. This may lead hearers to undesired interpretations. In other cases, they may only recover a phatic interpretation of those utterances, stop there their processing, as they would regard that interpretation as optimally relevant, and not exploit those utterances so as to obtain social effects.

All these virtual problems that hearers may find when interpreting phatic utterances should induce us to wonder how they assign phatic interpretations to utterances under normal circumstances, what cognitive strategy/ies they employ to do so and how they can overcome possible interpretation problems or difficulties. The relevance-driven comprehension process (Sperber and Wilson 1986, 1995; Wilson and Sperber 2002, 2004) and the cognitive strategies suggested by Sperber (1994) and Wilson (1999) can shed some light on these issues. The strategy of ‘naïve optimism’ can help us understand why individuals accept one correct or erroneous interpretation, while the strategy of ‘cautious optimism’ can help us understand how individuals can overcome pragmatic failures and possible conversational misunderstandings originated by a misuse of phatic utterances. I turn to a discussion of these two strategies in relation to the usage of phatic utterances in the next two sections.

3. Naïve optimism and the phatic interpretation of utterances

Under normal circumstances, a hearer searches for the interpretation of an utterance that seems to him sufficiently relevant. When he finds that interpretation, he thinks that it is the interpretation that the speaker intended to communicate and considers it to be her informative intention. If he does not find an optimally relevant interpretation, communication does not succeed.

When processing utterances, the easiest and simplest cognitive strategy available to hearers is what Sperber (1994) calls naïve optimism. A naïve and optimistic hearer presupposes that his interlocutor is both ‘competent’ –i.e. that she has an adequate command of the grammatical norms and rules of use of her language– and ‘benevolent’ –i.e. that she will not intend to deceive him. As a

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8 Sperber (1994) describes a third interpretive strategy called ‘sophisticated understanding’. Since that strategy enables a hearer to recover an interpretation that the speaker does not want or expect him to recover for some reason –she is not benevolent or wants to deceive her interlocutor– it will not be taken into account for the purposes of this paper.
result, that hearer will take for granted that his interlocutor will try to avoid misunderstandings and guide him to the interpretation that she intends to communicate following the interpretive path that yields the greatest number of cognitive effects in exchange for a reasonable amount of cognitive effort. In turn, a competent and benevolent speaker is one who checks that the information that she intends to communicate will in fact turn out relevant to the hearer, and that he will recover it instead of other possible interpretations.

Recall utterances (9-13) above, which can perfectly have either a phatic or a non-phatic interpretation given the necessary conditions. A competent and benevolent speaker may simply intend to communicate to the hearer with each of those utterances that she just wishes to keep the interactive contact with him. In that case, the complaint interpretation of (9), the compliment interpretation of (10), the suggestion/request interpretation of (11, 12) and the apology interpretation of (13) would be unwarranted. If the hearer is naïve and optimistic, he will follow the interpretive path that provides him with a satisfactory amount of cognitive effects in exchange of an acceptable amount of cognitive effort. During that process, he may realise that he is already aware of what the speaker refers to, since the assumptions that those utterances make manifest are already manifest to himself. Consequently, he may directly conclude that the speaker’s intention when using one of those utterances is precisely that one, as those utterances do not significantly alter his world view, and stop his processing. When he recovers that interpretation and considers it optimally relevant, he will not think of any other possible alternative interpretation, as this would detract from optimal relevance. He will believe that the speaker’s intention is indeed to talk to him just to keep the interactive contact, show a friendly attitude or avoid the unpleasantness of silence in that situation. However, if during that interpretive process he does not realise that the assumptions that those utterances make manifest are already manifest to him, he can perfectly end up recovering an unintended interpretation and considering it optimally relevant.

Although a naïve and optimistic hearer can potentially reach an interpretation along those lines when processing utterances actually intended by the speaker to be interpreted as phatic, he can also obtain social effects regarding, for instance, the sort of social relationship existing between him and the speaker. For a competent and benevolent speaker to transmit information about politeness systems, she must verify that the type of phatic utterance she intends to resort to in a conversation – neutral or personal, self- or other-oriented– corresponds to the type of utterance that can be used in the politeness system that she wishes to establish, maintain or modify with her interlocutor. In other words, she has to access assumptions about the interactive context, infer the politeness system existing between her and the hearer and check that the type of phatic utterance that she intends to use is allowed by the cultural metarepresentations referring to interaction with a particular
individual in a specific social context (14). In addition, she must also check that the hearer has an easy and immediate access to those contextual assumptions and cultural metarepresentations, as they will influence the hearer’s interpretation of the utterance she resorts to and can help him recover or prevent him from recovering that social information. Finally, that competent and benevolent speaker must select the utterance that best matches the politeness system that she wishes to establish, maintain or modify (15), so that the hearer inferentially obtains the desired social effects (16). A naïve and optimistic hearer will obtain those effects if he assumes that the speaker’s intention is to make him recover that social information, i.e. if it is part of her informative intention, and that the only optimally relevant interpretation that she might have wanted to communicate is the one that he recovers. Following the interpretive path that he thinks requires least cognitive effort and yields a reasonable amount of cognitive effects, he will access as many manifest contextual assumptions and cultural metarepresentations regarding the use of phatic utterances in a particular social relationship as necessary and will infer information about the politeness system that the speaker wishes to establish, maintain or modify. If he does not access such contextual assumptions and cultural metarepresentations, he might not obtain those effects.

(14) a. I do not know if my interlocutor has more power than me. [contextual assumption]
   b. My interlocutor and I have not met before. [contextual assumption]
   c. There is a deference politeness system between my hearer and me. [inference]
   d. In a deference politeness system the appropriate behaviour is to begin a conversation by means of a neutral phatic utterance. [cultural metarepresentation]
   e. In a deference politeness system personal phatic utterances should be avoided. [cultural metarepresentation]

(15) Frosty morning!

(16) a. I do not know if my interlocutor has more power than me. [contextual assumption]
   b. My interlocutor and I have not met before. [contextual assumption]
   c. There is a deference politeness system between my interlocutor and me. [inference]
   d. In a deference politeness system neutral phatic utterances are preferred. [cultural metarepresentation]
   e. My interlocutor wishes to establish a deference politeness system with me. [inference]

In the examples and situations discussed so far, speakers are supposed to

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9 As Wilson puts it, “[The speaker] has spoken competently if the first interpretation that [the hearer] finds relevant enough is the intended one; she has spoken benevolently if this interpretation not only seems relevant but is genuinely so” (1999: 137).
behave both competently, because they command the language they speak and the rules governing the use of phatic utterances, and benevolently, because they do not want to deceive their interlocutors and give them the impression that there exists a politeness system that does not really exists between them. However, speakers do not always behave competently when interacting, for they may not be aware of the constraints operating on certain linguistic behaviours in specific situations in their culture, take into account some of the features of the situation in which interaction takes place, foresee the contexts that hearers will most easily and quickly access to interpret utterances or select the most adequate utterance that leads hearers to recover specific social information (Sperber 1994: 192). This may bias hearers and make them obtain undesired interpretations. If this is something that can quite frequently happen between native speakers of a language, in the case of interaction between natives and L2 learners who do not have a good command of the target language and its cultural system, or interaction exclusively between L2 learners, the probability that non-native speakers behave incompetently may dramatically increase. As mentioned above, that incompetence can have negative consequences because both native and non-native hearers may recover interpretations that significantly differ from those that their interlocutors might have intended to communicate.

In some cases, an L2 learner may use an utterance expecting the hearer to interpret it as phatic, but may not be aware of some contextual factors that make him process it as non-phatic. Or, viceversa, the L2 learner may expect her interlocutor to process an utterance as non-phatic and is not aware that the assumptions that her utterance makes manifest are already manifest to him, so that he interprets it as phatic. In other cases, L2 learners either do not take into account the values of the sociological variables determining politeness systems or wrongly select a type of phatic utterance that does not correspond to the politeness system that they have established with their interlocutors without the intention to redefine it. The inadequate usage of a specific phatic utterance in a specific politeness system can give rise to pragmatic failures and many conversational misunderstandings in which hearers may recover a series of ‘prejudicial implicatures’ (Escandell Vidal 1996; Jary 1998) that may seriously affect interaction. However, they can overcome them by resorting to another interpretive strategy, which Sperber (1994) terms ‘cautious optimism’.

4. Cautious optimism and pragmatic failure caused by the (mis)use of phatic utterances

When pragmatic failure occurs, a hearer can feel induced to attribute to his interlocutor beliefs –‘prefailure’ beliefs, as Field (2007) calls them– and intentions
that she might not actually have. He may do so on the basis of an appreciated 
mismatch between the linguistic stimulus that the speaker selected to achieve a 
particular communicative goal and his cultural metarepresentations about 
interaction. Such metarepresentations can encourage the hearer to anticipate that 
the other individual will behave in a specific way or to expect a certain outcome 
from her linguistic behaviour in a given situation. If the speaker’s actual behaviour 
does not correspond to the hearer’s anticipations or expectations, they become the 
reason for the hearer’s subsequent surprise and frustration, which he tries to justify 
by attributing some beliefs or intentions to the speaker (Field 2007: 134). In 
extreme cases, an (erroneous) attribution of beliefs or intentions can even affect the 
hearer’s perception of the speaker’s personality.

Nevertheless, “[…] there is no compelling reason to conclude that such 
attributions imply that […] actions are guided by occurrent beliefs” (Field 2007: 
133). Misunderstandings arising from pragmatic failure can be reasonably 
overcome by resorting to cautious optimism. This cognitive strategy is “[…]
a special case of competent attribution of intentions” (Sperber 1994:192). By using 
this strategy, the hearer attributes to the speaker the intention to communicate an 
interpretation of an utterance that would have achieved an optimal level of 
relevance and that he would have accessed more directly and with less cognitive 
effort instead of another interpretation which, at that moment and under specific 
communicative circumstances, he must accept as the most relevant one. Cautious 
optimism is necessary when the speaker has not thought of another utterance that 
leads the hearer to recover the cognitive effects that she intended to produce with 
less effort, or when she has not taken into account some contextual elements that 
favour an alternative interpretation instead of the desired one. This strategy enables 
the hearer to overcome two types of misunderstandings: ‘accidental relevance’ and 
‘accidental irrelevance’ (Wilson 1999: 137). In what follows I will discuss how (non-)native 
hearers can overcome these two types of misunderstandings when processing phatic utterances produced by L2 learners.

4.1. Overcoming accidental relevance of (non-)phatic utterances

Cases of accidental relevance arise when the first interpretation that appears to 
the hearer to be relevant enough is not the one that the speaker intended to 
communicate. A naïve and optimistic hearer would accept that first interpretation 
as optimally relevant and would identify it with the speaker’s informative 
intention. On the contrary, an optimistic and cautious hearer is able to go a step 
further and wonder whether the first interpretation that seems to him optimally 
relevant is in fact the one that the speaker really intended to communicate. If not, 
he is entitled to consider an alternative interpretation.
An optimistic and cautious hearer is able to overcome pragmatic failures, in which an L2 learner’s formulation of an utterance ostensively but inadvertently favours an unintended interpretation. In the case of pragmatically ambivalent utterances like (9-13), which can give rise to different competing interpretations, a (non-)native hearer can hesitate between a phatic and a non-phatic interpretation. If he is naïve and optimistic and does not realise that those utterances make manifest assumptions that the L2 learner thinks are already manifest to him, he may assign to those utterances the complaint-, compliment-, suggestion-/request- or apology-interpretations. He will do so if, following the interpretive path that requires least effort and yields an acceptable amount of cognitive effects, those interpretations are the first to come to his mind and he finds them relevant enough. He would accept them and would not think that the L2 learner might have expected him to interpret those utterances differently, just as tokens of phatic communion. On the other hand, if the (non-)native hearer is cautious and optimistic, he may realise that the assumptions that the L2 learner makes manifest to him with those utterances are already manifest to himself, conclude that her intention is to avoid an uncomfortable interactive silence and opt for a phatic interpretation in spite of formulations that may have initially prompted him to accept those other non-phatic interpretations as optimally relevant.

An optimistic and cautious (non-)native hearer is also able to overcome those cases in which the L2 learner’s (unfortunate) selection of a type of utterance for a specific social context ostensively but inadvertently makes him draw some unexpected or undesired conclusions. He can refuse the first interpretation of an utterance that appears to him relevant and makes him conclude that the L2 learner’s informative intention is very different from the one which she actually has, and considers another alternative interpretation that enables him to keep the presumption that the learner is behaving benevolently. Nonetheless, he may think that she is incompetent.

In a given politeness system, for which the cultural metarepresentations spread throughout the individuals of a group establish a type of phatic utterance as preferable and adequate, a naïve and optimistic (non-)native hearer could interpret a dispreferred phatic utterance as inadequate on the grounds of those metarepresentations. Thus, in a hierarchical politeness system in which he is the superior and his interlocutor is the inferior, he could expect a self-oriented phatic utterance (17) from the L2 learner. If she addresses him by means of an other-oriented utterance (18), he could find a conclusion such as (19) optimally relevant:

(17) I can’t stand the traffic in this town!
(18) You have arrived late today!
(19) My interlocutor is being rude to me.

That naïve and optimistic (non-)native hearer could even think that his
interlocutor has not behaved benevolently and, therefore, attribute to her the intention to invade his psychological space, to be rude or impolite on purpose, which would certainly have negative consequences for their social relationship. However, an optimistic and cautious (non-)native hearer can consider assumptions such as those in (20) as ‘alternative implicatures’ (Yus Ramos 1999a, 1999b) when processing an utterance such as (18) in that politeness system, instead of considering (19):

(20) a. My interlocutor does not want to be rude/impolite to me; she has just (unknowingly) chosen a wrong phatic token to begin this conversation.

b. My interlocutor thinks she can use an other-oriented phatic token to begin a conversation with me.

That (non-)native hearer could also have found a conclusion like (19) optimally relevant on the basis of the cultural metarepresentations that he would have accessed. However, he realises that that is not the conclusion that the L2 learner might have intended or expected him to derive and considers an alternative one. Such conclusion makes it possible for him to still see his interlocutor as benevolent, although not fully competent, and prevents him from attributing to her an intention to offend him which she did not actually have.

As can be seen, in cases like these cautious optimism can enable (non-)native hearers to recover the intended interpretation of utterances that may be pragmatically ambivalent in a given communicative situation because the L2 learner has not taken into account some contextual features and has formulated her utterance in a way that favours an alternative, but equally possible, interpretation. This strategy can also enable (non-)native hearers to dismiss an undesired interpretation that could lead them to attribute to their incompetent interlocutors certain prefailure beliefs or intentions that would have guided their actions. If hearers attributed those beliefs or intentions to their interlocutors, they could form an inadequate idea of their interlocutors’ personality.

4.2. Overcoming accidental irrelevance of phatic utterances

As mentioned above, cautious optimism also makes it possible for the hearer to overcome cases of accidental irrelevance. Such cases arise, for instance, when he thinks that the speaker only transmits information that is already known or when she makes a slip of the tongue (Wilson 1999). In these circumstances, a naïve and optimistic hearer would only consider the linguistic evidence of the utterance and, as a consequence of its apparently low level of informativeness, would not obtain cognitive effects that satisfy his expectations of relevance. On the contrary, an optimistic and cautious hearer notices the apparent irrelevance of an utterance and
asks himself which other adequate interpretation the speaker could have intended to communicate so that the utterance would have achieved an optimal level of relevance. This interpretive strategy is also decisive for the interpretation of phatic utterances and the recovery of social effects.

Apparently, phatic utterances only make manifest assumptions that are previously manifest to interlocutors, so such utterances might be considered irrelevant by some individuals. An optimistic and naïve hearer accesses the assumptions that a phatic utterance makes manifest and, since they are already manifest to him, he may think that the L2 learner’s intention is just to keep the interactive contact. From the processing of that utterance he might only obtain what Yus Ramos (1999a, 1999b) calls an ‘involuntary explicature’. That would prevent him from grasping any implicit content that his interlocutor may intend to communicate – in this case, information about their social relationship. On the contrary, when facing an apparent case of irrelevance, an optimistic and cautious (non-)native hearer would go one step further and expand his interpretive context, incorporating assumptions referring to both interlocutors’ power, social distance or affect, as well as cultural metarepresentations referring to politeness system and interaction within them. In that way, he can relate those assumptions to the assumptions made manifest by the phatic utterance and obtain social effects that satisfy his expectations of relevance.

Accordingly, an optimistic and cautious (non-)native hearer would expand his context so as to solve the apparent irrelevance of (21) in a context where it is mutually manifest to both interlocutors that the blouse to which the utterance alludes is beautiful, and would move from an interpretation such as (22) to another such as (23). He would do so because of the cultural metarepresentations about the establishment or existence of a particular politeness system and the type of utterances that could be expected in it:

(21) Beautiful blouse!
(22) My interlocutor is willing to communicate with me.
(23) My interlocutor may wish to maintain a solidarity politeness system with me.

The speaker’s informative intention may be rather diffuse or difficult to pin down in some communicative circumstances, so it is the hearer’s task to make an appraisal thereof as exact as possible. She may also make weakly manifest some of the assumptions constituting her informative intention and expect the hearer to use them in order to get the intended interpretation of her utterance. However, the hearer may not use them or use some unintended implicatures on his own responsibility and, hence, misunderstand her utterance. When facing a case of accidental irrelevance, an optimistic and cautious hearer is able to incorporate to his interpretative context cultural metarepresentations that allow him to obtain social effects concerning the politeness system that the speaker intends to establish,
maintain or modify, or about the speaker’s (im)polite attitude. This should not mean that a naïve and optimistic hearer is not able to recover those effects in exchange of a reasonable amount of cognitive effort if the utterance generates enough expectations of relevance. If that hearer recovers them, he may attribute the speaker the intention to transmit those assumptions to him.

The speaker’s informative intention is a first-level metarepresentation of another representation formed by the assumptions that she intends to make manifest to the hearer. In turn, her communicative intention is a second-level informative intention, as it is her intention to make mutually manifest her informative intention (Sperber 1994: 193). In linguistic communication the hearer must discover which the speaker’s actual informative intention is. In order to do so, he must carry out an inferential process in which he takes the speaker’s informative intention as a premise and comes to a conclusion about that intention. As a consequence, he will be able to attribute that informative intention to the speaker. In that inferential process, the hearer uses a first-level metarepresentation so as to obtain a second-level metarepresentation:

\[(24) [S \text{ intends } [\text{me to believe/think the blouse is beautiful}]]\]

When interpreting an utterance that appears to be phatic, an optimistic and naïve (non-)native hearer reaches this second level of metarepresentation. However, an optimistic and cautious hearer takes this second-level metarepresentation as a premise for a new inferential process because he thinks that the interpretation of the utterance that he has recovered and finds relevant enough is not the interpretation that his (in)competent interlocutor intended to communicate. Consequently, he searches for another interpretation that is indeed optimally relevant. This means that he rejects the conclusion that the optimistic and naïve hearer would have drawn and considers another possible interpretation. An optimistic and cautious hearer needs another level of metarepresentation that makes it possible for him to solve his interlocutor’s incompetence in the two cases mentioned (Wilson, 1999: 137-138), either because an incompetent or not fully competent learner has selected an utterance that leads him to obtain an undesired interpretation or because that incompetent or not fully competent learner has produced an irrelevant utterance.

Communication is an intentional activity which not only presupposes the existence of an informative intention in one of the interlocutors, but also the existence of an intention that the other individual recognises that very intention or, in other words, her communicative intention (Sperber and Wilson 1986, 1995; Sperber 1994; Wilson and Sperber 2002, 2004). If a (non-)native hearer assumes that an L2 learner is competent and benevolent, he does not need to metarepresent her thoughts, but to recover an interpretation that he considers relevant and to think that it is the learner’s informative intention. On the contrary, if a (non-)native
hearer assumes that the learner is benevolent but incompetent, then he will think that she may have intended to communicate another different interpretation that would have in fact achieved an optimal level of relevance.

5. Conclusion

Most works on pragmatic failure underline the need to develop L2 learners’ ‘metapragmatic awareness’ so as to make them conscious of the importance of correctly knowing their L2 and applying its conventions of use, as well as of the repercussions that an undesired influence of their L1 may have upon their interlocutors’ perception of their personality. Regarding hearers, those works only dwell on the possible or actual evaluations that they could make of their more or less competent interlocutors’ linguistic behaviour, but do not say much about how they could contribute to make interaction smoother and softer by overcoming pragmatic failures, or the cognitive strategies they could resort to in order to do so.

This paper has discussed how hearers can take advantage of one of the interpretive strategies suggested by Sperber (1994) and Wilson (1999) in order to overcome pragmatic failures stemming from an inadequate usage of utterances envisaged as phatic by L2 learners. It has argued that cautious optimism is a strategy that can successfully help (non-)native hearers obtain alternative interpretations to other interpretations that, unfortunately, achieve an optimal degree of relevance in certain contexts. Being cautious and optimistic, hearers do not need to attribute to their interlocutors certain prefailure beliefs or intentions that would have allegedly guided their behaviour, an attribution that could induce them to form an erroneous conception of their personality.

L2 learners should therefore be trained to become optimistic and cautious hearers who are be able to metarepresent their interlocutors’ beliefs and intentions and thus consider alternative interpretations of apparently irrelevant utterances that can implicitly communicate additional social information or of utterances that accidentally achieve an optimal level of relevance under an unexpected or undesired interpretation because of a wrong choice of their linguistic form. Teaching them to be cautious and optimistic, teachers will progressively make learners understand that they should not look for alleged beliefs or intentions that could have guided their interlocutors’ linguistic behaviour, but that their behaviour is in some cases the result of an uninformed wrong habit, whose potential consequences they could even ignore.
References


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