

What Is *Phatic Communication*?

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0. Abstract

This article presents a relevance-theoretic analysis of the way utterances are interpreted in phatic exchanges. I consider phatic communication as a special case of ostensive-inferential communication, and I argue that what makes it special is the inference route which the hearer follows in interpreting the utterance, rather than the cognitive mechanisms involved.¹

1. Introduction

WHAT DO YOU SAY AFTER YOU SAY "HELLO"?

This childlike question, so apparently artless and free of the profundity expected of scientific enquiry, really contains within itself all the basic questions of human living and all the fundamental problems of the social sciences.

Eric Berne

How good a question is largely depends on the sort of answer one is looking for. For example, construed as an invitation to speculation, *What do you say after you say "hello"?* fares rather well. But, if a matter-of-fact type of answer were expected, the same question would be quite hopeless. By contrast, *What is phatic communication?* is a

¹In writing and rewriting this article I have benefited from discussions with and comments from a number of people. My thanks go to all of them, and especially to: Robyn Carston, Billy Clark, Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson (whose names are mentioned here in alphabetical order).

question to which a factual answer can be given in the context of an explanatory account of communicative behaviour. There can be little doubt that pragmatic theory should have something to say about this type of language use: first, phatic exchanges are very common in everyday discourse. So, a plausible approach to verbal interaction should be able to explain them. Second, phatic discourse presents specific difficulties for pragmatic analysis. So, there is something to be said about it that one would not necessarily need to say in dealing with other types of discourse. Third, phatic communication is often mentioned in passing, sometimes described, but, to the best of my knowledge, never explained. So, there is new ground to be covered. Finally, people generally agree on which conversations are phatic:

- (1) A: How long was your holiday?
B: Two weeks.
C: Yeah, / two weeks.
A: /Mhm.
And that's you back to work on Monday, is it?
B: No.
A: No.
B: We're gonna spend another week in the south actually.
A: Oh that's good.
B: Yeah.²

(Schneider, 1988:258)

Anyone vaguely acquainted with the term *phatic* would categorize the conversation in (1) as belonging to this type of communication. But, though easy to grasp, the notion of *phaticness* defies explanation. Typically, what one finds in the literature are statements about the

²The examples from Schneider are slightly adapted in details which have no bearing on my discussion. Unless otherwise indicated, the examples used in this article are mine, and are based on actual conversations.

intuitively observable distinguishing properties of phatic conversations. Here are some examples:

... it is not that we are not sharing information when we say nice day but it looks as if it may rain soon, but that the informational purpose is rather weak.

(Fawcett, 1984:47)

... small talk does not convey much cognitive information [...] but it is always loaded with social information.

(Schneider, 1988:11)

... 'phatic communion' has often been appealed to as a concept ... typically taken to designate a conventionalized and desemantized discourse mode or type.³

(Coupland, Coupland and Robinson, 1992:207)

These authors also note that phatic communication often involves a degree of *pretence* about how genuine the speaker's interest in the hearer is, and they go on to make the following point:

A key characteristic of talking phatically may therefore be not so much that it is inherently suspect, but that it manages to disguise the extent to which commitment is being made or withheld.

(Coupland, Coupland and Robinson 1992:217)

³The terms *phatic communication* and *phatic communion* are not synonymous, although they are sometimes used interchangeably. I think it is best to reserve the term *phatic communion* for the use of language in rituals. While various types of phatic exchanges have some characteristics of ritual practices (relatively stable content; the aim of providing protection against the sorts of risks illustrated in sections 5 and 6), they are not self-contained sets of actions strictly governed by rules which determine the production of a particular expression at a specific stage of an activity in which every expression is relevant only as part of the whole. For a brief illustration of the view that phatic exchanges typical of the opening and closing stages of conversations are best seen as ritualistic see Schneider (1988:32).

The problem seems obvious: *strong vs. weak informational purpose, cognitive information vs. social information, conventionalization and desemanticization* are not explanatory terms. Rather, they are notions which need to be explained in their own right. The way out of the impasse of infinite regress - though not always taken - is rather well-known. It is neatly signposted in Katz's (1972) consideration of the similarly elusive question of *What is meaning?*:

The question is generally treated on a par with a question like "What is the capital of France?" to which a direct and straightforward answer "Paris" can be given. It is supposed that an answer can be given of the form "Meaning is this or that". But the question "What is meaning" does **not** admit of a direct "this or that" answer; its answer is instead a whole theory.

(Katz, 1972:3)

And the question: *What is phatic communication?* does not admit of a direct answer either. The problem with existing accounts (at least, with all those I am aware of) is that they are not grounded in theories: there is no logical argument going from a particular theory of communication to a particular detailed characterization of the phatic use of language.

Why should this unwelcome state of affairs have arisen? Perhaps existing theories of communication are not up to the task. This may happen for various reasons. Theories may be founded on false premises, or they may lack the analytical tools required for the job. Some approaches reject the very direction of analysis suggested above, taking the view that explanation should go from data to theories, not the other way round. This stance (in its various guises) has come under fire repeatedly, over a considerable period of time, and from different camps, notably: Chomsky (linguistics), Searle (philosophy of language), and Sperber (anthropology). Quite some time ago, Chomsky famously

remarked that the idea of a discovery procedure which takes the researcher from raw data to a theory of language, was unfounded and without precedent in other sciences. More recently, Searle (1996:5) has pointed out that it is not possible to describe social institutions from an external behaviourist point of view, because the description of overt behaviour *misses the underlying structures that make the behaviour possible*. Sperber (1996:40) criticizes the view of interpretation as the essence of explanation in anthropology in a similar spirit. One of the arguments he presents runs, roughly, like this: a theory should be testable; in other words, it should be falsifiable. The data that can (dis)confirm a social theory are always interpretations of observable behaviour. If interpretations of observable behaviour are to be used in evaluating a theory, the reliability of these interpretations must be greater than that of the theory. But, for this requirement to be met, the interpretations employed in the evaluation must be independent of the theory being tested. Those theories which take interpretations of the data as their starting point are not testable in principle: they are dependent on the interpretations used in testing them. Consequently, the interpretations cannot be more reliable than the theories themselves.

I mention these objections, not only because surprisingly many contemporary approaches to the study of conversation are wide open to some or all of them, but also because they point the way which a theoretically and methodologically sound approach to explaining language use should take. What is called for is a theory which enables us to show how a given type of language use, in this case phatic communication, *results from relatively general mechanisms at work in a given specific situation* (Sperber, 1996:41). From this perspective, the crucial question is: *How do people understand phatic utterances?*

Obviously, phatic conversation is made possible by the speaker's ability to produce a (phatic) utterance and to rely on the hearer's ability to interpret it in a particular way. Perhaps not so obviously, the commonsense answer: *people know as a matter of **convention** which topics and which linguistic strings are phatic* will not do for two reasons.

On the one hand, utterances may be understood as phatic, even though their *phaticness* is not conventionalized. For example, imagine that Peter and Mary have quarrelled and have not spoken to each other for three days. It is evident to Peter that it is evident to both of them that postmen are on strike on that particular day (the strike having become something of a weekly event).⁴ On the morning of the fourth day, out of the blue, Peter says to Mary:

(2) There's a postal strike today.

In this case, the fact that Peter has addressed Mary would be of far greater interest to her than any information about the postal strike, and she would be justified in assuming that Peter is aware of this. By initiating communication Peter has communicated to Mary some assumptions about the potential for further interaction with her. The utterance is certainly phatic: Peter is sharing with Mary some information about the postal strike, but that is not his main point (cf. Fawcett's quote above); the information conveyed is primarily social (cf. Schneider's quote above), and the strength of Peter's commitment to reconciliation is disguised, as it were (cf. Coupland and Coupland's quote above). But, whatever it is that makes it possible for Mary to grasp the import of Peter's utterance, it is certainly not her knowledge that people typically talk about postal strikes when they want to engage

⁴The reasons for the rather involved formulation: *it is evident to X that it is evident to X and Y* are considered in section 2.1.

in conversation, to be sociable, to be nice to, or to make up with, each other. So, the utterance **is** phatic, although it is **not** conventionally phatic.

On the other hand - since phatic interpretation exists independently of special social conventions - even if one chooses to apply the term *phatic* only to expressions which are conventionally phatic, *phaticness* still needs to be characterized without reference to conventionalization. What follows is an attempt to show how this can be done within the framework of Sperber and Wilson's (1986/95) relevance theory. The most important tenets of this theory are sketched out in the next section.

2. Relevance theory

All human behaviour is informative in that it provides evidence for inferences. Some informative behaviour is intentionally informative, and some intentionally informative behaviour is evidently intentionally informative. This last type of informative behaviour is what Sperber and Wilson (1986/95) call *ostensive-inferential communication*. Ostensive-inferential communication involves two intentions:

- (a) a communicative intention to make mutually manifest:
- (b) an informative intention to make manifest or more manifest a set of assumptions *I*.

There are two (discernible, though inseparable) sides to this type of communication: the cognitive side and the social side. Clearly, to explain communication in terms of alterations of individuals' belief systems is to characterize it cognitively. But it should be noted that on this view communication is also a social phenomenon, because it involves ostensive behaviour. Ostensive behaviour is a type of social behaviour, because by means of it one individual aims to affect the belief system of

a group of individuals (a group minimally including those individuals and the communicator), partly by virtue of the collective recognition of her intention. Therefore, it is natural to expect that a whole range of recognized uses of language, including phatic communication, could be characterised in terms of systematic correlations between ostensive stimuli and their effects on individuals' belief systems.

2.1 Manifestness

From both the cognitive and the social perspective, the key notion is *manifestness*. In its technical sense, *manifestness* refers to a person's psychological disposition for belief representation, which is a function of her cognitive make-up and the physical environment. It is a comparative notion: the more conclusive the evidence an individual has for representing an assumption as a belief, the more manifest that assumption is to that individual. In ostensive-inferential communication, the speaker affects the hearer by causing changes in the degree of manifestness of certain (sets of) assumptions. Since manifestness does not entail the mental representation of assumptions, ostensive-inferential communication does not entail it either, although, of course, it does not preclude it. Those assumptions which are made highly manifest by the act of ostension are actually mentally represented, and those whose manifestness is increased to a lesser extent are not. For example, in the situation described, Peter's utterance:

(2) There's a postal strike today.

makes highly manifest to Mary the assumption: *Postmen are on strike on September 18th 1996*, and she will represent it mentally. The same utterance provides less conclusive evidence for assumptions, such as:

Peter is no longer angry with Mary, Peter is feeling guilty about his previous behaviour, Peter wants Mary to forgive him, and probably others, whose manifestness is only slightly increased, and which Mary needn't actually represent.

From the social point of view, by engaging in communication, people establish a relationship in which they publicly take certain responsibilities. The communicator's responsibility is to choose the best stimulus available to him for fulfilling his communicative intention. The more evidently the speaker takes the responsibility for communicating certain (sets of) assumptions, the more strongly communicated those assumptions are. For example, Peter's utterance *There's a postal strike today* shows that Peter takes full responsibility for communicating something about the postal strike (thus communicating this information relatively **strongly**), somewhat lesser responsibility for communicating something about being prepared to engage in further exchanges with Mary, and far less responsibility for specific assumptions about no longer being angry with her, feeling guilty, or wishing to be forgiven (thus communicating this information relatively **weakly**).

Peter's utterance communicates some information about the world outside his relationship with Mary (namely, the postal strike) and some information about an aspect of their relationship, (namely, assumptions about his readiness to assume a particular social role in interacting with her). In relevance theory terms, the public acceptance of particular sets of belief-assumptions (about individuals' rights, duties, etc.) in a given situation explains the formation of *social roles*. The **persistence** of the collective acceptance of particular social roles over time, and their generalization to types of situations, underlies the formation of *social statuses*. The notion of collectivity, which is crucial for characterizing

both *social role* and *social status*, is explained in terms of mutual manifestness. As Sperber and Wilson (1986/95) point out:

... ostensive communication could be described as an attempt to create a genuinely mutual cognitive environment between social personae. When the communicator is sincere (and so is the audience in manifesting its acceptance of the information communicated), then the actual individuals and their social personae coincide, and otherwise they don't. (Sperber and Wilson (1986: 258, footnote 32)

In a nutshell, the act of ostension modifies the interlocutors' belief systems. An assumption is *manifest* to the extent that the environment provides evidence for its adoption. The set of all assumptions that are manifest to an individual is that individual's *cognitive environment*. The set of all assumptions that are manifest to two individuals is their *shared cognitive environment*. A shared cognitive environment in which it is manifest which people share it is what Sperber and Wilson (1986/95:41) call a *mutual cognitive environment*.⁵ The mutuality of cognitive environments is socially important because:

A change in the mutual cognitive environment of two people is a change in their possibilities of interaction (and, in particular, in their possibilities of further communication). (Sperber and Wilson, 1986:61-2)

The speaker must be able to estimate the cognitive resources of the hearer, including their likelihood of being deployed in a particular way in comprehension. The mutual cognitive environment sets a limit on that ability.

⁵ Cognitive environments may be mutual but the extent to which their mutuality is manifest to each interlocutor may not be the same. That is why I prefer to use rather elaborate formulations of the type *it is manifest to X that it is mutually manifest to X and Y*, instead of the simpler *it is mutually manifest to X and Y*. Consider the following scenario: Mary has arranged for her and Peter to go out with Susan and James in three weeks time. Mary mentioned the arrangement to Peter in passing. In this case, it is manifest to some **limited extent** to Mary that the information in question is mutually manifest to Peter and her (for all she knows, Peter might have forgotten about it). Note that in this case Mary has good reasons to communicate the information again, in order to ensure that it is mutually manifest.

2.2 The Principle of Relevance

The potential vastness and indeterminacy of two (or more) people's mutual cognitive environment raises two questions. On the speaker's side, the problem is how to ensure that the hearer will draw upon a particular set of assumptions in interpreting her utterance? On the hearer's side, the problem is how to decide in which context the speaker intended her utterance to be interpreted? The solution to both problems lies with the *Principle of Relevance*, a law-like generalization about the way people allocate their cognitive resources in processing ostensive stimuli. The principle of relevance is the guiding criterion which constrains the inference processes involved in ostensive-inferential communication. In a more recent formulation (Sperber and Wilson 1995), it is labelled the *Second Principle of Relevance*:

The (Second) Principle of Relevance

Every act of ostensive communication communicates the presumption of its own optimal relevance.

Presumption of Optimal Relevance

- (a) The ostensive stimulus is relevant enough for it to be worth the addressee's effort to process it.
 - (b) The ostensive stimulus is the most relevant one compatible with the communicator's abilities and preferences.
- (Sperber and Wilson, 1995:260-270)

Part (a) of the presumption of optimal relevance ensures that the hearer does not waste his cognitive resources; part (b) ensures that the hearer aims to exploit his cognitive resources along the lines intended by the speaker. According to the (second) principle of relevance, the interpretation of an ostensive stimulus is adequate when the contextual

effects achieved offset the processing effort required for deriving them. Consequently, the appropriate context for the interpretation is the one which includes the minimal number of assumptions required for arriving at an interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance.

3. Ostensive communication and phatic interpretation

A typical reason for communicating a particular assumption strongly is the relevance of that assumption over and above the relevance of other assumptions which are communicated by the same utterance. For example, you ask me: *What time is it?*, and I reply: *Six o'clock*. The proposition expressed by my utterance is strongly communicated (you have fairly conclusive evidence that I intended to communicate it) and it is relevant to you (far more relevant than other assumptions whose manifestness has also been increased by the same act of communication). In this case, the relevance of the utterance as a whole lies with the information which has been communicated strongly. Examples like this one may suggest - I hasten to add, misleadingly - the following generalization: if an utterance communicates some information strongly, then that information is more relevant than any other information communicated comparatively weakly by that utterance. In fact, this conclusion does **not** reflect any inherent properties of ostensive-inferential communication. Utterances may easily communicate strongly information the relevance of which is not obvious in any readily available context. For example, this article begins with a quote by Eric Berne, which communicates fairly conclusively some assumptions about a particular question. However, these assumptions are not relevant in their own right, but in virtue of providing the context in which the text that follows the quote is relevant.

Bearing these observations in mind, let us look at example (2) again. Remember, it is manifest to Peter that it is mutually manifest to Mary and to him that there is a postal strike. They have quarrelled and have not spoken to each other for some time, when, out of the blue, Peter says:

(2) There's a postal strike today.

Peter's utterance communicates strongly some information about the postal strike, and communicates weakly some information about Peter's change of disposition towards Mary. The information communicated strongly, is patently irrelevant in any contexts readily available to Mary, while the information communicated weakly is highly relevant in the immediate context. The main relevance of Peter's utterance lies in the fact that he has addressed Mary. Since the information about the postal strike would be desirable to Mary if it were relevant, this information provides some contextual evidence for the weakly communicated assumptions about Peter's positive social attitude towards Mary. In this case, as in the case of the opening quote, the information communicated relatively strongly is relevant because it provides the context for the interpretation of the evidence coming from another source (the act of ostension).

In phatic communication in general, the linguistic meaning of the words used yields few effects, and the main relevance lies with the act of ostension, the fact that somebody has spoken. Consider example (1):

- (1) A: **How long was your holiday?**
B: **Two weeks.**
C: Yeah, / two weeks.
A: /Mhm.
And that's you back to work on Monday, is it?

B: No.
A: No.
B: We're gonna spend another week in the south actually.
A: Oh that's good.
B: Yeah.

(Schneider, 1988:258)

A's question makes it mutually manifest to A and B that some information about the duration of B's holiday is relevant to A. On what grounds is B to decide what to say in reply? Obviously, B needs to act on some hypotheses about the particular way in which information concerning the length of his holiday is relevant to A. These hypotheses, based on B's contextual knowledge, might include the following: *A thinks that only fairly long holidays are enjoyable; if B has had a long holiday, then A will assume he must have had a good time. A is positively disposed towards B and will be pleased to hear B has had an enjoyable holiday. A knows that people's holidays matter to them; he wants to show that he takes an interest in B's welfare by raising a topic which concerns B's life. A finds it awkward to be standing next to B without talking to him. A knows that people are generally keen to talk about their holidays, and so on.* As it happens, B's answer is rather uninformative. Typically, such a response could be due to two sorts of reasons. Either, B's estimate of the amount of information that would be optimally relevant to A is fairly conservative, or (by making it mutually manifest that he is giving a less than optimally relevant answer) B wishes to communicate a certain reluctance to engage in further (possibly lengthy) conversation with A. The principle of relevance makes a clear prediction here: the more evident A's keen interest in the details of B's holiday is, the more strongly B's answer communicates something

negative about his willingness to engage with the topic and/or to continue the conversation. So, relevance-theoretic assumptions about utterance comprehension provide a natural explanation of the way A's question and B's answer are understood.

A more detailed analysis of this example could easily be given. But even this cursory account will suffice to make my main point: the implicatures communicated in phatic exchanges are social because of what they are about (*A's interest in B's welfare; B's slight reluctance to engage in detailed conversation on the topic*), not because of some special cognitive mechanism involved in communicating them. If I am right the categorial difference between (the communication of) *social* and *cognitive* information (illustrated in the quote from Schneider, section 1) is an illusion. The question is: where does this illusion come from? One of the consequences of the principle of relevance is that in interpreting an utterance the hearer should pay attention first to its linguistic content: the act of ostension communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance, a kind of guarantee that the speaker has used the best stimulus at her disposal for achieving the intended effects. Hence, when the ostensive stimulus is an expression in the language code, the hearer should process it for relevance by paying attention to its linguistic properties. In many instances of verbal communication the exploitation of the linguistic meaning of the utterance will yield enough contextual effects to offset the processing effort required for achieving those effects. If the processing of the linguistic meaning fails to yield enough effects in any readily available contexts, the hearer is likely to go one step up, as it were, and consider whether some effects could be derived from the evidence presented by the act of ostension itself. This is exactly what happens in phatic communication. When A says *How long was your holiday?* , and the contexts readily available to B do not

include any assumptions about the relevance to A of specific information concerning the length of the B's holiday, B is led to consider what A intended to communicate by the very act of initiating communication on the given topic. That is how a range of weak implicatures about A's social attitudes towards B are given rise to. The illusion that this social information is different in kind from that conveyed in non-phatic discourse is due precisely to the fact that the cognitive effects achieved in phatic communication critically depend on the evidence presented by the act of ostension, the fact that somebody has spoken, while in many other instances of verbal communication the effects are mainly achieved by exploiting the meaning of the words used.

However, on this account phatic communication is still a case of linguistic communication, because the linguistic properties of the utterance do play a role in the interpretation.⁶ Thus, in (1) the meaning of A's question provides B with some evidence of A's socially positive interest in B. In other words, it provides evidence for some contextual assumptions about the way in which the act of ostension is relevant. Another question, such as *Who are you looking at?*, would have a very different impact: it would communicate a socially negative attitude of A towards B, and its linguistic properties would contribute to communicating this. Nevertheless, the interpretation of *Who are you looking at?* has something important in common with that of *How long was your holiday?*: in both cases the linguistic meaning fails to yield enough effects to make the processing of the utterance worth the hearer's while, and in both cases the hearer needs to consider what the speaker intended to communicate by the act of ostension which makes it mutually manifest that *some information about the hearer's reasons for looking at the speaker is relevant to the speaker*, and that *some*

⁶For a discussion of ostensive and non-ostensive forms of communication see Wilson and Sperber (1993).

information about the length of the hearer's holiday is relevant to the speaker, respectively.

A detailed characterization of the *phatic* use of language emerges from this discussion: first, the interpretation of phatic utterances exploits both **linguistic** and **non-linguistic** properties of the utterance. Second, the information communicated by exploiting the linguistic meaning of the utterance is comparatively **strongly** communicated; the information communicated by exploiting the act of ostension is comparatively **weakly** communicated. Third, the information which is communicated strongly (and is based on linguistic meaning) is relatively **low in relevance**; the **main relevance** (that is, the majority of cognitive effects) lies with the act of ostension. This distinction explains the following observation made by Lyons (1968):

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.
(Lyons, 1968:417)

The relevance-theoretic account in terms of the distribution of cognitive effects according to the kind of evidence exploited in deriving those effects gives theoretical content to the notion of *dominant part of the "use" of the utterance*. Fourth, the linguistic meaning of the utterance provides some contextual assumptions exploited as evidence about whether the social attitude conveyed is **positive** or **negative**.

To conclude: the term *phatic communication* does not identify a natural class of utterances, but a pattern of interacting factors, including: (a) what the information communicated is about, (b) the types of evidence exploited in the interpretation, (c) the strength at

which the information is communicated, and (d) the distribution of cognitive effects according to the type of evidence exploited in achieving those effects.

4. Phatic communication as a social institution

So far I have shown that phatic communication is possible without social conventions about the way certain topics and linguistic strings are used. Nevertheless, phatic communication does exist as a social institution. This is reflected in ordinary English words like *small-talk* and *chit-chat* (which are partial synonyms of the term *phatic communication*), in the systematicity of people's intuitions about the use of some expressions (*Nice weather, isn't it?*; *How long was your holiday?*), in their awareness of the social significance of conversations on particular topics (the weather, the addressee's welfare), and, most importantly, in their judgments about the way certain phatic strings are understood: utterance interpretation requires mental effort and takes time. Yet, this process is sometimes (more or less correctly) perceived as almost instantaneous, although the inferential route from the linguistic meaning of the utterance to its interpretation may be rather complex, in that it involves a number of steps. Given the speed and ease with which many phatic exchanges are conducted, it seems reasonable to assume that the complex inference process normally required is somehow bypassed in the interpretation of at least some of the linguistic strings used in those conversations. Two types of institutionalization, *standardization* and *conventionalization*, could be used to explain how this is possible.

4.1 Standardization

The notion of standardization is introduced and discussed by Bach and Harnish (1979) and Bach (1996), among others. According to Bach (1996):

..., the standardization thesis says simply that the speaker's informative intention is inferable in Gricean fashion but that precedent ... streamlines or shortcircuits the inference required on the part of the audience. (Bach, 1996:3)

On this view, in cases of standardization the interpretation goes beyond the literal meaning of the utterance and can be achieved without reference to conventions. If there were no precedent for a particular use, the hearer would still be able to rely on the available contextual information and work out what the speaker intended to communicate.

The importance of standardization depends on the overall theory in which this notion is embedded. On a Gricean view of communication, it is assigned a rather special role, which, I think, it fulfills badly. Let me clarify this claim. The expression *inferable in Gricean fashion* in the quote above is not entirely innocuous. On Grice's approach (a) truthfulness is the overriding criterion in communication, and (b) the inference process which guides the hearer in interpreting the utterance consists of truth-preserving operations. So, if considerations of veracity (which also apply to rationally justifiable departures from truthfulness) play a crucial role in determining what is communicated, and if the reasoning involved in utterance interpretation can be shortcircuited, then there is something very special about the mechanism which makes this possible, because that mechanism does the work of the fundamental criterion used in utterance interpretation. On what grounds is the hearer to decide on a particular interpretation if the inference process which legitimizes that interpretation is skipped? What makes standardization special in this type of framework is that its role is to

provide an answer to this question. Standardization does not fulfill this role adequately, because it explains how the problem arises, without showing as much as a glimpse of the solution.

I think there is good evidence to support this criticism. Take an example of standardization:

- (3) His divorce is behind him, but the public is not.
(pun made by a friend of Prince Charles, in a radio programme broadcast on 10/01/1997)

The interpretation of *X be behind person Y* exploits two sets of contextual assumptions:

- (a) to be free from X; not to have to deal with X any longer, not to be affected by X any longer etc.
(b) to have, or be in a position to count on the support, help, etc. of X.

The contextual assumptions in (a) and (b) yield the kinds of effects shown in (a') and (b'):

- (a') Charles is free from his former wife; he does not have to deal with the problems relating to his divorce any longer; his divorce is no longer a source of his distress, anxiety, ...
(b') Charles cannot count on public support; his popularity is low, the public does not approve of him becoming King, ...

Example (3) bears the hallmark of standardization: the understanding of both conjuncts goes beyond the literal meaning of the words used, and

can be achieved without reference to conventions; the inference is compressed by precedent, because the expression is often used in these particular ways, and, if there were no precedent, an elaborate inference would be required. This last point is illustrated by the literal translation of (3) into Serbo-Croat:

(3') Njegov razvod je iza njega, ali javnost nije.

The interesting difference between (3) and (3') is that the Serbo-Croatian literal equivalent of *X be behind person Y* does not have the standardized uses of its English counterpart. Nevertheless, upon reflection, native speakers are able to figure out the intended interpretation of the utterance.⁷

The pun in (3) shows that standardization does not operate blindly. This presents serious difficulties for a Gricean account, because, on this approach, the mechanism of standardization explains how a particular interpretation comes to be considered, while removing the basis for the selection of that interpretation. The pun exploits two standardized uses of *X be behind person Y*, so that its appreciation depends on the hearer's ability to select the intended interpretation for each conjunct. On what grounds the correct interpretation is selected remains unclear.

More generally, the standardized use of an expression does not yield the intended interpretation independently of the context. Phatic expressions like *Nice weather, isn't it?*, *How are you?* and quite a few others, seem to be prime examples of *standardization*. After all, they are systematically used in phatic exchanges (unlike other linguistic strings,

⁷ I have actually checked this by consulting native speakers of Serbo-Croat who do not speak English and do not live in an English speaking environment.

such as the one in (2)) and seem to possess all the distinguishing features of standardization. However, just as there are situations in which a typically non-phatic string receives a phatic interpretation (example (2)), in some circumstances the phaticness of a typically phatic expression is not exploited. For example, if it is highly manifest to B that it is mutually manifest to A and B that B had recently been ill and had spent a week in hospital, A's question *How are you?* will be easily understood by B as expressing some considerable interest in B's welfare, and it will not have the import of a phatic expression.

Within the framework of relevance theory standardization can be characterized in a similar vein, but its consequences for the theory are insignificant. On this approach, utterance interpretation starts with an expectation of relevance created by the act of ostension, and continues with the search for a context in which that expectation is fulfilled. In example (3), this search is quick and relatively effortless. Why should this be? The selection of the context in which an utterance is interpreted is part and parcel of the interpretation process. This contextual information is accessed in several steps in some cases, and in a single step, in others. The fewer steps are needed for selecting the context in which the utterance is optimally relevant, the lesser the processing effort required for the interpretation will be. And, the lesser the processing effort is, the more relevant the utterance will be. So, it is in the hearer's interest to minimize the expenditure of the processing effort in utterance interpretation. But what determines the accessibility of the context? According to Sperber and Wilson (1986/95):

..., the more a representation is processed, the more accessible it becomes. Hence, the greater the amount of processing involved in the formation of an assumption, and the more often it is accessed thereafter, the greater its accessibility.

(Sperber and Wilson, 1986/95:77)

The notion of standardization comes down to the availability of encyclopaedic knowledge about the way some expressions are usually understood. Chunks of assumptions about the typical contexts in which particular linguistic strings are usually processed for relevance, become accessible in one single step, thus avoiding the need for more complex inferencing. So, all that is required for the interpretation of (3) is that the sets of assumptions (a) and (b) should be readily accessible. And they become immediately accessible as a result of the process described in the quote above.

This sort of account carries over to *standardized phatic expressions*. Linguistic strings like *Nice weather, isn't it?* and *How are you?* are so often used in phatic exchanges that the contextual assumptions required for their phatic understanding are immediately accessible. These assumptions are a part of people's encyclopaedic knowledge about the contexts in which these expressions are typically intended to be processed, in much the same way as the sets of assumptions (a) and (b) are part of the encyclopaedic knowledge about the typical contexts in which the expression *X be behind person Y* is optimally relevant. Hence, within the framework of relevance theory (at least from the cognitive point of view) standardization does not warrant a technical label at all. Since the criterion used in utterance interpretation is consistency with the principle of relevance, the manner in which the contextual assumptions required for interpreting the utterance are accessed (in one or more inferential steps; individually or in chunks) has no direct bearing on the theory.

However, the consequences of standardization for utterance understanding are special from the social point of view. The standardization of the phatic use of utterances has a part to play in

turning phatic communication into a kind of (informal) social institution. Searle (1996) succinctly characterizes the nature of such institutions:

If people believe that a certain set of relationships in which they are involved is a case of friendship/date/cocktail party, then the possession of each such status is constituted by the belief that the relationship does in fact possess that status, and the possession of that status carries with it certain functions. This is shown by the fact that the people involved have certain sorts of justified expectations from a friendship/date/cocktail party, which they do not have from an identical set of arrangements about which they do not believe that it is a friendship/date/cocktail party. ... If the rights and duties of friendship suddenly became a matter of some grave legal or moral question, then we might imagine these informal institutions becoming codified explicitly, though of course, explicit codification has its price. It deprives us of the flexibility, spontaneity, and informality that the practice has in its uncoded form.
(Searle, 1996:88)

It seems reasonable to assume that certain linguistic strings create expectations about the type of verbal activity in which they are standardly used, thus turning this use into a kind of social institution. If this is indeed the case, then the formation and spreading of assumptions about how certain expressions are generally used in conversation is an important part of the process of institutionalization of uses of language, including phatic communication. Sperber (1996:30) provides a good basis for characterizing the properties in question. On his approach, institutionalization involves the formation and spreading of higher order representations which describe types of lower order representations and the conditions under which tokens of these lower order representations can be produced and distributed. The general knowledge assumptions about how certain linguistic strings are typically used are higher order representations. The linguistic strings themselves are lower order representations. So, the standardization of the phatic use of expressions like *Nice weather, isn't it?*, *How are you?* and a number of others is part of the process of establishing phatic communication as a social institution.

From one point of view, the standardization of the phatic use of linguistic strings comes down to chunks of encyclopaedic knowledge becoming so highly accessible that they masquerade as rules. From another point of view, the higher order representations involved in standardization are *ceteris paribus* rules. That is to say, they are rules of the format: ***other things being equal***, *such and such an expression is used in such and such a way*. The *ceteris paribus* clause is essential to ensure that the rules are not mandatory and that they may be overridden in context without being violated. I am not sure what, if anything, hangs on the choice here. On this occasion at least, I prefer to let sleeping dogs lie.

The account of standardization put forward in this section provides a natural explanation for Coupland, Coupland and Robinson's observation about phatic communication:

A key characteristic of talking phatically may therefore be not so much that it is inherently suspect but that it manages to disguise the extent to which commitment is being made or withheld.

(Coupland, Coupland and Robinson 1992:217)

A speaker who uses a typically phatic utterance makes manifest assumptions which are somewhat conflicting: *the speaker is showing an interest in the hearer*, and *the speaker is conforming to a social norm*. In principle, a standardly phatic utterance may be relevant in three ways: (a) by virtue of providing evidence of the speaker's genuine and unqualified interest in the hearer; (b) by virtue of providing evidence of the speaker's observance of a social norm of verbal behaviour, and (c) by virtue of both (a) and (b). But the evidence about the comparative relevance of (a) and (b) is very often inconclusive. Admittedly, there are occasions on which the hearer is almost certain that the utterance is used merely to fulfill a social norm. On other occasions the formulaic

character of the phatic utterance is patently irrelevant. However, in readily conceivable circumstances the utterance is partly relevant as an indication that the speaker is fulfilling a social norm, and partly as an expression of the speaker's interest in the hearer. The element of *disguise* that Coupland, Coupland and Robinson point out is due to the fact that the evidence about the comparative relevance of (a) and (b) is often inconclusive.

It should be clear from this discussion why speakers often modify stereotypical phatic utterances, as exemplified by A's initial question in (4):

(4) A: **So how long are you here for, for a month or so, or ... ?**

B: No, I'm afraid I have to go back after three weeks.

A: Yes / yes yes yes.

C: / Mhm

Still, /it's not bad, it gives you a bit

B: / (...

C: of time to / (er) look around.

B: ...) / That's right.

A: / Oh yeah.

B: Well otherwise it wouldn't be worth it, really, to come here.
/ It's so expensive,

A: / No no no no no.

(Schneider, 1988:256)

A's question would probably be more phatic if it were less complex. By using an utterance which makes it manifest to B that his reply will be

interpreted in a context in which fairly specific information about the length of B's stay is relevant, A indicates that his reasons for enquiring about B's holiday go beyond mere social convention. The search for what A intended to communicate by using the more complex (and, apparently somewhat redundant) utterance, results in some assumptions about A's genuine interest in B becoming more manifest. Of course, speaker A may deliberately use a less manifestly phatic utterance, precisely in order to conceal his superficial interest in the hearer. But, in this case, A is not ostensibly communicating to B that his interest is purely superficial.

4.2 Conventionalization

As Searle (1996) repeatedly emphasizes, institutionalization is not an either or matter. Some phatic expressions may be (informally) institutionalized, others are phatic by virtue of speech act type rules about their usage. For example, words like *hi* and *hello* count as greetings by convention. In terms of Bach and Harnish (1979) they are examples of *conventionalization*:

Whereas a communicative intention is fulfilled by means of recognition of that intention, a conventional intention is fulfilled by means of satisfying a convention.

...

For us conventions are count-as rules and nothing else.
(Bach and Harnish, 1979:108)

..., they [conventions] are actions which, if done in certain situations, count as doing something else. In other words, a convention is a mutually recognized means for doing something, counting as such only because mutually recognized, perhaps by having been agreed upon.

(Bach and Harnish, 1979:109)

A number of linguistic strings (which have, or, at least, used to have, linguistic meaning: *how do you do*, *yours sincerely*, etc.) seem to have become conventionalized in this way. On Sperber and Wilson's approach, these expressions, as well as those like *hi* and *hello*, do not contribute to the interpretation of the utterances in which they appear in virtue of their linguistic meaning (either because it has become suppressed, or because they have none), but rather in virtue of people's encyclopaedic knowledge about their use. So, when Mary says *hello* to Peter, he interprets her utterance by forming a description of the act of ostension: *Mary has said HELLO to me*, and by accessing some relevant contextual assumptions about how *hello* is usually understood: "*hello*" is an informal greeting. Peter then uses his descriptive representation of the act of ostension and the contextual assumption as premises, in deriving the conclusion: *Mary has greeted me informally*. The uses to which formulaic phatic expressions like *how do you do*, *yours sincerely*, etc. are typically put is made possible by the socially accepted conventions about their use. In relevance theory terms, these conventions are encyclopaedic assumptions about the use of particular linguistic items. They are higher order mental representations about how lower order linguistic representations are used. In speech act theory terms, greeting is a type of speech act, and the *conventions* which create the possibility of this type of speech act are called *constitutive rules*.⁸ Once again, I am not in a position to discuss the implications of the choice between these approaches.

⁸These remarks on greeting expressions are based on Gutt (1993:39-40; 148-152).

5. ***Phatic communication: risk and responsibility***

By and large ostensive-inferential communication is neither regulated nor created by rules. Such freedom from strict norms presents obvious advantages which come at a price: the risk of failure is seldom negligible. An important purpose of phatic exchanges is to establish, modify and maintain a mutual cognitive environment suitable for the efficient conduct of communication and other collaborative activities in which the interlocutors may wish to engage. That is why phatic communication is often unadventurous. Good phatic topics always involve safe choices: the weather, the hearer's well-being, the success of the hearer's holiday, and so on. These choices can be assumed to be relevant to at least some extent in most ordinary, everyday situations, even if the mutual cognitive environment of the interlocutors is rather poor. For example, imagine you meet a colleague on your way to work. It is quite likely that *Nice weather, isn't it?* would be a good phatic utterance on this occasion. Another utterance, say, *The harvest will be good this year, won't it?*, would almost certainly be inappropriate. Why should this be? After all, phatic conversations are often said to be on topics which are patently irrelevant, and what could be less relevant to your colleague than information about the prospect of a good harvest? Well, this information may actually be irrelevant, but the utterance would communicate the presumption of the relevance of this information, and the expectation of relevance thus created would not be fulfilled in any contexts (easily) available to the hearer. Of course, there are both cultural and individual differences about what can be taken for granted. The following example is illustrative in this connection:

- (5) A: Where are you from originally?
B: What used to be Yugoslavia.
A: Oh there's a lot of trouble there. Which part of Yugoslavia?
B: Belgrade.
A: **So are you a Serb then?**

A's last question indicates to B that A holds some beliefs like the following: *people who are from Belgrade are (mostly (?), exclusively (?)) Serbs; people from that part of the world (typically (?), invariably (?)) belong to a particular nationality; they generally have a definite sense of their national identity; B has a definite sense of his national identity, and so on.* Given that in B's view these assumptions are not valid, A has put him in a difficult position: B can either give a phatic answer which is not sincere, or a sincere answer which is not phatic. A sincere answer would necessarily be fairly complex and informative - more informative than B has reason to believe A expects it to be - and the main point would no longer be about maintaining the superficial level of collectivity adequate for all sorts of non-demanding collaborative endeavours. That is to say, the conversation would no longer be phatic.

The moral of A's communicative failure in (5) is a truism: responsibilities entail risks. These risks vary in kind and degree. In ostensive-inferential communication people (as communicators) **affect** others, and are liable to be seen as doing so rationally and intentionally. Of course, it is by no means necessary that all the effects of an act of communication be (perceived as) intentional. Take example (5) again. Upon hearing A's last question, B need not assume that A wants the conversation to move on from a phatic, superficial, exchange to a more informative discussion of a specific topic. It may be manifest to B that A's cognitive environment is less than adequate for the conduct of a

phatic conversation. And, if B is right in assuming that A wants to keep the communication at a fairly superficial level (superficial in that the interaction is maintained without significant investment of mental effort and without the interlocutors taking great risks), he will be justified in giving an answer which is less than sincere (while being phatic), since such an answer will be optimally relevant to A. What matters here is that B communicates his sincere consent to continue the conversation at the already established level of superficiality.

As we have seen, it is not quite possible to know how exactly the hearer will be affected by a given utterance in a specific situation. In the case just considered the misunderstanding on B's part would not have any major consequences. On other occasions, it may be more serious. Consider (6):

- (6) A: Where do you come from originally?
B: Yugoslavia.
A: Oh I know the war [World War II]. There were the partisans and the Chetniks. Ah the Chetniks they were very nasty!
B: Uhm uh [hesitates]
A: Well I suppose it always depends which side you are on.
B: I was not I wouldn't've been on their side but uhm uh there were all sorts of nasty people around at the time.

Speaker A shifts from phatic to non-phatic communication before an adequate mutual cognitive environment has been established, then realizes the potential risk (of causing disagreement with, or offending B) and backtracks. B tries to give an answer which does not make A feel awkward, although it contradicts a belief of A's (namely, that the Chetniks were the nastiest party in the war). The unease arises, because

A has misjudged the risk and the potential consequences of disagreement. Even if B does not assume that A actually intends to oppose his views, the utterance may cause offense to B, because A has accidentally provided conclusive evidence of holding a view which B disapproves of on moral grounds. A's mistake is to have used a particular utterance without taking heed of the context in which B is likely to interpret it.

In more successful phatic exchanges potentially controversial opinions are either avoided, or communicated weakly. The use of weak communication in minimizing the risk of causing offense is well-evidenced by exchanges where the status relationship between the interlocutors is being (re)negotiated:

(7) Are you feeling tired after all that hard work?

(Laver, 1974:217)

As Laver (1974) observes, the particular facts about social relationships affect the appropriateness of utterances like (7). Only higher or equal status grants the right to ask such questions. The interpretation of (7) depends on the manifestness of assumptions about the relative statuses of the speaker and hearer. The relevant facts about status enter verbal communication via the cognitive environments of the interlocutors. Let us look at a couple of possibilities. Suppose that it is manifest to the hearer that it is mutually manifest to both interlocutors that:

Situation (a)

The speaker **accepts** the existing status differential and it is inconceivable that she would want to question it.

Situation (b)

The speaker is **aware** of both the relevant social norms of verbal behaviour and of the existing difference in status.

In situation (a) the utterance will not communicate a desire to question or change the existing status relationship between speaker and hearer. It is more likely to be taken to betray the speaker's lack of awareness of particular conventions of behaviour (conventions whose origin can be rationally explained, but which are - and that may well be very significant in a specific situation - culture specific). By contrast, in situation (b) the utterance may (depending on other aspects of the mutual cognitive environment) communicate that the speaker would like the status relationship to change (whether in the long term, or for the purposes of the ongoing interaction), that she objects to the established status differential and that she is registering a mild protest by manifestly not conforming to expectations. The strength with which such information is communicated partly depends on the extent to which it is manifest to the hearer that the set of assumptions in (b) is mutually manifest. If their mutual manifestness is highly manifest to the hearer, he may well take the view that the speaker is impolite.

6. Phatic communication and politeness

Three observations about linguistic (im)politeness are particularly important in connection with phatic communication. First, (im)politeness is communicated ostensively. Second, the notion of politeness does not play a role in defining phatic communication: communicative behaviour can be polite or impolite, while being, or not being, phatic. Third, the extent to which phatic communication is institutionalized is intrinsically

connected with cultural values placed on universal moral principles concerning basic human rights.

Impoliteness seems to be a case of what I think could be termed ***inadvertent ostensive communication***. In order to show what I have in mind it will be useful to focus on the most important aspects of the inference process which results in the interpretation of an utterance as impolite:

- (a) the hearer identifies the information that the speaker intends to communicate (say, her desire to change the existing status differential), but
- (b) the utterance also yields some effects which were not actually intended by the speaker (say, her lack of respect for the hearer's views), and
- (c) despite this, the hearer is **justified** in deriving the additional effects in (b), because the resulting interpretation is consistent with the principle of relevance.

What makes this a case of inadvertent communication is the absence of the hearer's **actual** intention to communicate particular information. What makes it a case of **ostensive** communication is the fact that the interpretation is consistent with the principle of relevance: the hearer is justified in assuming that the communicator might rationally have intended to communicate that particular set of effects by using that particular utterance.

On this approach, the difference between mere impoliteness and negative phaticness (see section 3) is this: the attribution of impoliteness depends primarily on the contextualization of the linguistic meaning of the utterance (the evidence of the intention to communicate

the offensive information is, in fact, rather scant). By contrast, negative phatic utterances exploit the act of ostension itself. For example, in a specific situation, the utterance *What are you looking at?* makes it highly manifest that something negative is being communicated (Clark 1993) . It is interpreted, roughly, as follows: the hearer needs to make some hypotheses about a context in which some information about which particular individual the hearer is looking at is relevant to the speaker. It is highly manifest to the hearer that it is mutually manifest to both interlocutors that the hearer is looking in the direction of the speaker. In none of the contexts readily available to the hearer is any information about the identity of the individual the hearer is looking at optimally relevant to the speaker. Hence, the hearer goes one step up, as it were, and considers what the speaker intended to communicate by the act of ostension itself, in this case, by manifestly requesting manifestly irrelevant information. The hypotheses about the speaker's disapproval of the hearer, of the hearer's presence in the room, of the hearer's general attitude towards the speaker, and so on, become (more) manifest in the search for relevance. In this case, the manifestness of the intention to communicate some (negative) social attitude or other is comparatively high, while the manifestness of the particular assumptions communicated is comparatively low. The uncertainty about what exactly is communicated is due to the limited contribution that the evidence presented by the linguistic meaning of the utterance makes to the interpretation. The converse is true of utterances which are merely impolite (rather than hostile): the information communicated is comparatively highly manifest, but the manifestness of the intention to communicate this information is rather low. The uncertainty about the social attitude communicated is, in this case, due to the evidence of the speaker's communicative intention being rather

scant. In fact, the speaker may use (7) intending to be polite, hoping to convey a mere suggestion which the hearer is in a position not to take up, because it has been communicated weakly. If her estimate of the hearer's cognitive environment is way off, she may fail, and the hearer will be justified in interpreting the utterance as communicating something impolite: the responsibility for estimating the hearer's cognitive resources (including the context in which he is likely to process the utterance) lies with the speaker. But, if the speaker succeeds, the politeness of her utterance will also have been communicated inadvertently: the hearer is justified in interpreting the utterance as communicating the speaker's concern not to put the him in a mildly embarrassing position (in case he does not approve of the suggestion), although the speaker did not actually have the intention to communicate that she is showing consideration for the hearer. So, both politeness and impoliteness are typically communicated inadvertently.

The degree of impoliteness of a (phatic) utterance depends on the gravity of the offensive behaviour, which is primarily determined by the nature of the offense and the speaker's reasons for committing it. The nature of the offense is depends on what the offense is against. For example, since phatic communication is a kind of social institution, some phatic utterances may be impolite because the issues raised and the linguistic expressions used are deemed inappropriate for this type of conversation. There is a violation of a social convention and nothing more. An utterance may also be offensive because on moral grounds. Thus, the inappropriateness of (7) in situation (a) is not seen as serious, because the speaker has merely accidentally failed to conform to a convention. In situation (b), the violation of the convention is intentional, but the nature of the hearer's disapproval crucially depends on the context against which the deliberate violation of the social norm

is interpreted: if the hearer takes it for granted that any form of rebellious social behaviour is morally reprehensible, he is likely to be rather negative towards the speaker, despite the fact that the status differential has been questioned only weakly. What matters here is that the hearer's condemnation of the speaker is based, not on the realization that a norm has been violated, but this violation is taken as evidence of a deeper moral flaw. This link between social norms and moral values is not surprising, since cultural norms are (whether tacitly or overtly) ultimately grounded in moral values. However, the more indirect the link between the social norm and the moral values behind it is, the less threatening the transgression is taken to be. While the speaker of (7) can plead ignorance of social-cultural norms about indicators of status in verbal interaction, in example (6) speaker A provides rather conclusive evidence of holding a view which B strongly disapproves of, and A cannot put forward his lack of knowledge about how phatic conversations are conventionally conducted in his defense. Therefore, he tries to remove the threat of disagreement and offense by making a factual point about the subjective nature of the relevant judgements (*Well I suppose it always depends which side you are on*). So, although conventions and moral norms are difficult to disentangle, the distinction seems to be pragmatically relevant. Furthermore, it is independently supported by evidence from psychology. For example, Morton (1996) observes that children aged five readily differentiate between the transgression of moral norms (stealing) and the violation of school regulations. He concludes:

... the distinction between what is wrong and what is unconventional is available very early. It does not emerge from an undifferentiated "things you don't do" via reflection and analysis. It is as if the children were little Platonists, construing one another's actions as falling under an intuitively graspable form of The Good (or often more appropriately, The Bad).
(Morton, 1996:64)

The role of phatic communication in a society is partly determined by what counts as The Good and The Bad. For example, the right to be free is probably universal, but what counts as a transgression of somebody's freedom is certainly culture specific. One can easily imagine that in a society in which strong expressions of personal views count as impositions on the hearer's freedom, various types of weak communication unlikely to cause disagreement will evolve into (informal) social institutions aimed at avoiding the violation of the right to freedom from imposition. Similarly, if society places great value on the equality of individuals, various ways of acknowledging the worth of (the views of) others are likely to become institutionalized.⁹

7. Conclusion

I have proposed an account of phatic communication (a typically social use of language) within the framework of relevance theory (a typically cognitive pragmatic theory). If plausible, my analysis presents direct evidence against an all too familiar view of that theory:

In Sperber and Wilson's model, differences between people are depicted solely as differences between individuals' cognitive environments. These differences are assumed to stem from variations in physical environment and cognitive ability between people. Considerations of culture and society are notably absent in the characterization of individuals' cognitive environments.
(Talbot, 1993:3526)

To be sure, the question is not whether a notion like *mutual cognitive environment* is called for in pragmatics, social psychology and sociolinguistics. Some thirty years ago Berger and Luckmann pointed out:

⁹ Obviously, these are considerations relating to the notion of *face*. I do not use this term here, because it has been the focus of much controversy the detailed discussion of which lies beyond the scope of this article.

Knowledge of how the socially available stock of knowledge is distributed, at least in outline, is an important element of that same stock of knowledge.
(Berger and Luckmann, 1966/81:15)

Twenty-six years later Giles and Coupland observed:

..., we suggest that interactants share an array of assumptions; in fact, while it is perennially difficult to capture what is actually shared, this must be the case otherwise meaningful communication could never take off the ground.
(Giles and Coupland, 1991:2)

This article goes some way towards showing that relevance theory fills the gap which these authors are so acutely aware of: I set out to discover how far it is possible to go in characterizing phatic conversation within the framework of a general theory of human communication. The result of my investigation is a rather fine-grained account of the phatic use of language as a means of achieving a range of social goals through establishing, maintaining, and, broadly speaking, managing (mutual) cognitive environments.

I hope to have demonstrated that the term *phatic communication* does not identify a natural class of phenomena, but that *What is phatic communication?* is nevertheless a factual question. It differs from questions like *What do you say after you say "hello"?* which are not tractable, and which pragmatic theory should steer clear of, in much the same way as the theories in the natural sciences do not attempt to solve problems like: *How many people die in a flu epidemic?*, or *What will the weather be like in London on New Year's eve one hundred and twelve years from now?*.

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