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# **The Pragmatics of Rebroadcasting Content on Twitter: How is Retweeting Relevant?**

## **Abstract**

Social media networking sites such as Facebook or Twitter depend, for their success, on the willingness of users to share digital content with other users in their network. To this end, they often have sharing functionality built into each new post by default. With one or two clicks, a user can rebroadcast another user's post or content to their own followers or subscribers. In this article, I consider the pragmatics of online sharing of third-party content, and I analyse these acts of rebroadcasting using the relevance-theoretic pragmatic framework (Sperber & Wilson, 1986/95). I establish that rebroadcasting is an ostensive act of communication. Furthermore, I suggest that rebroadcasting is attributive in nature, and may, like other attributive uses, achieve relevance in a variety of ways. I consider the communicative intentions that lie behind acts of rebroadcasting on Twitter, aligning relevance-theoretic analyses of attributive use with self-reported motivations for retweeting as identified by boyd et al. (2010). I show that the categories of attributive use that we find in ostensive acts of communication more generally are also represented in acts of retweeting.

Keywords: Twitter; social media, ostension; attributive use; sharing; rebroadcasting; relevance theory

## Highlights

Rebroadcasting third party content online is an ostensive act of communication.  
Acts of rebroadcasting achieve relevance as attributive acts.  
The relevance of rebroadcasting may be informational, attitudinal, or phatic.

## **1. Introduction: Online Pragmatics and New Forms of Interaction**

Online communication and social media have created new ways for us to interact and communicate. Users of social networking sites are not only able to write messages in various formats (text, images, graphics, emoji, animated gifs, etc.) but they can also publicly interact with content that has been posted by another user. They might choose to do this by clicking on a reaction button or they might choose to share the content more widely by performing an act of rebroadcasting.

Rebroadcasting involves sharing existing, usually third-party, content with other users in an online social network. Most platforms allow material to be shared across networking sites. For example, a user can share a YouTube video to their Facebook or Twitter feed with just one or two clicks. Indeed, many non-social media websites now also feature share buttons which allow users to post content quickly and easily from those sites to their social media profiles. Some social media sites also have site-internal sharing functionality built into the platform. For example, Twitter users can retweet content, Tumblr users can reblog content, and Facebook users can share content publicly via their news feed or privately in a direct message.

Much has been written elsewhere about the general acts of sharing that take place online (John, 2013; Androutsopoulos, 2014; Giaxoglou, 2018). It is, of course, possible to share original content, and this is precisely what users do when they post an original message, image, or video to a social media site. However, in this paper I focus on cases where users share content that has been created by others, and I refer to this as rebroadcasting. From the perspective of pragmatics, this option to rebroadcast content to a new audience raises interesting questions. Should we treat acts of rebroadcasting as communicative, and if so, how are they interpreted by the intended audience? How does sharing content fit into a more general pragmatic framework for understanding communication? In this article, I start to investigate these issues by focusing on the act of rebroadcasting content online, and specifically, I focus on the act of retweeting content on the microblogging site Twitter. The general patterns that emerge from this work are, however, applicable in other social media contexts where rebroadcasting is afforded.

I use the relevance-theoretic framework for utterance interpretation (Sperber and Wilson, 1995; Carston, 2002; Wilson and Sperber, 2012; Clark, 2013) to analyse the meaning that users intend to convey when they rebroadcast content online. I start by arguing that rebroadcasting is an ostensive act of communication and that, as such, it triggers the same interpretative processes as utterances and other acts of ostension. That is, rebroadcasting content raises expectations of relevance. In Section 2, I provide a brief overview of the relevance-theoretic approach to utterance interpretation with a focus on the role of ostension and the presumption of optimal relevance. I consider how these might apply in media broadcasting environments where a communicator does not necessarily know who their audience will be. I also introduce the idea that when a user rebroadcasts content online, they are showing that content to their followers. Showing is an ostensive act of communication. In Section 3, I introduce the relevance-theoretic notion of attributive use and consider the ways in which attributive utterances may achieve relevance. I then provide an overview of an existing study by Boyd et al. (2010) that looks at self-reported motivations for retweeting. The aim in Section 4 is to bring these two pieces of work together and to show how we can understand the self-reported motivations for retweeting in terms of their contribution to relevance. I reanalyse the categories identified by Boyd et al. in terms of the varieties of attributive use and provide examples from Twitter to illustrate each. The article concludes with a brief discussion of the limitations of the analysis and of directions for future work.

## **2. Relevance and Ostension Online**

Relevance theory, as a framework for studying utterance interpretation, deals with ostensive acts of communication. Ostensive behaviour is special in that it raises expectations. More specifically, it raises expectations that the communicator is attempting to be optimally relevant. According to Sperber and Wilson (1995:53-54), '[s]omeone who engages in any kind of ostensive behaviour intentionally draws some attention to himself' and by doing so makes manifest the assumption that 'he is trying to be relevant'. An addressee is entitled to assume that the communicator is aiming at optimal relevance, and this assumption plays a crucial role in the interpretation process.

An input is relevant when it leads the audience to update their cognitive environment in some way. This could take the form of updating (or eliminating) an assumption that is already held, or deriving a new assumption that was not previously available. In relevance-theoretic terms these updates are referred to as cognitive effects. A stimulus will be optimally relevant when the effort required to process the input is warranted by the resulting cognitive effects. The fact that ostensive behaviour carries with it a presumption of its own optimal relevance means that an addressee will follow a path of least effort when interpreting the behaviour. The addressee is also entitled to assume that first interpretation which meets the threshold of optimal relevance is the interpretation that the communicator intended to convey. The discussion and analyses in this article are underpinned by the assumption that the underlying mechanisms that drive the production and interpretation of communicative acts are the same online, as they are offline. While new technologies may offer new opportunities and new resources, they are only as effective as the people who use them. There is no reason to believe that our basic human abilities and behaviours change when we go online. Relevance theory is a framework for understanding, not only language use, but also communication and cognition more generally, and as such, it predicts that we should find the same general processes at work whether we are communicating online or offline (Yus, 2011; Scott, Forthcoming).

To understand acts of rebroadcasting as intentional communicative acts, we need to first consider the role of the audience on social networking sites like Twitter. Optimal relevance cannot be presumed by just anyone who comes across an utterance. It is only the addressee of an utterance who can presume optimal relevance. It has been argued that when communicating on one-to-many social media platforms such as Twitter, users are writing for what has become known as an 'imagined audience' (Marwick and boyd, 2011; Brake, 2012; Litt, 2012; Litt and Hargittai, 2016). They cannot know precisely who will access their message, and so they write with an imagined reader or readers in mind. When a user posts a tweet it will appear in the timeline of anybody who is following that Twitter account. While we might then be tempted to say that the followers of an account comprise the audience for that user's tweets, the list of followers

associated with an account is unlikely to accurately represent the actual audience for any one tweet. With mediated forms like Twitter, a user has no way of knowing whether followers are active on the site regularly, occasionally, or never. If a user follows a large number of accounts, there is also a chance that any one tweet might get overlooked or lost in the noise. Twitter feeds are also checked on mobile apps at different times and in different places, and there is no way of knowing who will be reading your tweet, or when they might do so. There is no guarantee that just because someone follows an account, they will necessarily see a particular posting. Furthermore the potential audience for a tweet goes beyond the follower list. Users may find a tweet via a keyword search, and, of course, a tweet may be retweeted to a new and different audience. As Marwick and boyd (2011:99) note, 'it is virtually impossible for Twitter users to account for their potential audience, let alone actual readers', and while, in reality, most tweets will be read by relatively few people, their significance lies in the 'possibility of tremendous visibility, not the guarantee of it' (boyd, 2010:48). Furthermore, retweeting content can 'significantly amplify the reach of a tweet' spreading it to an even larger audience (Zappavigna, 2012:36)

At first this may seem to be a problem for a relevance-based approach. Optimal relevance is a property associated with ostensive acts of communication, and ostensive acts require an intended audience. If you overhear me speaking to my friend on a train, you cannot expect my utterance to be optimally relevant to you as you are not the intended addressee. However, reading an open message posted on social media is not the same as eavesdropping. Sperber and Wilson (1995), writing before the launch of the first social networking sites (boyd and Ellison, 2007), describe how the presumption of optimal relevance applies when there are no definite addressees. As they explain (1995:158):

In broadcast communication, a stimulus can even be addressed to whoever finds it relevant. The communicator is then communicating her presumption of relevance to whoever is willing to entertain it.

If retweeting is simply rebroadcasting, perhaps to a wider or different audience, then the retweeter is communicating her presumption of relevance to whoever is

willing to entertain it. Most tweets are available to all users by virtue of being public. However, retweeting is an intentional act of rebroadcasting which causes a tweet to appear in the feed of anyone following the retweeter's account. Marsili (2020:14) likens retweeting to pointing. He suggests that it is 'an act of indication that takes a representation as content'. This act of indication involves the user showing the tweet to her followers. Showing is an ostensive act of communication (Sperber and Wilson, 1995:46-54; 2015; Wharton, 2009). By showing the tweet to her followers, the retweeter is communicating that she thinks it is worth them paying attention to it. According to Sperber and Wilson (1995:49) there is 'no point in drawing someone's attention to a phenomenon unless it will seem relevant enough to him to be worth his attention'. By requesting someone's attention you are communicating that you think that 'by paying attention, [the addressee] will gain some relevant information' (49). Therefore, by retweeting a post, a retweeter is signalling that the content of the post will be relevant in some way to those who are 'willing to entertain it'.

### **3. Rebroadcasting and Communication**

#### **3.1 Rebroadcasting as Attributive Use**

If retweeting is an act of rebroadcasting in which a user shares content originally created by someone else, then, in effect, the user is quoting the original post. Zaki (2017:46) suggests that sharing be seen as the 'virtual equivalent of reported speech in cyberspace'. According to Sperber and Wilson and relevance theory, quotations are a type of attributive use (Wilson, 2000; Clark, 2013:258-263). Rather than describing the world from the speaker's perspective, attributive uses represent some other utterance or thought. To illustrate this contrast between describing and attributing, consider how we might understand Mel's reply to Esam's question in (1).

- (1) Esam:           What did Lee say when you asked him to come next week?  
      Mel:            I'm not talking to you.

If Mel is using her utterance to describe the world as she sees it, then she is communicating that she (Mel) is not talking to you (Esam), and we might then

infer that she is refusing to answer his question. However, there is another possibility. She could be quoting or paraphrasing Lee's reply. If she is quoting or paraphrasing Lee, Mel's words do not describe the world as she sees it, but rather they represent Lee's utterance. On this interpretation she is communicating that Lee told her that he (Lee) was not talking to her (Mel). This is an attributive use of language. As Sperber and Wilson explain, '[d]irect quotations are the most obvious examples of utterances used to represent not what they describe but what they resemble' (Sperber and Wilson, 1995:228).<sup>1</sup>

Descriptive uses of language achieve relevance because the description of the world (as the speaker sees it) provides information which leads to some cognitive effects for the addressee. For example on the descriptive interpretation of Mel's utterance in (1), Esam is likely to update his assumption about whether Mel is currently talking to him. Attributive uses of language, on the other hand, achieve relevance 'by informing the hearer of the fact that so-and-so has said something or thinks something' (Sperber and Wilson, 1995:238). This act can, as we shall see, be relevant in at least three different ways.

Some attributive uses achieve relevance by informing the audience of the content of the attributed thought (Wilson and Sperber, 2012:128). This is the most likely way in which the attributive interpretation of Mel's utterance in (1) would achieve relevance. The fact that Lee told Mel that he is not talking to her will be relevant in its own right to Esam. The speaker must believe that the contents of the attributed utterance or thought will be relevant to the addressee(s). As Wilson (2000:424) explains, these uses have been the main focus of existing literature on quotation. I will call such uses *informative attributive uses*, as they are 'are primarily intended to inform the audience about the content of an attributed thought' (Wilson and Sperber, 2012:129).

Some attributive utterances are produced, not to communicate new information, but to communicate the speaker's attitude towards another thought or utterance.

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<sup>1</sup> Boyd et al. (2010) discuss the edits that a retweeter may make to the original post (and the reasons for doing so), and the notion of resemblance and attributive use is useful to understand how these edited posts function in the same way as the unedited, pure retweets.

In relevance-theoretic terms these are referred to as *echoic uses*, and Wilson and Sperber (2012:128-129) define echoic use as ‘a subtype of attributive use in which the speaker’s primary intention is not to provide information about the content of an attributed thought, but to convey her own attitude or reaction to that thought’. The relevance lies not in the content, but in the attitude. The attitude may be positive or negative and ‘the speaker may indicate that she agrees or disagrees with the original, is puzzled, angry, amused, intrigued, sceptical, etc., or any combination of these’ (Wilson, 2000:432). This notion of echoic attributive uses of language is central to the relevance-theoretic account of irony. To illustrate, consider the following example, adapted from Sperber and Wilson (1987:708). Imagine that Donnacha utters (2) to Olivia in the morning as they are discussing how to spend their day.

(2) It’s a great day to drive to the beach!

They decide to drive to the beach, but end up spending all day in a traffic jam. As they sit in their stifling hot car Olivia utters (3) to Donnacha.

(3) It’s a great day to drive to the beach indeed!

Here she is quoting Donnacha’s words back to him, but the relevance of her utterance lies in the mocking, dissociative attitude that she is communicating. This is a typical example of verbal irony.

Finally, the motivation for an attributive utterance might be to show the addressee that you have heard the original utterance, or to in some other way manage the social interaction. We might, for example, repeat somebody’s words back to them to show that we are listening and thinking about what they have said. We can see this in action in example (4).

(4) Clare:           When he shouted at me it made me feel really upset.  
    Paula:           hmm, it made you feel upset.

The informational content of Paula's utterance in (4) will not be relevant to Clare in its own right. She already knows that she felt upset, so this information will not directly lead to cognitive effects for her. Paula is not communicating a particular attitude towards Clare's utterance, and so this is not an echoic attributive use. Rather, Paula is communicating that she has heard what Clare has said and is thinking about it, and it is this itself that leads to cognitive effects. It may, for example, strengthen Clare's assumption that Paula is an attentive listener and a good friend. It may lead Clare to derive the assumption that Paula is open to discussing the subject further and that she will be sympathetic. The relevance of such uses lies in the effects they have on social relationships and social interactions (Žegarac and Clark, 1999; Padilla Cruz, 2004; 2005), and as such, we can think of these as *phatic attributive uses*.

If, as I have suggested, retweeting is an attributive act, we might expect to find examples of retweets that are motivated by these same three ways of achieving relevance: informative, echoic, and phatic. In the next section I will draw on work by boyd et al. (2010) in which motivations for retweeting were explored via a survey of Twitter users. I will reanalyse these in terms of the types of attributive use that we have seen in this section, illustrating with examples from Twitter. We will see that each of the means of achieving relevance via attributive uses is attested, both in boyd et al.'s identified motivations and in examples from Twitter itself.

### **3.2 Self-Reported Motivations for Retweeting**

Boyd et al. (2010) conducted a survey collecting self-reported motivations for retweeting. They asked Twitter users the question in (5).

(5) What do you think are the different reasons for why people [retweet] something (boyd, Golder and Lotan, 2010:4).

The survey received 99 responses. Boyd et al. acknowledge that the sample is small and convenience-based, and that it is therefore likely to be biased. However, the responses still reveal what they describe as 'diverse motivations'

for retweeting. They group the responses into the ten categories given in (a) to (j) (list adapted from boyd, Golder and Lotan, 2010:6).

- (a) To save tweets for future personal access.
- (b) To amplify or spread tweets to new audiences.
- (c) To entertain or inform a specific audience, or as an act of curation.
- (d) To comment on someone's tweet by retweeting and adding new content, often to begin a conversation.
- (e) To make one's presence as a listener visible.
- (f) To publicly agree with someone.
- (g) To validate others' thoughts.
- (h) As an act of friendship, loyalty, or homage by drawing attention, sometimes via a retweet request.
- (i) To recognize or refer to less popular people or less visible content.
- (j) For self-gain, either to gain followers or reciprocity from more visible participants.

While the motivations covered by these categories are not claimed to be exhaustive, they do reveal at least some of the reasons why users click on the retweet button and choose to rebroadcast content to their followers on Twitter. I assume that the process of interpreting an act of retweeting includes forming a hypothesis about the intentions behind the user's decision to retweet. The motivations identified by boyd et al. offer us a starting point for what these intentions might be.

The motivation described in category (a) appears to be non-communicative. Rather the users have co-opted the retweet option to create an archive of tweets for future reference. At the time of boyd et al.'s survey in 2010, there was no specific means of marking a tweet for future reference available in Twitter. Retweeting and/or liking a tweet links the user's profile to the original tweet. This makes the content easier to find again at a later date. Users reported that they used the retweeting option for this function. A bookmarking feature was introduced in 2018 giving users an alternative way to do this (Shah, 2018). We might think of this use of retweeting as a form of note taking. The act of writing

something down as an aide memoire could be interpreted as a self-addressed utterance which carries with it the presumption that it will be relevant to the writer at some future point. On this analysis retweets that arise from motivation (a) are informationally relevant. The act of retweeting is driven by their content. The motivation behind such retweets will not, of course, be apparent to the users who see the retweet. They will still search for relevance as normal and they are entitled to form relevance-guided hypotheses about the intentions behind the act of retweeting.

The remaining categories involve a more straightforward communicative motivation. We can understand these motivations as lining up with the different means by which attributive utterances achieve relevance, as described in Section 2: (i) informative use, (ii) echoic use, and (iii) phatic use. Motivations for retweeting are, of course, complex. As we shall see in the discussion below, some acts of retweeting achieve relevance in more than one way. For example, users might take the opportunity to express their attitude towards a tweet while also wanting to share the content with a wider audience. Furthermore, the fact that they have chosen to do this publicly might also have phatic relevance.

### **3.3. Methodological Approach**

The aim in this paper is to bring the results from boyd et al.'s (2010) survey together with insights from relevance theory pragmatics to ask whether acts of rebroadcasting on Twitter can be understood in terms of attributive use. As discussed in Section 3.1, previous work on relevance theory has identified three ways in which attributive acts may achieve relevance. In the analysis that follows, I consider whether these align with the self-reported motivations for retweeting as identified by boyd et al. I then draw on examples from my own Twitter timeline and discuss them as illustrations of each category. I make no claims about the relative frequency of retweets from each category. Rather my aim is to provide examples of acts of retweeting which achieve relevance in different ways, and to show that the three categories of attributive use that we find in utterances, are also attested in acts of rebroadcasting. As discussed, boyd et al.'s survey is fairly small scale. It is, of course, possible that a different set of users might have described different or additional motivations for retweeting.

Relevance theory predicts, however, that in all cases we should be able to interpret all acts of rebroadcasting in terms of the speaker's intention to produce an optimally relevant stimulus.

The examples discussed are all taken from posts that were published and/or retweeted publicly on Twitter. These have been anonymised, except when they have been posted by public figures, such as politicians and journalists, or when they were posted on behalf of companies or organisations. The content of some tweets has been paraphrased to maintain anonymity where users were tweeting in a personal capacity.

## **4. Analysis of Retweets as Attributive Acts**

### **3.1 Informative attributive uses**

Informative attributive acts of rebroadcasting will be relevant if cognitive effects arise from the dissemination of the content of the tweet. Categories (b) ('To amplify or spread tweets to new audiences'), (c) ('To entertain or inform a specific audience, or as an act of curation'), and (i) ('To recognize or refer to less popular people or less visible content') describe cases where this is the motivation behind the act of rebroadcasting. By retweeting, the user intends to spread the propositional content of the original tweet to a wider audience. The three categories differ slightly in terms of how they frame this act. Description (b) is focused on spreading the content to new audiences and amplifying the content as much as possible. We see this use when a high-profile news story breaks. Consider the tweet in (6) which was posted by the BBC Breaking News Twitter account (@BBCBreaking) on April 21, 2016.

(6) The musician Prince has died at his Paisley Park estate aged 57, his publicist tells.

This tweet announcing the death of the singer Prince was retweeted by thousands of users. These users were, we assume, treating this as news that would be highly relevant to many people, and they were using the retweet function to spread this as widely as possible.

The motivation described in (c) focuses on retweeting as an act of curation. Twitter users with a following focused around a particular topic may retweet additional content that they think is likely to be relevant to that following. For example, the @gatewaywomen account focuses on supporting childless women, and on March 31, 2020 retweeted the tweet in (7), which was originally posted by the @ChildlessWeek account.

(7) There are many aspects to being childless; as there are to being a parent. Self isolation can be hard on many of us for numerous varied reasons. Please note these scenarios can apply equally to men #COVID19 #Selfisolation #workingfromhome #childless

The retweeted content has been shared as it is likely to be relevant to those already following the retweeting account.

### **3.2 Echoic Attributive Uses**

As an attributive act, we might expect to find instances of rebroadcasting where the relevance lies, not solely in the content of the tweet itself, but in the attitude that the retweeter conveys as part of their act of rebroadcasting. Categories (d) ('To comment on someone's tweet by retweeting and adding new content, often to begin a conversation'), (f) ('To publicly agree with someone'), and (g) ('To validate others' thoughts') from boyd et al's survey describe acts of retweeting driven by this motivation. In (d), the user describes retweeting so that they can comment on the original content, and categories (f) and (g) also focus on the communication of the retweeter's attitude. Of course, the information in these retweets may be relevant to some readers in its own right, but the relevance of the retweet lies, at least partly, in the communication of the retweeter's agreement or validation of the original message. Therefore, they are echoic. In echoic uses of language the attitude communicated towards the original utterance can be positive or negative, and it can be explicitly signalled or left tacit. We might therefore expect to see both positive and negative attitudes communicated by the attributive act of retweeting, and we might expect to see

cases where the attitude is left tacit alongside cases where the attitude or reaction is explicitly signalled.

When a user clicks the retweet icon on a tweet, they are given the option to add their own comment to the message. This then appears along with the original retweeted post in the feeds of their followers. Cases where users choose this option and include a comment offer perhaps the most obvious cases of echoic retweets. On March 4, 2016, the Voice of Researcher (@Reseach\_Voice) posted the message in (8) which also included a link to an associated article. This was then retweeted by IoPPN PostDocs account (@IoPPN-postdocs) with the comment in (9).

(8) 'The voices of #postdoc organizations are growing stronger...'

(9) Good!!

In this case, the retweeting account (@IoPPM\_postdocs) appears to be explicitly endorsing the content of the embedded tweet by adding the comment 'Good!!'. They have retweeted, not just to spread the content to a wider audience, but also to communicate their endorsement of that content.<sup>2</sup>

We also find cases where the option to add a comment has been used to communicate a negative attitude towards the embedded content. Following terrorist attacks in Brussels in March 2015, President of the United States of America Donald Trump (@realDonaldTrump) posted the tweet in (10).

(10) Do you all remember how beautiful and safe a place Brussels was. Not anymore, it is from a different world. U.S must be vigilant and smart.

This was retweeted by many users. One user added a comment, paraphrased in (11), when they retweeted Trump's original post.

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<sup>2</sup> As pointed out by an anonymous reviewer, it is, of course, possible that a comment of 'Good!!!' is intended ironically.

(11) The fool Donald Trump pretends he knows what places other than the United States are like.

This user is communicating his clearly dissociative attitude towards the original post.

However, just as a speaker can leave her attitude tacit when producing an attributive utterance, so a retweeter can choose to leave her attitude towards the retweeted content tacit, for the reader to infer. On March 19, 2016, the official Twitter account of Premier League football club Chelsea (@ChelseaFC) posted the tweet in (12).

(12) GOAL!!! 2-2 Fabregas!!! #CFCLive.

This was tweeted as part of the live Twitter commentary during a match, and is reporting that a goal has been scored. The original post was then retweeted almost 2000 times. Many of these retweets were posted without any further comment attached. At first it may seem reasonable to conclude that the users chose to retweet this post to spread the information to a wider audience. However, once we consider the context of the retweet and the affordances of Twitter, this motivation seems less central. First, we might assume that anyone who is interested in the football match would be following the commentary themselves. They would see the goal announcement by following the original feed or the #CFCLive hashtag. In fact, a retweet (without comment) only appears in the timelines of people who do not follow the original account, so anyone actively following the match is likely to have no need of the retweet. The act of retweeting is only likely to spread the tweet to people who have shown no active interest in following the event. Furthermore, the information in the tweet is time sensitive. It is only relevant at that point in the game, and there is no guarantee that the score will remain as it is. Anyone who is not following but who might find the final score relevant would have to check elsewhere anyway.

The key to understanding what motivated nearly 2000 people to retweet this information lies, I suggest, in accepting that some attributive acts achieve

relevance by communicating an attitude, and that this attitude is not always explicitly communicated. The retweeters of the post in (12) have rebroadcast the content to communicate their reaction, presumably positive in most cases, to the information in the embedded tweet. Thus these retweets are echoic attributive uses.

It is notable that the results of boyd et al's survey do not include any explicit reports of users retweeting for the purpose of dissociating themselves from the original tweet. While such uses may be covered by category (d) ('To comment on someone's tweet by retweeting and adding new content, often to begin a conversation'), retweeting seems to be strongly associated with endorsement. However, attributing an attitude to the retweeter is an inferential process. The audience will test interpretations in order of accessibility and will settle on the first interpretation that satisfies their expectations of optimal relevance. In many cases, the first interpretation likely to be tested will be that of endorsement. After all, by retweeting content, a user is rebroadcasting it to their audience from their account, and a highly accessible hypothesis to test is that they do so because they agree and want to be associated with that content in some way. Metaxas et al. (2014) consider a disclaimer that some users put in their profile summary. This disclaimer states that 'retweets are not endorsements'. As they discuss, the very fact that some users feel that they need to explicitly state this 'is an implicit admission...[that] for most people retweeting *is* endorsement'<sup>3</sup>. Overall, they conclude that 'retweeting indicates, not only interest in a message, but also trust in the message and the originator, and agreement with the message content' (Metaxas *et al.*, 2014:4).

However, we do find cases where content is retweeted without comment but where the relevant interpretation is that the retweeter has a negative attitude towards the original post. One such case occurred when journalist Owen Jones (@OwenJones84) received an insulting reply to one of his tweets. The reply tagged him using his Twitter handle and called him an 'idiot'. Jones retweeted

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<sup>3</sup> They found that most users who include this disclaimer are journalists, reporters, and media producers, along with some politicians.

the insulting reply, causing it to appear in the timeline of his followers. How does this act of rebroadcasting achieve relevance? How are readers to interpret Jones' act of showing in this discourse context. Given that the retweeted content is openly insulting him, it seems unlikely that Jones is endorsing the sentiments in the reply. If we start from the assumption that Jones does not think of himself as an idiot, it is hard to find a context in which the insulting tweet would be taken as sufficient evidence to change his mind. Furthermore, we would have to infer that Jones also intended his followers to accept the same assumption. Given highly accessible assumptions about the type of arguments that persuade people to change their opinions of themselves, this seems unlikely. Furthermore, anyone familiar with Twitter is likely to be aware that arguments and conflicts can and do arise very quickly and easily. As Widyanto and Griffiths (2011:15) explain, 'the internet provides anonymity, which removes the threat of confrontation, rejection and other consequences of behaviour'. As Tagg et al. (2017:46) explain, 'affordances such as the possibility of anonymity, the physical distance between interlocutors, and a relative lack of social cues may...encourage repressive and confrontational behaviour'. In this discourse context, a much more accessible interpretation is that Jones wants to bring this tweet to the attention of a wider audience and communicate his dissociative attitude to the reply and to the replier. He could, of course, have included an overt indication of his attitude by including a comment. However, perhaps in this instance showing without saying was a more effective means of communicating his intended meaning. It reveals that he feels confident that his followers will share his dissociative attitude, and it allows him to avoid overtly engaging with the content of the insulting tweet.

### **3.3 Phatic Attributive Uses**

Boyd et al.'s study suggests that some retweets may be motivated by the social relevance of the act of retweeting. In (e), users describe retweeting as a way to 'make one's presence as a listener visible'. As discussed in Section 2, the non-face-to-face, asynchronous nature of Twitter means the tweeter is writing for an imagined audience. A Twitter user will not normally be aware of who has seen a

particular tweet.<sup>4</sup> Retweeting, however, triggers a notification to the original poster, and is also recorded on the retweet count below the original post. A user can easily see who has retweeted their content. The social motivation for retweeting is also captured in category (h) ('As an act of friendship, loyalty, or homage by drawing attention, sometimes via a retweet request'). Finally, category (d), while mostly focused on communication of an attitude, also mentions that retweeting might be used 'to begin a conversation'. In these cases, the user rebroadcasts the content to a wider audience, and may also implicitly communicate approval of the original content. However, at least some of the cognitive effects that arise from the act of retweeting relate to the social relationship between the retweeter and the original poster. The act of retweeting may lead those who see it to update their assumptions about this relationship. Retweeting can, for example, be a way of signalling affiliation and association. On March 2, 2016, the day after an important match, the official Chelsea Football Club account (@ChelseaFC) tweeted a photograph of their men's team captain, along with the caption in (13).

(13) Good morning!

The informational content of this post is minimal. It is a greeting from the club account to the followers of that account. It is therefore perhaps hard to see what relevant effects could follow from the spreading of this information by a third party. The act of wishing others 'good morning' is also fairly unremarkable, and it is difficult to see how communication of the retweeter's attitude towards this specific message could achieve relevance on its own. However, over 500 people quickly retweeted the post. They did so, it seems, for phatic reasons. They are, as boyd et al. describe, showing that they have seen the message, and wish to be associated with the account. The relevance of their act of rebroadcasting lies in the affinity that the retweeter is claiming with the post and with the account behind the post. Furthermore, to interpret both the original tweet and the act of retweeting, a viewer must access assumptions about why the 2<sup>nd</sup> of March might

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<sup>4</sup> Users can view 'Tweet activity' for each tweet to see how many people have seen the tweet (impressions) and how many have engaged with it in some way. However, this only provides numbers and no details of who has seen or engaged with the content.

be considered a particularly good morning. Accessing shared assumptions helps create what Zappavigna (2012; 2018) describes as ‘ambient affiliation’. The retweeter is communicating that she knows why it is a good morning, and by doing so she aligns herself with others who also share this assumption. Zappavigna (2018:133) describes social media users as participating in ‘shared practices of aligning and de-aligning with particular stances and perspectives’. In relevance theory terms, we can understand this particular act of retweeting as achieving relevance by making a wide range of weak implicatures accessible to the audience. These implicatures are likely to relate to the retweeter’s interests, affiliations, and loyalties.

As examples, (12) and (13) illustrate, there may be an overlap in some cases between echoic uses and phatic uses. A user might communicate her (positive) attitude towards an original message while simultaneously signalling her affiliation with the message and with the original poster. The key claim here is that in examples such as (13) at least part of the relevance lies in this communication of social affiliation.

### **3.4 Perlocutionary Acts**

So far I have discussed motivations (a) to (h). In the case of the final two categories, the users have described the decision to retweet content in terms of the perlocutionary effects that may follow from the act. Perlocutionary effects are the effects of the act on the participants involved (Searle, 1969). Category (i) captures retweets that are motivated by the urge ‘to recognise or refer to less popular people or less visible content’. On the surface, this category is about disseminating the information in the tweet more widely. However, in reporting her motivation in this case, the retweeter has focused on her intention that, by sharing the information, the value of the content and the contribution of the original tweet and its author should be more widely recognised and appreciated. Category (j) (‘For self-gain, either to gain followers or reciprocity from more visible participants’) also describes the act of retweeting in terms of the perlocutionary effects that the retweeter intends to produce. In this case, the retweeter is hoping that retweeting will lead to her gaining followers. Finally,

category (c), while mostly focused on informative attributive motives, also notes that retweets may be intended 'to entertain' a specific audience. Again, this is perlocutionary act which follows from the wider sharing of the information in the original tweet. As these perlocutionary examples illustrate, motivations for retweeting are, of course, complex. Some acts of retweeting achieve relevance in more than one way. For example, users might take the opportunity to express their attitude towards a tweet while also wanting to share the content with a wider audience. If that attitude is positive it may signal loyalty or friendship. If it is negative, it may be designed to start a conversation or even an argument. The relevance-theoretic notion of attributive use and the acknowledgment that attributive acts of communication may achieve relevance in different and overlapping ways provides us with a framework for understanding the pragmatic processes that lie behind the acts of retweeting described by boyd et al.'s participants.

## **5. Conclusions**

In this paper I have argued that retweets on Twitter (and other similar acts of rebroadcasting of content on social media) can be understood as attributive acts. Retweeting is an ostensive act of communication and as such it raises expectations of relevance. As with attributive uses of language, the rebroadcasting of content can achieve relevance in various ways. The informational content of the material might be relevant in its own right, or the relevance might lie in the attitude of the retweeter. Finally, the relevance of the act of retweeting might lie in its social significance, making the retweeter's presence as a listener visible and/or signalling social affiliation. The motivations identified by boyd et al. (2010) can be understood in terms of these three means of achieving relevance. Any one act of rebroadcasting may achieve relevance in one or more of these ways, and I have discussed examples to illustrate each of the routes to relevance associated with attributive communicative acts.

As discussed, boyd et al.'s survey is fairly small scale and only gives us a snapshot of how users self-report their motivations for retweeting. It is possible that further motivations exist, and it is also possible that behaviours will change

and develop as digital media change. The analysis presented here does not claim to provide any indication of how frequently the different categories of use occur across social media sites. The examples discussed show that retweeting can achieve relevance in these different ways. However, more work must be done to establish how often communicators make use of these different options and in which discourse contexts they tend to occur.

Intentions of communicators lie at the core of pragmatics. The interpretation of ostensive communicative acts necessarily involves making inferences about those intentions. Boyd et al.'s survey provides us with insights into how users understand their own acts of retweeting. In this paper I have argued that these motivations align with previously identified categories of attributive use. However, to strengthen this analysis, further work should focus explicitly on how readers interpret these acts. Are acts of rebroadcasting ever misunderstood, and if so, why? Do interpretations of retweets extend beyond the categories identified here, and if so, how can we understand them in relevance-theoretic terms? Finally, we might also consider other non-verbal means by which users interact and react to third party content, including 'favouriting' or 'liking'. Relevance theory is a framework for understanding cognition and communication. As such it is ideally placed as an analytical tool for understanding the new forms of communication and interaction that have emerged with the development of digitally mediated communication. Bringing together work on how users behave online with an established pragmatic framework allows us to test the scope of the framework while also providing insights into digitally mediated communicative behaviours.

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