

***Phatic Communion:
How It Works in Face-To-Face and Online Communications***

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Abstract

This is a paper that demonstrates how phatic communion works in both face-to-face and online communications. Communication is the act of transferring information from the speaker(s) to the hearer(s). Phatic communion is a type of communication that occurs in social interactions. In many communicative situations, speakers intend to convey information, but in some situations, it is not necessary that information needs to be conveyed. Interactants speak in many social interactions for a variety of reasons, including keeping away silent, maintaining a social relationship, and demonstrating friendliness, to mention a few. This is when phatic communion comes into play. Phatic referred to language used to create an atmosphere or maintain social contact rather than exchanging ideas and information. Nowadays, the internet has increasingly gained an important role in society; thus, communication does not only take place face-to-face, but online communication has become popular, especially among younger generations. A lot of online platforms, such as *Facebook*, *Instagram*, and *Twitter*, emerged to respond to the demand. Instead of only verbal language as in face-to-face communication, phatic communion expands its role into online interactions with this newly emerging communication method such as emoticons, stickers, and GIFs, to name a few. This article discussed what phatic communion is and how it works in both face-to-face and online communications. In addition, the article provides illustrative examples of phatic communion to aid the reader's comprehension. The methodology used in the study was observation in real-world settings and online platforms.

Keywords: Online Interactions, Phatic Communion, Social Interaction

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Introduction

What is phatic communion?

Phatic communion, first introduced by Malinowski (1923), is ‘a type of speech in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words (Malinowski, 2014: 285).’ In line with Crystal (2008: 360) who explains that ‘phatic’ refers to ‘language used for establishing an atmosphere or maintaining social contact rather than exchanging information and ideas (e.g., comments on the weather, or enquiries about health).’ According to Malinowski (1923), language is an instrument of thought and the communication of thought but phatic communion is defined as the language used in order not to convey thoughts but to establish a social relationship between the interactants; that is, phatic communion fulfills social functions. Leech (1981: 41) describes it as the function of ‘keeping communication lines open and keeping social relationships in good repair (talking about the weather in the British culture).’ There might be some people who confused the term ‘communication’ with the term ‘communion’ of Malinowski’s phatic communion concepts. According to Oxford Dictionary ‘communication’ is the exchange of information and ‘communion’ is the exchange of intimate thoughts and feelings, especially on a mental or spiritual level. Adam Kendon (mentioned in Senft, 1995) states that the more general meaning of the term ‘communion’ is the achievement of ‘rapport’ through the use of speech. Phatic communion’s main purpose is to establish bonds between the speaker and the hearer, not only to convey thoughts or exchange information as ‘communication’ does. Stereotyped phatic communion phrases are utterances used to avoid silence in interactions such as greeting formulae, apologies, weather comments, small talks. ‘Each utterance is an act serving the direct aim of the binding hearer to the speaker by a tie of some social sentiment or other [...] (Malinowski, 1936: 145).’ Malinowski (2014) states that human beings have a tendency to be together, to enjoy each other’s company, and phatic communion facilitates successful communication by preventing the feeling of danger, alarm, unfriendliness in the hearer that could threaten fellowship establishment in social interactions. Senft (1995), in line with Malinowski (2014), asserts that phatic communion is used to establish and maintain friendly atmospheres during the opening and the closing stages of social encounters including greetings and partings, apologies, weather comments, enquiries about someone’s health, small talk topics that do not mean to extract information. Laver (1975) expands the definition of Malinowski’s ‘phatic communion’ that it is ‘a type of speech in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words (Malinowski, 2014: 285).’ Malinowski’s original definition of phatic communion looks at the interactions through speech only in a limited set of phrases such as greetings, parting, apologies, remarking about the weather, asking about health in general, small talks but Laver J. (1975) looks at interactions through the opening/ the medial/ the closing phases which include not only verbal interactions but also non-verbal interactions and phatic communion functions as part the whole behaviour. It is obvious the literal meaning of ‘phatic communion’ is ‘communion achieved through speech (Laver, 1975: 216)’; however, in my opinion, Malinowski’s definition is an establishment to understand ‘phatic communion’ but it is quite narrow because speech always occurs in contexts and non-verbal acts are essential in the parts. In interactions, sometimes people do not need to exchange words, they understand each other. For example, if you do not want your friend to say something about you in front of others, you could just make eye contact with him/ her in order to indicate your intention, but this is also limited by the social relationship between you and the hearer. Examples by Hymes (1972: 40), in communities such as the Paliyans of South India where very verbal, communicative persons are regarded abnormal or even offensive; or for Wishram Chinook of the Columbia River, ‘one does not talk when one has nothing that needs to be said (Hymes,

1974: 127).’ Laver (1975) points out that communication cannot be achieved by a mere word exchange, and that phatic communion is one strand of communicative behaviours. In successful communication, there are many communication strands including gestures, body movements, eye contact, facial expressions which create communication. As mentioned, he divides the temporal structure of interaction into three major phases: the opening phase, the medial phase, and the closing phase. He explicates that the opening phase is to break the ice, the medial is the main business, and the closing one is the preparation for the departure. ‘The opening phase is the establishment and consolidation of the interpersonal relationship between the two participants. The closing phase is the comfortable management of the transition from non-interaction to full interaction, and the transition from interaction back to non-interaction’ (Laver, 1975: 232).

Some scholars dispute Malinowski’s claim that phatic communion is ubiquitous. Dell Hymes, one of those researchers, says that phatic communion is not just greeting routines, apologies, asking about health, weather, and so on, but very varies between cultures. Crystal (1987) provides instances to clarify Hymes’ statement. In Burundi, Central Africa, Rundi women commonly exclaim ‘I must go home, otherwise my husband will beat me’ as they depart. This woman lives in a male-dominated culture. Leaving a party or gathering usually involves parting phrases to ease the hearer’s rejection. If this happens in England or Thailand, the argument for fleeing will not be ‘my husband will beat me’ because both cultures are not male-dominant and consider the behavior cruel and unacceptable. Laver (1975) states that phatic conversations are used to ‘build relationship’ and ‘achieve transition’. I agree with Laver (1975) that phatic communion is not only greeting/parting formulae, little conversations, etc., but also a major basic competence to enable daily psychosocial interactions. I view that phatic communion is more than just exchanging words because the same words can imply different things in different contexts. Successful encounters do not necessarily include talking.

Substance

How does phatic communion work and is it really an important part of social interactions?

1. Phatic Communion in Face-to-Face Interactions

Phatic communion is a really important part of social interactions. If we talk about phatic communion according to Malinowski’s definition which is an exchange of words, its primary function is to avoid the hostility of silence in situations as Malinowski states ‘a man’s silence is alarming and dangerous, the communion of words to break the silence is the first act to establish links of fellowship (Ogden and Richards, 1923: 314).’ In society, people do not only talk because they intend to convey their thoughts or want some information but also to maintain a social relationship. For example, this was a situation I encountered. My housemate asked his colleagues for lunch at our house in England (I lived in a shared house); it was the first time I would meet his colleague. She was Vietnamese and the same age as me. She came early, I was the one who opened the door for her and walked her to the kitchen where my housemate was busy cooking. Once I opened the door, I greeted her, and along the way to the kitchen I asked her ‘is it cold outside?’ I knew it was cold outside because it was in the winter; so, this was not the question for acquiring information but this was phatic communion to keep silence away in order not to make the guest feel alarmed and feel that I was unfriendly to her. The guest replied that ‘it is very cold today.’ This was not intended to convey the weather information but it was the utterance of phatic communion as well to

maintain or specifically to pave the way for setting up a social relationship between me and her. On the contrary, if I had opened the door, said 'hi' and nothing more, she would have perceived the hostility, or if she had ignored my question, I would have felt alarmed and the companionship to be established as well as the friendly atmosphere during the meal could have been threatened. As a result, our social relationship could have been in danger. Comparatively, if this situation took place in Thailand, my home country, I would ask 'is it hot outside?' because Thailand is a hot country. If I ask 'is it cold outside?', the hearer would think there might be something wrong with me. This is an example showing that phatic communion is culturally variable. It can be seen that the linguistic token used in phatic communion in this situation is specific to the place of utterance. It also seems to me that phatic communion is an automatic act in social interactions for people who are likely to be accepted in society.

English is now a global language. I want to display phatic connectivity with other cultures. English and Thai greetings are examples. The Thai greeting 'Sawasdee' means 'happy' and 'dee' means 'excellent.' 'Sawasdee,' or 'Whaddee,' is employed in superior-inferior relationships like superiors and inferiors, teachers and students, seniors and juniors, parents and children, and so on. Greetings amongst friends are varied. If you meet your friends by chance, you may say 'what?' (to demonstrate that you are astonished to see them), 'how come we have met here?,' 'how are you?' (without saying 'hi/hello'), or just mention their names. According to Berger and Bradac (1982), 'how are you?' does not seek for self-revelation but acknowledges the other. Thus, Thai and English 'how are you?' acknowledge each other's presence. Thais can acknowledge greetings without saying 'Sawasdee.' Sometimes saying 'Sawasdee' or 'Waddee' to everyone seems weird. British people say 'hi/hello' to practically everyone, except in official contexts. In the British community, I can say 'hi/hello' to my friends, colleagues, teachers, and housemates in the morning, no matter their age. In Thailand, I must consider the hierarchy, social standing, and age of my listeners before greeting them and choose my greeting phrases accordingly. For example, 'Sawasdee' is appropriate for greeting professors but not friends or housemates. Thai people greet one other with 'where are you coming from?' or 'where are you going to?' These phatic greeting words are frequent in Thai greeting formulae, but in British cultures, asking these questions instead of saying 'hi/hello' looks impolite. On the Trobriand Islands, people ask 'where are you going to?' or 'where are you coming from?' interpersonally (Senft, 1995: 6). Senft (1995) explains that the Trobriand Islanders' phatic greeting formulas signals and assures that people are acknowledged and greeted and that the community guarantees their protection. Some people will also know their whereabouts if something happens on the way home or to their destination. This interpretation could apply to Thai communities, especially in the countryside where similar greeting formulations are widespread among acquaintances. Most rural residents are family; thus, they care about each other more than city dwellers. In my community, all homes are related, thus they rarely utter 'Sawasdee' in social encounters but instead inquire whereabouts. In British society, asking acquaintances about their whereabouts considered unpleasant and intrusive.

Another example showing that phatic communion differs between cultures. When a guest arrives at a Thai household, the host should invite them to dinner. The house owner would be considered impolite and hostile if they do not invite and only chat about business. Even though they both realize it's just a courteous gesture to invite the guest to dinner. This scenario requires a phatic deed to preserve the social bond. I experienced this in England. The guy fixed the kitchen heater while I ate lunch. I felt awkward and bad not inviting him to the

supper, but I knew if I had asked, he would have thought I was crazy because he is British and my culture is different.

2. Phatic Communion in Online Interactions

Internet is everywhere in this technology-connected world. Social use of internet-related technology is growing. According to Wang, Tucker & Rihll (2011: 44), these technologies include: (1) email systems, such as Microsoft Mail (1988), Yahoo Mail (1997), Google Mail (2004); (2) commercial sites, such as Amazon (1996), eBay (1998); (3) social networking sites, such as The Well (1985), AOL (1989), ICQ (1996), Facebook (2004); and (4) a variety of web-based software programs that allow users to interact and share data through social networking sites, such as Napster (2003). Technology has changed our lives and relationships. Software's social impact has made the Internet part of society. *Instagram*, *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *LinkedIn*, and *WhatsApp* have been popular worldwide during the past decade.

Wang, Tucker & Rihll (2011: 44) term these interfaces as 'phatic technologies' and define the concept of phatic technology as a technology that serves to establish, develop and maintain human relationships. These technologies promote online interactions and currently they are even more popular since Covid-19, the deadly virus transmitted through air, struck the world in 2019. The COVID-19 pandemic has continued to spread around the world, with 623,000,396 confirmed cases and 6,550,033 deaths attributed to the disease so far in October 2022 ("WHO Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard," n.d.). Regarding work, people need to maintain social distancing to stop the virus transmission; thus, the stay-at-home policy was enacted in many workplaces around the globe. A lot of people are required to work from home. New platforms to facilitate online working such as *Zoom*, *Microsoft Teams*, *Google Classrooms* were emerged and become widespread in a very short time. In terms of casual activities, people have less face-to-face interactions because they are afraid of the Covid-19 contraction, more interactions have moved to online platforms. These online interfaces offer typed interactions, and some elements that trigger a phatic feeling of connectedness and presence, for example the 'paralinguistic digital affordances' (Carr, Wohn & Hayes, 2016) on *Facebook* such as acknowledgements (*like, love, wow, sad, angry*) and calls for attention ('poke'), together with automated linguistic reminders of initiated interactions (personal emails) (Yus, 2019). The poke is a form of phatic communication that serves the purpose of keeping individuals in touch and make connections without making any substantial information (Wang, Tucker & Haines, 2012). Radovanovic (2008: 12-13) explained that in social networking terms, a 'poke' can be interpreted depending on the contexts and the level of familiarity between the 'poker' and the 'pokee'. It usually denotes the expressions such as: 'Hey, what's up?' or 'Look at me!', or saying 'Hi' to someone whom we already know well. There are more possible meanings and interpretations behind a poke, which can include: a) showing romantic interest for the other; b) a high visibility, low pressure way of getting attention; c) a lightweight interaction.

As far as I remember, I was poked once. It quite surprised me because my Thai friends in *Facebook* hardly sent me a poke; they would just send 'hi/ hello' in the messenger if they wanted my attention. This friend who sent me a poke was a Mexican friend whom I never met in person. We knew each other because she wanted to rent my room after I left the room, so we were not so close. After I left that room for 4-5 months, I saw that she poked me, so I sent her 'hi, how are you? You sent me a poke. What is it?' in her messenger. I expected she wanted to talk to me about something important, asking for help or making a request about

something she assumed I could help her with, but she said she only thought about me when she went into the kitchen since some of my culinary utensils were still there, and that was it. If my Thai pals had prodded me, they would have had something useful to say. It suggested cultural disparities. My Mexican acquaintance was blunt and ended the conversation. Thai friends would talk longer, or phatic communion. I learned about cultural differences without resentment.

Facebook is one of the online platforms that is very popular in Thailand with about 50.75 million users in 2020 ("Thailand: number of Facebook users 2017-2026 | Statista", 2021). I am one of the people who use it frequently. In my opinion, Facebook is used to express oneself, to follow trends, update current situations and more importantly, to connect with people. The acknowledgements 'like' is a phatic signal to express feelings to others without any typed information. In these recent years, there are more various forms of emoticon and smileys (Radovanovic & Ragnedda, 2012) on Facebook such as 'love', 'care', 'wow', 'angry', 'sad' buttons, of which the users cannot only click these buttons on posts but also on comments. They are powerful phatic tools as they can be used to express one's feelings more specifically, which means that they can strengthen relationship or even make strangers become acquaintances. I will give you an example. Facebook friends whom you are not very close to hit the 'like', 'love', or 'care' buttons for your posts from time to time, you would feel closer to them and if they do it regularly, you would feel much closer to them. This feeling occurs because what they did is to acknowledge your existence. They made you feel special. Even if you have never met, you will feel like you are friends. However, this is one-sided because the other person can react whenever they want and can think, rethink, delete, and amend their answers.

Kulkarni (2014) investigated phatic function in instant messaging interactions. She categorized phatic words from the corpus in her study into three categories: establishing contact such as *hi, hello, dude, there? (are you there?)*; maintaining contact such as *wow!, nice, cool, ok*; terminating contact such as *goodnite, GN, Gnite, ok*. In my opinion, phatic signals are informative, not only used to maintain or establish a relationship because they always send some information to the receiver. For instance, if my friend told me in the messenger about her fabulous skydiving lessons and I type 'wow!'. This 'wow' is used to maintain the conversation and also tell my friend that I was excited about her story. Then, it goes to the notion that phatic words can be used to maintain the relationship. Thus, if you say that phatic communion is not informative, it is not necessarily true. Even the emoticons '*sad, happy, care, love*' always send information to the interlocutor. That is, the information is sent through signals, not words.

Computer-mediated communication is different from face-to-face communication, according to Kulkarni (2014). They are online at the same time, but they do not have to acknowledge each other like they do in person. Online conversations often end with one or both parties disappearing. Internet reception or platform crashes may be the cause. Thus, conversations may stop abruptly. Kulkarni (2014) found this in her instant messaging study. Online chats have 'no reaction,' 'without endings,' and 'abrupt endings.' Online users should be aware that internet stability may vary. Interlocutors can also just leave if they want to end the chat, or it may end accidentally. I think these circumstances could cause miscommunication. For instance, I cease talking to my buddies in the messenger. I might disappear because my niece fell into the pond and I have to rescue her, but my friend might be offended. With friends, I can explain later, but with a boss or senior, it could be considered rude. Online conversations might lead to unexpected outcomes, so be understanding.

Conclusion

These examples show that phatic communion is crucial in face-to-face and online social encounters because it establishes and solidifies relationships. Phatic communion is done by persons who want to be social. Phatic communion establishes a social relationship, making encounters more successful. Phatic communion is still the predominant form of communication, even though individuals use more online interfaces. Phatic communion helps people be together and welcomed because humans are social. Since I am most familiar with Thai and British cultures, I have shown how phatic communion differs between cultures. Cultural phatic acts vary. Phatic communion that connects people in one culture may be harsh and odd in another. Thus, social interactions require both phatic communion and cultural awareness.

Online and face-to-face phatic communion differ. Due to the distance between them, online chatters must be more specific to avoid misunderstandings. Instead of leaving the messenger empty, you might message 'thinking...' to your friend if they asked you something on it. If your friends comment on your Facebook post and you have nothing to say, tap the acknowledgement button to show you appreciate their opinion and strengthen the friendship. Facial expressions and body language will describe you in person. I believe internet phatic signals let people connect while separated. According to Radovanovic & Ragnedda (2012: 12), phatic expressions in online conversations build, maintain, and strengthen connections. This article shows that social relationships require phatic communion, whether online or in person.

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