PHATIC COMMUNICATION

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The term 'phatic' (from Greek *phátos*: spoken) was originally used in the phrase 'phatic communion' which was coined by the anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski (1923). Malinowski observed that in some types of communicative interaction (e.g. greeting, gossiping) the situation in which the conversational exchange takes place consists in, and is largely created by, 'what happens linguistically'. In this type of **communication** - in which the **meanings** of the words used are almost irrelevant - linguistic expressions fulfil a social function. They establish an atmosphere of sociability and personal communion between people (a sense of being in positive rapport with each other) through overcoming silence, which is inherently unpleasant and somewhat threatening. While the phrase 'phatic communion' is closely associated with ritualized aspects of social interaction, the more recent expressions 'phatic communication' and 'phatic speech' place greater emphasis on the function of conversational exchanges described as phatic.

Jakobson (1960) characterizes the 'phatic function' of language as its use to focus on the channel of communication itself, rather than on the information conveyed by the language code. He points out that prolonged phatic **conversations** sometimes occur precisely when the communication process is threatened (for instance, by the insecurity of the interlocutors). From this perspective, various more or less conventionalized ways of opening and ending conversations, as well as maintaining them (e.g. back-channelling devices, such as 'uh-huh') are described as phatic. Laver (1974) takes up Malinowski's views and examines in some detail the connection between the relative social status of the interlocutors and the appropriate choice of linguistic expression in a phatic exchange. Coupland (2000) is a

collection of articles which looks at small-talk as a form of phatic communication from the sociolinguistic perspective.

Despite the growing number of publications on phatic communication, this type of social interaction calls for much further research on a number of issues, including the three which are briefly outlined here. First, analyses of phatic communication are often couched in terms of the distinction between cognitive (propositional) and social information. To give but one example, Schneider (1988: 11) observes that phatic speech 'does not convey much cognitive information [...] but it is always loaded with social information'. Clearly, this claim and similar claims can be explanatory only if the terms 'cognitive' (i.e. 'propositional') information and 'social information' are given reasonably explicit theoretical contents. However, while the propositional mode of mental **representation** has been explored extensively within **cognitive psychology** and **pragmatics**, the theoretical content of the term 'social information' remains something of a mystery. For this reason, the description of phatic communication as the communication of social information has little explanatory value. Second, the production and the comprehension of phatic communicative acts are generally seen as regulated by social conventions about the way particular **topics** (which might be called 'phatic topics') are brought up in particular types of social situation. On the one hand, this makes it difficult to explain communicative acts which have a phatic function, although they are not conventionally phatic, as illustrated by (1):

(1) Several people (who have never met before) have been waiting at a bus stop in North
    London for about twenty minutes. One of them walks some distance up the road to see
    if there is a bus coming. He then rejoins the others and says (facing another person

who is also waiting impatiently): 'No sign of a bus. I suppose they'll all come together'. She replies: 'Oh yes. They travel in convoys'.

This conversational exchange has the key features of phatic exchanges. The main point of the two utterances does not lie with their propositional contents; rather, the main purpose of the exchange is to establish a sense of solidarity between the interlocutors. But it is not clear how this conversation, and many similar conversations, can be analyzed in terms of social conventions or why they might need to be explained in this way. On the other hand, many phatic conversations in which social conventions about topic choice and language use do play a role cannot be fully explained in terms of conventionalization or standardization (for a discussion of these terms see Bach and Harnish 1982). As Lyons (1968: 417) points out, utterances are not simply phatic or non-phatic, but may be more or less phatic:

> We must therefore distinguish between that aspect of the 'use' of utterances which may be referred to their function in 'phatic communion' and that part of their 'use' which is to be distinguished as their meaning (if they have meaning in terms of our definition). In saying this, we recognize that, even when both these aspects are present, either one or the other may be the dominant part of the 'use' of the utterance.

There is ample evidence to support this view. The following is a clear example of a conventional phatic exchange, in which the words used are informative to some appreciable degree:

(2) Conversation between two colleagues who have met by chance in a corridor at their place of work.

[1] A: Hi. How are you?

[2] B: Fine. Thanks. And you?

[3] A: Busier than I'd like to be, but generally okay.

A's **question** in [1] is standardly used as a greeting, but it is also an expression of some interest in the hearer's well-being. B's reply in [2] expresses a similar interest and, despite being a conventional phatic string, leaves A the option to give a more or less informative answer. In fact, by providing more information than a formulaic phatic reply would do, A conveys a more positive social attitude towards B (than he would have done by using a formulaic phatic utterance). Examples like these suggest that the degrees of phaticness of a given utterance, or conversational exchange as a whole, can be explained only in the context of a general theory of human communication. Third, as is well known, phatic communication varies across **cultures** in a number of respects. They include the types of situation in which phatic conversation is appropriate, the length of phatic talk at a particular stage of a conversation (say, the beginning or end) and the topics which are appropriate for use in phatic communication.

Attempts to address these issues within the framework of a general pragmatic theory have been few (e.g. Žegarac and Clark 1999a, 1999b; Žegarac 1998) and remain controversial (see Ward and Horn 1999). Working within the framework of **relevance theory** (Sperber and Wilson 1995), Žegarac and Clark (1999a) start from the observation that the 'phaticness' of a communicative act largely depends on **context**. For example, the utterance 'It's sunny, but there's a rather cold wind' may be very phatic in one situation (e.g. as part of a chat over coffee

between two people who do not expect they will be going out), while not being phatic in a different setting (e.g. if the interlocutors are getting ready to go sailing). These authors argue that the main difference between phatic and non-phatic communicative acts concerns what the most relevant communicated information (which they assume is always propositional) is about and how this information is communicated. In phatic communication, the most relevant information is about the positive rapport between the interlocutors, whereas in non-phatic communicative interaction, the main relevance lies with information which builds to a greater extent on the meanings of the words used. On this approach, the **knowledge** of conventions about conducting phatic exchanges merely facilitates (but does not explain the possibility of) phatic communication. Topics and communicative acts which are frequently used in phatic communication are very cognitively salient. Therefore, they are readily available for use in situations where phatic communication seems appropriate. Žegarac and Clark's relevance-theoretic analysis also identifies two universal properties of good conventional phatic topics. A topic is suitable for use in phatic communication if (a) the interlocutors can reliably presume (even if they are complete strangers) that the topic is potentially relevant to them in readily conceivable circumstances, and (b) the topic is not very relevant in the immediate situation of communication (or the conversational exchange will be commensurably less phatic or not phatic at all).

See also: Cognitive psychology; cognitive science; communication; context; conventionality; conversation; culture; intercultural communication; knowledge; proposition; relevance theory; representation and computation

Suggestions for further reading:

Coupland, J., Coupland, N. and Robinson, J.D. (1992) ''How are you?': negotiating phatic communion', *Language in Society*, 21: 207-30.

Malinowski, B. (1923) 'The problem of meaning in primitive languages', in C. Ogden & I.A. Richards (eds) *The Meaning of Meaning*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Žegarac, V. (1998) 'What is phatic communication?', in V. Rouchota & A. Jucker (eds) *Current Issues in Relevance Theory*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

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