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**WhatsApp Statuses as Communicative Acts: Combining Cognitive Grammar and Relevance Theory**

**Abstract**

The article attempts to provide a description of WhatsApp statuses as phatic communicative acts. Based on data collected via a survey questionnaire on 12 WhatsApp statuses, the paper demonstrates WhatsApp users' responses and interpretations of these statuses as public phatic stimuli. The study combines Lagnacker's cognitive grammar with Sperber and Wilson's cognitive and communicative principle of relevance to these stimuli, since the cognitive and communicative environments are inseparable in language usage. It shows that different distinct phatic communicative acts correspond to linguistic structures that build WhatsApp communication perspectives. A perspective is an integral part of cognition and communication which is objectified by language as seen from the perspective of a communication participant. WhatsApp users form abstract mental construals of WhatsApp statuses which trigger cognitive and communicative environments. These construals can be viewed in terms of profile/base distinction. The study also characterizes WhatsApp communication environment into three construals overlapping with four communicative environments; permitted, forbidden, fuzzy and restricted environments.

*Keywords:* Cognitive linguistics, Pragmatics, Internet-mediated communication, Relevance Theory, Construal

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### حالات الواتساب كأفعال تواصلية: الجمع بين النحو المعرفي ونظرية الصلة

#### مستخلص الدراسة

المؤلف: بهاء الدين ابوالحسن حسن  
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يستعرض البحث وصف لأوضاع تطبيق الواتساب على أنها أفعال ذات وظيفة اتصالية. واستناداً إلى البيانات التي تم جمعها عبر استبيان استطلاع 12 حالة من حالات الواتساب ، يوضح البحث استجابات مستخدمي الواتساب وتفسيراتهم لهذه الحالات كمحفزات اتصالية عامة. وتجمع الدراسة بين قواعد Lagnacker المعرفية ومبدأ Sperber و Wilson الإدراكي والتواصلية ذي الصلة بهذه المحفزات، ونظراً لأن البيانات المعرفية والتواصلية لا تنفصل في استخدام اللغة ، فإن أعمال التواصل المختلفة تتوافق مع الهياكل اللغوية التي تبني وجهات نظر اتصال الواتساب. والمنظور المعرفي هو جزء لا يتجزأ من الإدراك والتواصل الذي يتم تجسيده بالوسائل اللغوية من وجهة نظر المشارك في الاتصال. ويشكل مستخدمو الواتساب قيوداً عقلية مجردة لحالات الواتساب التي تؤدي إلى بيانات معرفية وتواصلية. كما تلخص الدراسة بيئة الاتصالات في الواتساب في ثلاثة استنتاجات تتداخل مع أربع بيانات اتصالية ؛ البيئة المسموح بها والمحظورة والغامضة والمقيدة.

الكلمات الرئيسية: اللغويات المعرفية، التداولية، التواصل بواسطة الإنترنت، نظرية

الصلة

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## WhatsApp Statuses as Communicative Acts: Combining Cognitive Grammar and Relevance Theory

### 1. Introduction

Cognitive linguistics has been applied to media discourses and internet-mediated communication in particular. This article combines both cognitive grammar and relevance theory because our understanding and use of language is influenced by both the context in which we use it and our personal experiences. Cognitive environment refers to the mental processes we use to understand and produce language. This includes our knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, and syntax, as well as our ability to process information and make meaning from it. Communicative environment, on the other hand, relates to the social and situational context in which language is used. This includes factors such as the speaker's audience, the purpose of the communication, and the cultural norms that influence language use. When we use language, we draw on both our cognitive and communicative environments to select appropriate words and phrases, understand the meaning of what is being said, and convey our intended message.

The internet is a primary source of phatic communication. Yus (2011) discusses 'the so-called phatic internet' from the cognitive pragmatic point of view. Phatic communication has a social function, rather than an informative one. Zegarac and Clark (1999) suggest applying the term 'phatic' to interpretations. They are defined as "those arising from an intention to create and maintain ties and social bonds, to exhibit desire of sociability towards others, rather than an intention to transfer substantive information" (Yus 2011:161). This article focuses on how communication participants form perspectives which influence their interpretations and choices when they communicate via WhatsApp. The study claims that WhatsApp statuses can be viewed as public phatic stimuli and users create construals as cognitive processes which overlap with different communicative environments. It also argues

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that a public phatic stimulus (a linguistic expression) is a communicative act addressed to public and not to a certain individual used for the purpose of social interaction, rather than to convey information or ask questions.

On receiving public phatic stimuli, as WhatsApp users' statuses initiate them, users are confused about whether they should respond or not and how to respond. This study investigates the different perspectives, cognitive and communicative environments among WhatsApp users. In normal user-to-user interactions interlocutors communicate effectively, i.e. an addresser user sends a message to an addressee user who, in turn, responds with a reply. However, a confusing situation occurs when the stimulus is a status that is public. The result is a phenomenon of an indeterminate addressee, i.e. the addressee is not definitely determined or not known in advance. The public stimulus in WhatsApp communication does not lead to a definite relative interpretation; vagueness arises from the uncertainty of responses. Therefore, the vagueness of WhatsApp users' statuses might lead to communication failure. In his explanation of the inferential model which adds inferences to the decoding stage of the message, Wilson (1994: 47) summarizes the reason for misunderstanding in utterance interpretation, either in physical settings or on the internet, as follows:

Because of mismatches in memory and perceptual systems, the hearer may overlook a hypothesis that the speaker thought would be highly salient, or notice a hypothesis that the speaker had overlooked. Misunderstandings occur. The aim of a theory of communication is to identify the principles underlying the hearer's (fallible) choices.

Sperber and Wilson also (1987: 699) explain that people have different representations of the

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world which they call cognitive environments. From the cognitive point of view, communicative functions shape language forms. This fact also goes back to Langacker(1987, 1991). According to Langacker (1991), language proficiency is usage-based: speakers are familiar with symbolic units because they make abstractions from usage occurrences.

In this paper, I attempt to envisage how WhatsApp users make abstractions over WhatsApp statuses. In context of users' dilemma, i.e. the problem of how to respond to WhatsApp statuses, I embark upon studying the following questions:

- 1) How can grammatical structures in WhatsApp statuses be analyzed as schematic units that help the users take perspectives on the statuses?
- 2) How can the communicative principle of relevance help analyze WhatsApp users' interpretations and responses to WhatsApp statuses as public phatic stimuli?
- 3) What are the different communicative environments which trigger addressee users' responses to WhatsApp statuses?

The following sections review relevant previous and theoretical works on the cognitive grammar concept of construal and cognitive environment in phatic communication. The methods used in the study are explained in the next section. The analysis section outlines the possible construals and interpretations in phatic communication. Finally the conclusion and implications section addresses how the study may shed light on cognitive and communicative environments in WhatsApp to fill a gap in cognitive linguistics and relevance theory.

## **2. Literature Review**

Many studies stressed the linguistic aspects of WhatsApp statuses. One influential study on WhatsApp status updates was carried out by Sanchez-Moya & Cruz-Moya (2015). The goal of the study is to categorize the most common pragmatic uses of a corpus of WhatsApp

messages by examining the multi-modality those status updates present. A sample of 400 WhatsApp statuses for individuals of various ages was used in the study. The analysis revealed a five-mark taxonomy for recurring, self-generated, and auto-generated status realizations, with the self-generated forms mostly being wordy, mixed, rigidly iconic, and void. Al-Khawaldeh et al. (2016) conducted a research study on WhatsApp status updates as well. Discursive and thematic assessments of WhatsApp statuses were the main focus of the study. They intended to establish gender differences as well as the main characteristics and goals of the alerts. Jordan WhatsApp users tested a corpus of 300 statuses in order to achieve these objectives. From a sociolinguistic perspective, Al-Smadi (2017) investigated the differences in customer ages and genders to study the WhatsApp status. The study used a qualitative approach to assess 400 participant statuses from two age groups: those under 30 and those beyond 30. The results showed a wide range of age and gender differences. The data revealed that male users most frequently had social status, while female users were more likely to have religious status. Assagaf (2019) also discussed two features of WhatsApp status notifications; namely, the most common discursive realizations and the major pragmatic themes. He analyzed a sample of 846 status notifications of WhatsApp users' profiles.

### 3. Theoretical Background

Cognitive linguistics is an approach to language analysis that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s in the works of George Lakoff, Ron Langacker, and Len Talmy. Ibáñez and Peña Cervel (2005) provide an insightful summary of the interdisciplinary nature of cognitive linguistics. In cognitive linguistics, we use notions such as 'construal', 'profile/base distinction', 'perspective', 'subjectivity', or 'point of view' and 'objectivity'. The cover term used for different ways of perceiving a particular situation is 'construal'. The concept 'construal' is

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“our ability to conceive and portray the same situation in alternative ways” (Langacker 2017: 1). Langacker argues that every lexical and grammatical component incorporates, as a basic aspect of its meaning, a particular way of construing the conceptual content evoked. It is the ability to take perspective on the world. It is incorporated in the meaning of all linguistic expressions, since languages provide different ways for categorizing situations, their participants and features. Categorization is a fundamental cognitive skill allowing you to understand the world.

A speaker who accurately observes the spatial distribution of certain stars can describe them in many distinct fashions: as a constellation, as a cluster of stars, as specks of light in the sky, etc. Such expressions are semantically distinct; they reflect the speaker’s alternate construals of the scene, each compatible with its objectively given properties. (Langacker 1991a: 61)

The fact that a particular situation can be construed in alternate ways can be justified because languages provide means for different kinds of construal. Langacker proposed several classification schemes for construal phenomena. One of these construal operations recognized as linguistically highly relevant is the profile-base distinction. All expressions are characterized semantically by the imposition of a profile on a base. In other words, linguistic expressions evoke a frame (base) and highlight a part of that frame (profile). Profile-based distinctions also exist in the domain of communication. The communicative environment constitutes the base of WhatsApp statuses which have different profiles. The different lexical expressions in the different WhatsApp statuses may profile communicative environments. For example, the predicate constructions that are construed as something which is affirmed or denied concerning an argument of a proposition focus on the part of a sentence or clause

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containing a verb and stating something about the subject (e.g. ‘using WhatsApp’ or ‘being busy’ or any verb phrases denoting what the WhatsApp user is doing). Grammatical constructions may restrict the interpretation of a situation by imposing a particular kind of profile. For example, the spatial prepositional phrase constructions (preposition + Noun) can be said to impose a particular profile on the interpretation of the clause (e.g. ‘at work’ or ‘at the gym’ or any phrases denoting the place where the WhatsApp user is). Another notion of grammatical construal involving different levels of perspectives is provided by subjectivity and objectivity. A construal can be either subjective or objective. A subjective construal is a “manner of viewing [...] inhering in the subject rather than the object of conceptualization” (Langacker 2008: 537); whereas the opposite is true for an objective construal. Verhagen (2007: 877) argues that Langacker uses the word ‘subjective’ as “a matter of vantage point”, rather than a description of a speaker’s attitude.

As Ibáñez and Peña Cervel (2005) show the interdisciplinary nature of cognitive linguistics, we correlate cognitive grammar with relevance theory. The word ‘cognitive’ is the key common area between the two disciplines. The two distinct disciplines are interrelated as semantics and pragmatics complement each other. Sperber and Wilson (1998/1995) focus on the cognitive environment among interlocutors. They propose two types of intention, the informative intention and the communicative intention. They argue that all assumptions manifest to an individual constitute her/his cognitive environment. They deny Grice’s first Quality maxim, that speakers are expected to say something literally true. According to Sperber and Wilson (2002), speakers are expected to communicate something true, because an utterance cannot be relevant without achieving some true cognitive effects. According to Sperber and Wilson (1986:40), an interlocutor’s cognitive environment exhibits degrees of manifestation when s/he identifies a stimulus. They also introduce the recursive notion of ‘mutually manifest’ to describe information which is manifest within the shared



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cognitive environment of different individuals. The set of assumptions that are manifest to two individuals is their shared cognitive environment. In this way, the stimulus is said to have an ostensive quality. The idea of ostension is important to lead the hearer to infer the intended meaning and interpret the communicative act as providing relevant information. The act of ostension helps the addressee's attention to access some set of assumptions which constitute the initial context in which the stimulus is processed. Suppose the interpretation of the stimulus in the initial context is not sufficient to give proper effects. In that case, the context is enlarged to include new assumptions, until an adequate interpretation is satisfactory to the addressee. Therefore, a relevance-oriented analysis would primarily focus on 'the addressee user', i.e. the receiver of information whose task of searching for relevance has to be compensated for by realizing cognitive effects.

Furthermore, what is manifest to the addressee may involve information provided by the environment or communicated by the speaker to a lesser or greater degree. The highly manifest assumptions reflect high communication effect, while weakly manifest assumptions reflect low communication effects. Sperber and Wilson's model is based on the role of the addressee who infers the speaker's informative and communicative intentions. The communicative principle of relevance governs the inferential process of interpreting a stimulus (Sperber and Wilson 1995: 260-270). Therefore, in face-to-face interactions relevance is based on ostensive-inferential communication. The problem lies in achieving relevant effort and effect because ostension is not always applicable; i.e. assumptions are not made manifest to the addressee user in all situations; assumptions may be manifest without being mutually manifest. In Sperber and Wilson's model, context plays a major role. It is a number of information sources including the addressee's encyclopedic knowledge, physical context and interpersonal relations. They argue that "since variations in context may increase or decrease the relevance of the proposition that is being processed, the goal of reaching an

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optimal level of relevance may constrain the choice of context” (Sperber and Wilson 1986: 593).

Another key principle in relevance theory is the dichotomy of effect/effort which denotes maximizing the effect of interpreting a stimulus at a low processing effort. When people communicate, they make manifest a number of assumptions: “an assumption is relevant in a context if and only if it has some contextual effect in that context” (Sperber and Wilson 1986: 22). According to Sperber and Wilson (1995: 265–266), there are two conditions for relevance to occur:

Condition a.

“An assumption is relevant to an individual to the extent that the positive cognitive effects achieved when it is optimally processed are large.”

Condition b.

“An assumption is relevant to an individual to the extent that the effort required to achieve these positive cognitive effects is small.”

Sperber and Wilson (1986/1995) divided the principle of relevance into cognitive and communicative principles. The cognitive principle of relevance is based on connecting new information (stimulus) and old information. The search for relevance of the stimuli is an instinct in human beings. Yus (2011) proves that the cognitive principle of relevance also applies to internet-mediated communication. He coined the term ‘cyberpragmatics’ to investigate all cognitive processes and interpretations on the internet (see Yus 2001a, 2001b).

#### **4. Data and Methodology**

Data consist of WhatsApp users’ interpretations of and responses towards WhatsApp statuses

which were collected via a survey questionnaire on the 12 default WhatsApp statuses as public communicative acts (See Appendix I). The statuses which have been analyzed in this study include WhatsApp 12 default statuses: “Hey there! I am using WhatsApp”, “Available”, “Busy”, “At school”, “At the movies”, “At work”, “Battery about to die”, “I can’t talk. Only WhatsApp”, “In a meeting”, “At the gym”, “sleeping” and “urgent calls only”. I used Google forms to disseminate the questionnaire. The questionnaire is available via the link <https://forms.gle/jE26vfpYXSBEEdPoW9>. 1217 WhatsApp users responded to the questionnaire. Survey Questionnaires are an elicitation technique that is used to give participants several plausible pragmatic options or interpretations of utterances in given situations (Kasper 1999, Kasper and Roever 2005). The design of the questionnaire is based on multiple choices. Age and gender are incorporated in the questionnaire to guarantee heterogeneous analysis. The questionnaire allows eliciting information on comprehension and meta-pragmatic judgments. It is constructed as a scaled response instrument (divided into five scales) which has been validated by an expert panel. The statistical analysis is descriptive; it is a summary that describes features of a collection of data. These 12 stimuli have a function in common; i.e. phatic communication; they are similar in the fact that the addresser user sends a public stimulus and the addressee user is not determinate. The 12 statuses are default statuses offered by WhatsApp application. This study is a descriptive research that provides a general description of a phenomenon in WhatsApp. It also utilizes a discourse analytic approach to analyze the interpretations of certain potential communicative acts in WhatsApp. The following section analyzes the different cases of public stimuli in WhatsApp.

## 5. Analysis

In this section we have two dimensions; the categorization of status construals and the categorization of communicative environments in WhatsApp. The main function of

WhatsApp statuses is to let users know whether it is the right time to communicate or whether users can expect any communication. WhatsApp users can conceive and portray WhatsApp communication in alternative ways. Users directly experience the here-and-now of the situation. They also experience their point of view. On contacting other users, they have to share the cognitive environment of other users. To do so, they need to create embodied construals of WhatsApp statuses meanings as part of their imaginative understanding of linguistic expressions used in these statuses. They continually simulate static schemas and categorizations in their understanding of these statuses. In this study we are attempting to present the different abstract mental construals of WhatsApp statuses and the categorization of their cognitive and communicative environments. As WhatsApp communication is virtual, construals would become more abstract, and as the level of abstraction increases, so too would the cognitive environment users share. Moving from a concrete representation of WhatsApp application to a more abstract representation involves retaining central features and omitting features that are deemed incidental by the very act of abstraction. For example, by moving from representing an object as “software” to representing it as “a communication channel,” we omit information about the users’ statuses. An abstract representation is selected according to its relevance to our goal. Thus, if one’s goal is to contact another user, then “a WhatsApp status” is relevant, but another is not.

Given this goal, the cognitive environment of the other user could be shared via a process of abstraction. Relevant shared details consistent with the chosen abstract representation lead to a shared cognitive and communicative environment. Because abstract representations necessarily impose one of many alternative interpretations, and because relevant details are shared, these representations tend to be simpler, less ambiguous, more coherent, and more schematic, it is essential to note that construals often convey additional information about the value of the stimulus (i.e. a status) and its relations to other stimuli. In

this section we are going to analyze the 12 statuses into 3 abstract mental construals. The process of categorization is based on ‘profile/base distinction’. The study argues that there are three grammatical constructions; predicate constructions referring to the speaker, prepositional phrase construction and predicate construction referring to the third party. Grammatical constructions may restrict the interpretation of a situation by imposing a particular kind of profile.

The first construal is formed as the base is the communicative situation and the profile is construed as something affirmed or denied concerning an argument of a proposition. It focuses on the part of a sentence or clause containing a verb and stating something about the subject. The following grammatical constructions contain the predicate construction which refers to the speaker. What the user is doing is highlighted as a profile. Examples can be seen in the following statuses in Table 1:

**Table 1** Statuses in which the subject profile is highlighted

<b>Expression used in WhatsApp status</b>	<b>Grammatical construction</b>	<b>profile</b>
am using WhatsApp	a predicate consisting of V+NP	Highlight on what the user is doing
Available	a predicate consisting of an elliptical verb to be + Adj	Highlight on what the user is doing
Busy	a predicate consisting of an elliptical verb to be + Adj	Highlight on what the user is doing
can't talk. Only WhatsApp	a predicate consisting of intrans V and enriched by an elliptical predicate consisting of NP	Highlight on what the user is doing
sleeping	a predicate consisting of intrans V	Highlight on what the user is doing
urgent calls only	an elliptical predicate consisting of NP	Highlight on what the user is doing

To put it differently, the first construal focuses on the state of WhatsApp user or what s/he is doing at the time of communication.

The second construal focuses on where WhatsApp users exist at the time of communication. For example, the spatial prepositional phrase constructions (preposition + Noun) can be said to impose a particular profile on the interpretation of the clause (e.g. ‘at work’ or ‘at the gym’ or any phrases denoting the place where the WhatsApp user is) as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2 Statuses in which the place profile is highlighted**

Expression used in WhatsApp status	Grammatical construction	profile
At school	preposition + Noun	Highlight on the place requirements
At the movies	preposition + Noun	Highlight on the place requirements
At work	preposition + Noun	Highlight on the place requirements
In a meeting	preposition + Noun	Highlight on the place requirements
At the gym	preposition + Noun	Highlight on the place requirements

Another notion of grammatical construal involving different levels of perspectives is provided by subjectivity and objectivity. In the previous construals the speaker is embedded in the very same situation she/he is to construe and construes it as it is perceivable to her/him. Thus, these can be described as subjective construals. However, when the speaker is not embedded in the situation, it can be described as objective construal as in Table 3.

**Table 3 Statuses in which objectivity is highlighted**

Expression used in WhatsApp status	Grammatical construction	profile
Battery about to die	Predicate stating something about a third party	Highlight on objectivity

In this construal the focus is on a third party, i.e. the battery of the mobile. Note that the speaker is implicitly encoded in this status. It means that “my battery is about to die”. Thus, the subject and the object are maximally contrasted — ‘objective construal’. In objective

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construal, the user is located outside the situation she/he is to construe and construes it as it is perceivable to her/him. The speaker, who construes the situation, is detached from the situation she/he is to construe and her stance here is characterizable as ‘subject-object contrast’. All these construals are formed in WhatsApp users and they influence the cognitive and communicative environment.

Concerning the cognitive and communicative environment, statuses have been classified into four categories according to communicative environments correlated with statuses. On the one hand, based on the questionnaire, a high percentage of responses reflects an understanding of the communicative environment. This can be seen in permitted, forbidden and restricted environments. On the other hand, a low percentage of responses reflects that the communicative environment is shared among those users. In this section, I will explore the different categories of the communicative environment of each WhatsApp status. The first category is the permitted communicative environment. The first status in this category is “Hey there! I am using WhatsApp”. Questionnaire results show that 88.1 % of the users understand that the user who utilizes this status makes manifest the assumption that s/he is active on WhatsApp and ready to communicate. This stimulus has an ostensive quality; it is mutually manifest within the shared cognitive environment of WhatsApp users. Thus, the cognitive principle of relevance can be achieved within this status. In terms of intention, questionnaire results indicate that 87.8 % of WhatsApp users may respond positively to the status and they may communicate with the user who posts this status because the utterance gives the implicature that one can communicate with her/him. Thus, the communicative principle can be achieved within this status. Therefore, the cognitive effect and the mental effort are balanced; relevance is maximized in this phatic communicative act. Similarly, the second status is “Available”. Questionnaire results show that 85.6 % of the users understand that the user who uses this status manifests the assumption that s/he is available on



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WhatsApp. The stimulus also has an ostensive quality; the degree of manifestness in this stimulus is higher than the previous status. The implicature is that the user is ready to communicate. Thus, the cognitive principle of relevance can be achieved. In terms of intention, questionnaire results indicate that 91.1 % of the users may respond to the status as the utterance implies that one can communicate with the user who posts this status. The communicative principle can be achieved within this status. It is also clear that relevance is maximized in the status as there is a balance between the cognitive effect and the mental effort to recognize the intention of the user who posts this status.

The second category of the communicative environment is the forbidden one. An example of such an environment can be seen in the status “Busy”. According to the questionnaire results, 88.6 % of the users understand that the user who uses this status manifests the assumption that s/he is busy and not ready to communicate. This stimulus also has an ostensive quality; it is mutually manifest within the shared cognitive environment of WhatsApp users. Thus, the cognitive principle of relevance can be achieved. In terms of intention, questionnaire results indicate that 87.8 % of the users disagree with the user who utilizes this status because the utterance implies that one cannot communicate with her/him. Thus, the communicative principle cannot be achieved within this status. In terms of effect/effort balance, it is clear that relevance is maximized as it is not allowed for anyone to communicate until s/he gets out of the busy status. Another example is the status “At school”. As shown in the questionnaire results, 87.3 % of the users understand that the user who uses this status manifests the assumption that s/he is at school and not ready to communicate. It implies that communication is not possible at that time. The stimulus here has also an ostensive quality, and it is mutually manifest within the shared cognitive environment of WhatsApp users. Therefore, the cognitive principle of relevance can be achieved. In terms of intention, questionnaire results indicate that 86.2 % of the users may not communicate with

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those users who utilize this status because the utterance implies that one cannot communicate with them. Thus, the communicative principle cannot be achieved within this status. Regarding effect/effort balance, relevance is maximized within this status.

Another example of a forbidden communicative environment is the status “At work”. Questionnaire results point out that 85.6 % of the users understand that the user who uses this status manifests the assumption that s/he is at work and not ready to communicate. It implies that communication is not possible. It is mutually manifest within the shared cognitive environment of WhatsApp users. Thus, the cognitive principle of relevance can be achieved. In terms of intention, questionnaire results indicate that 88.9 % of the users disagree to communicate with the user whose status is “At work” because the utterance gives the implicature that one cannot communicate with her/him. Thus, the communicative principle cannot be achieved; it is clear that relevance is maximized because WhatsApp users who respond to the questionnaire may not communicate with the user until s/he changes her/his status. Another status is “In a meeting”. It implies that communication is not possible. This status is mutually manifest within the shared cognitive environment of WhatsApp users. Questionnaire results show that 87.5 % of the users understand that the user who uses this status makes manifest the assumption that s/he is in a meeting and not ready to communicate. Thus, the cognitive principle of relevance can be achieved. In terms of intention, questionnaire results indicate that 84.8 % of the users disagree to communicate with the user of this status because the utterance implies that one is not allowed to communicate with her/him at that time. Thus, the communicative principle cannot be achieved. In terms of effect/effort balance, it is clear that the users who respond to the questionnaire may not communicate with the user who posts this status. Therefore, relevance is maximized within this communicative act. Another example is the status “Sleeping”. It means that the user is sleeping. The stimulus here has also an ostensive quality. It is mutually manifest within the

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shared cognitive environment of WhatsApp users. Questionnaire results show that 88.8 % of the users understand that the user who utilizes this status makes manifest the assumption that s/he is sleeping and not ready to communicate. Thus, the cognitive principle of relevance can be achieved. In terms of intention, questionnaire results show that the questionnaire respondents infer the user's informative intention. Though the communicative principle cannot be achieved in these statuses, relevance is maximized as the forbidden communication environment is clear to WhatsApp users.

The third category of communicative environment is the fuzzy one. An example of such an environment is the status "At the movies". Questionnaire results show that 83% of the users understand that the user who uses this status makes manifest the assumption that s/he is at the movies and not ready to communicate. The implicature that communication is not possible at that time is not clear. This status is not mutually manifest within the shared cognitive environment of WhatsApp users. Thus, the cognitive principle of relevance cannot be achieved. In terms of intention, questionnaire results indicate that 48.1 % of the users may not communicate with the user whose status is "At the movies" because the utterance does not imply that one cannot communicate with her/him. Thus, the communicative principle cannot be achieved within this status. In terms of effect/effort balance, relevance is not maximized within this status. Another example is the status "At the gym". The implicature that communication is not possible is not clear. The stimulus here does not have an ostensive quality. This status is not mutually manifest within the shared cognitive environment of WhatsApp users. Questionnaire results show that 44.3 % of the users understand that the user who uses this status makes manifest the assumption that s/he is at the gym and ready to communicate. Thus, the cognitive principle of relevance cannot be achieved. In terms of intention, questionnaire results indicate that the questionnaire respondents 44.4 % of the users disagree on communicating with the user of this status. Therefore, the communicative

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environment is fuzzy, i.e. it is unclear whether the user may communicate with the user of this status. Thus, relevance is not maximized in this status.

Another example of fuzzy environment is the status “Battery about to die”. This status implies that communication is possible but it is not the right time and any message sent should be short. This status is not fully manifest within the shared cognitive environment of WhatsApp users as questionnaire results show that 44.4 % of the users understand that the user who uses this status makes manifest the assumption that the battery is about to die. The low percentage may mean that users do not understand the intended meaning of the status. Thus, the cognitive principle of relevance cannot be wholly achieved. In terms of intention, questionnaire results indicate that 50% of the users disagree with communicating with the user of this status. Thus, the communicative environment is fuzzy; it is unclear whether the user should communicate. Therefore, relevance is not maximized.

The fourth category of environment communication is the restricted one. An example is the status “I can’t talk. Only WhatsApp”. It implies that communication is possible but it is restricted to the form of writing. The stimulus here has an ostensive quality. This status is mutually manifest within the shared cognitive environment of WhatsApp users. Questionnaire results show that 87.9 % of the users understand that the user who posts this status makes manifest the assumption that s/he cannot talk on WhatsApp and is ready to communicate via messages. Thus, the cognitive principle of relevance is achieved. In terms of intention, questionnaire results indicate that 80.5 % of the users agree to communicate with the user of this status. Therefore, the communicative environment is restricted. In terms of effect/effort balance, relevance is maximized. Another example is the status “Urgent calls only” It implies that communication is possible but it is restricted to emergencies. The stimulus here has an ostensive quality. This status is mutually manifest within the shared cognitive environment of WhatsApp users. Questionnaire results show that 79.4 % of the

users understand that the user who uses this status makes manifest the assumption that s/he is ready to receive only urgent calls. Thus, the cognitive principle of relevance can be achieved. In terms of intention, questionnaire results show that 83.5 % of the users infer that one may communicate in urgent cases. Thus, the communicative environment is restricted. In terms of effect/effort balance, it is clear that the user who sees this status may communicate with the user only in urgent situations.

Based on the previous analysis, the study argues that WhatsApp user's choices to interpret WhatsApp statuses as stimuli vary according to the user's cognitive environment which is part of the social context. It is worth mentioning that the addressee user's communicative intention can be reflected in her/his cognitive and communicative environments. The study argues that the communicative principle of relevance can be realized in four different communicative environments:

- 1- Clear communicative environment ( Permitted communication)
- 2- Restricted communicative environment
- 3- Fuzzy communicative environment
- 4- Forbidden communicative environment

**Table 4 Different categories of communicative environments in WhatsApp**

Categories of communicative environment	Statuses
Clear communicative environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Hey there! I am using WhatsApp”</li> <li>• “Available”</li> </ul>
Restricted communicative environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I can’t talk. Only WhatsApp”</li> <li>• “urgent calls only”</li> </ul>
Fuzzy communicative environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Battery about to die”</li> <li>• “At the gym”</li> <li>• “sleeping”</li> </ul>
Forbidden communicative environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Busy”</li> <li>• “At school”</li> <li>• “At the movies”</li> <li>• “At work”</li> <li>• “In a meeting”</li> </ul>

As shown in Table 4, the clear communicative environment can be realized in statuses such as “Hey there! I am using WhatsApp” and “Available”. The restricted communicative environment can be seen in statuses such as “I can’t talk. Only WhatsApp” and “urgent calls only”. The fuzzy communicative environment can be realized in statuses such as “Battery about to die”, “At the gym”, and “sleeping”. The forbidden communicative environment can be viewed in statuses such as “Busy”, “At school”, “At the movies”, “At work” and “In a meeting”. To sum up, relevance is maximized when

- 1- The cognitive and the communicative principle can be achieved, or
- 2- The cognitive principle can be achieved, but the communicative principle cannot be

achieved

However, relevance is not maximized when the cognitive principle cannot be achieved, i.e. the status is not mutually manifest among WhatsApp users.

## **6. Conclusion and Implications**

To conclude, the first part of the research questions concerned the different construals formed when the users perceive WhatsApp statuses. The study classifies the statuses into three categories. The first category highlights what the user is doing; the second on where the user exists and the third category on a third party. The study connects these construals with relevance theory, ostension and manifestness. As regards the mixed framework, relevance theory (the communicative principle of relevance) has proven to be adequate for relating construals with communicative environments in communication on WhatsApp. It focuses on the cognitive and communicative environments which are part of social context, rather than factors such as the linguistic coding of the message. Thus, phatic communication does not depend on the linguistically-encoded content of the message; it depends on users' cognitive and communicative intentions. One of the main conclusions of this article is that this extended analysis of addressee users' interpretations and responses opens up ways for addressing and understanding the phenomenon of phatic communication on WhatsApp. There is a need for a set of etiquette for WhatsApp public phatic communication to avoid indeterminate interpretations among users. The study attempts to describe the use of relevance theory in WhatsApp statuses as public phatic stimuli. The findings show that phatic communication is pervasive in WhatsApp communication in which the stimulus is not addressed to a specific addressee user. The study also answered the research questions pertained to the different communicative environments which are available to the addressee user when s/he receives a public phatic stimulus in WhatsApp statuses.

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*Language 17: 3-26*

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**Appendix**

**Survey Questionnaire on WhatsApp Status**

**Dear Participant,**

I would like you to help us by completing this questionnaire about your understanding of WhatsApp statuses and your responses to these statuses. Your answers to the questions will assist ensure the accuracy of the data in order to incorporate them as part of research on WhatsApp statuses. All provided information will be kept confidential. You do not have to write your name. **Thank you for your participation in this survey questionnaire.**

**Section I: Basic information**

Gender: A) Male                      B) Female  
 Age: A) 18-21              B) 22-25              C) 26-above

**Section II:** The likert 1-5 rating scale is used. You can choose only one answer to each statement

1= Strongly disagree    2= Disagree    3= Neutral    4= Agree    5= Strongly Agree

- |  |   |   |   |   |   |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1- I understand that the status “Hey there! I am using WhatsApp” means that the user is active on WhatsApp and ready to communicate. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 2- I may communicate with the user whose status is “Hey there! I am using WhatsApp”  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 3- I understand that the status “Available” means that the user is available on WhatsApp and ready to communicate.                   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 4- I may communicate with the user whose status is “Available”   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 5- I understand that the status “Busy” means that the user is busy and not ready to communicate                                      | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 6- I may communicate with the user whose status is “Busy”  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 7- I understand that the status “At school” means that the user is at school and not ready to  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

communicate.

8- I may communicate with the user whose status is "At school"	1	2	3	4	5
9- I understand that the status "At the movies" means that the user is at the movies and not ready to communicate	1	2	3	4	5
10- I may communicate with the user whose status is "At the movies"	1	2	3	4	5
11- I understand that the status "At work" means that the user is at work and not ready to communicate	1	2	3	4	5
12- I may communicate with the user whose status is "At work"	1	2	3	4	5
13- I understand that the status "Battery about to die" means that the battery is about to die.	1	2	3	4	5
14- I may communicate with the user whose status is "Battery about to die"	1	2	3	4	5
15- I understand that the status "I can't talk. Only WhatsApp" means that the user cannot talk on WhatsApp and is ready to communicate via messages	1	2	3	4	5
16- I may communicate with the user whose status is "I can't talk. Only WhatsApp"	1	2	3	4	5
17- I understand that the status "In a meeting" means that the user is in a meeting and not ready to communicate	1	2	3	4	5
18- I may communicate with the user whose status is "In a meeting"	1	2	3	4	5
19- I understand that the status "At the gym" means that the user is at the gym and ready to communicate	1	2	3	4	5
20- I may communicate with the user whose status is "At the gym"	1	2	3	4	5

Bahaa-eddin Abulhassan Hassan

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21- I understand that the status “sleeping” means that the user is sleeping and not ready to communicate	1	2	3	4	5
22- I may communicate with the user whose status is “sleeping”	1	2	3	4	5
23- I understand that the status “urgent calls only” means that the user is ready to receive only urgent calls	1	2	3	4	5
24- I may communicate with the user whose status is “urgent calls only”	1	2	3	4	5