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The Function of Phatic Communication in the English Language

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Abstract: This paper considers the social function of phatic communication in English. Phatic communication does not inform; it strengthens social bonds and ensures that the channel of communication is open. In other words, phatic communication is concerned with the process of communication not the content of communication. The following question is explored: What are the communicative situations that the phenomenon of phatic communication can function properly in? Thus, the paper aims at identifying the function of phatic communication along with some contextual elements influencing it. To achieve the above aim, it is hypothesized that phatic communication is intended to establish ties of union among interlocutors rather than seeking information. In order to achieve the aim of the study and examine its hypothesis, the following procedures are adopted: 1) Conducting a theoretical account of phatic communication in English along with its function from different perspectives, and 2) Investigating the relationship between phatic communication and politeness according to the literature written. Then, it is inferred that phatic communication is a type of communication that has a social function rather than informative function. It is generally used to serve social functions like establishing and maintaining a friendly and harmonious atmosphere between interlocutors. Phatic communication is a social lubricant that does not convey information, but it only keeps communication lines open.

Keywords: Phatic Communication, Function, Politeness

1. Introduction

Language is mainly used to communicate information or feelings, but it also has another function which is that of establishing and maintaining social relations. In other words, in phatic communication, language is used to establish social contact among people rather than conveying or seeking information. Then, phatic communication can refer to utterances that are said to have exclusively social, bonding functions maintaining friendly and harmonious atmosphere in interpersonal relations. Such utterances help keeping the communication channel open [19].

The term "phatic" (from the Greek phátos: speech) was coined by the anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski (1923) in his phrase 'phatic communion'. He observed that the situation of the conversational exchange consists in, and largely created by, 'what happens linguistically' in some types of communicative interaction (e.g. greeting, gossiping). In other words, the meanings of the words used are almost irrelevant, that is they represent linguistic expressions fulfilling a social function. They establish an atmosphere of sociability and personal communion between people in an attempt to overcome silence creating a sense of being in positive rapport with each other [8].

Phatic communication focuses more on the mere act of communication and less on the content of communication. There are different expressions of phatic communication in the English language depending on different hearers and situations, such as: "Good afternoon," "How do you do?" "Nice day" [17]. Each utterance represents an act that serves the direct aim of binding the interlocutors by the tie of some social sentiment or other [15]. In addition, the English speakers create good social relationships by making use of a considerable number of functions that are going to be further illustrated later.

At last, phatic communication and politeness are related to each other in the sense that they are both concerned with aspects of social relationships and with something that goes beyond meaning [7]. Hence, in section 1, phatic

communication is introduced etymologically. In section 2, the relevant definitions of phatic communication are outlined according to different perspectives. In section 3, the function of phatic communication is discussed. In section 4, the phenomenon of phatic communication is examined in relation to politeness. At the end, the review is hoped to reach to a functional conclusion which shoes that phatic communication is used to fulfil a social function making the interlocutors to feel their way towards the establishment of rapport.

2. Phatic Communication

Phatic communication involves speech that serves to establish and maintain initial social contact between people. In this sense, it enables interactants to carry out accent identification and categorization by creating an environment that is rich in social and auditory information. It is language that binds the hearer to the speaker by a tie of some social sentiment or other. Besides, phatic communication joins people in a relatively inoffensive manner and allows them to exchange noncontroversial background information that is unlikely to create conflicts between interactants [9].

According to West and Turner [21], phatic communication consists of words and phrases that are used for interpersonal contact only and are not meant to be translated verbatim. Such a kind of communication can be thought of as content-free because listeners are not supposed to think about the meaning of the statement; instead, they are expected to respond to the polite contact the speaker is making. For example, when someone is asked "Hi, how are you doing?", he is just being made contact to and the person who asks does not want really to know how the detailes about the other person is doing. Gramley and Patzold [11] point that what is important about such a use of language is not the informative value of what is said or the originality or creativity of the language used, but that something is said at all and that silence is avoided so that speaker and addressee feel at ease and can enjoy each other's company. In this way, language is used to keep social relations in good repair by ensuring that people keep talking with each other. Finally, phatic communication is seen as a kind of verbal formulae consisting of choices from a limited set of stereotyped phrases. Greetings and small talk are key examples of phatic communication. It helps the interlocutors to be at ease and establish connections on a more personal level [6].

At last, scholars chiefly linguists have characterized phatic communication as follows [16]:

1) Making conversation for the sake of it.
2) Using language for the sake of maintaining rapport.
3) Talking where speakers' relational goals supersede their commitment to factuality and instrumentality.

3. Phatic Devices

Phatic communication can be achieved by different devices that are utilized to indicate differences between the participants.

3.1. Openings and Closings

The opening and closing phases of an interaction are realized by greetings, warming up talk and farewells. *Hi* and *hello* are among the conventionalized phatic words [4]. Other examples are "Good afternoon," "How do you do?" "Nice day" [14].

3.2. Appeals and Uptakes

These devices contribute to establish and develop the relation between the interlocutors in the communicative contact. That is, a turn-final item serving as an "appealer" for feedback followed by the next speaker's turn-initial "uptake" are the most effective devices in maintaining the communicative contact [10]:

-You thought that was funny *eh*?
-*Yeah*.
-I'll be down in about twenty minutes, *okay*?
- *Alright*.

3.3. Connective Linkers

The main purpose of this device is to avoid gaps in the conversation. *Well* and sometimes *cos* (because) are typical examples and their use is purely phatic [12]:

- 'what are you going to wear?'
- 'well I'm going to put on a black jeans skirt and on top I really don't know I've got many options'

3.4. Verbal Fillers and Hedges

These devices work on the macrostructural level. They help the speaker to hold the turn by filling the gap in the conversation and thus keeping it going. They are realized by filled pauses in the conversation, as in [20]:

- Come on I want the truth and nothing but truth, [what did you say]?
- [*er*, well] I told her that, I told her all the sad things you'd ever done in your life
- Like what?
- Like *erm*, *er*, I can't think off hand now.

Likewise, hedges functions as fillers helping the speaker when does not know how to proceed or struggles for words [20]:

-... my brother at least thinks Jimmy's really nice,
- Does he ?
- *like* yeah because *like*, about what he did you know he was staying up for pairs and all this, and *like* giving him money and looking after Andrew, so he goes to my parents Jimmy's really nice.

As such, hedges reduce the speaker's commitment to what is being said.

4. The Function of Phatic Communication

The idea of phatic communication was first introduced by Malysonki (1949) as a type of speech in which ties of union

are created by a mere exchange of words. Viewed in this way, one gains the impression that phatic communication is something trivial, however: although trivia are the subject-matter of phatic communication, the function it performs is a vital one indeed. This view is derived from a linguistic tradition that highlighted the unimportance of the propositional content of phatic utterances in terms of information transmission portraying them as linguistic devices aimed at recognizing each interlocutor's presence [1]. Against this view comes the view of Laver in his paper "Communicative Functions of Phatic Communion" which defends that phatic communication is extremely important for social interaction as it provides indexical information about interlocutors' social roles constraining the nature of the interaction. In other words, it provides a working consensus about the interlocutors' identity, attribute, and attitude revealing their perceptions and their relative social status [13]. He divided this particular interaction into three different phases: the opening phase, the medial phase, and the closing phase. In the opening phase the interlocutors try to lubricate the transition from silence to interaction. They break the ice in an attempt to move to the medial phase. And the closing phase is also transitional in the sense that serves the transition from full interaction to departure again [13].

Then, phatic exchanges do not inform and do not express any particular thought. Nevertheless, they strengthen social bonds and establish the possibility of communication. In other words, it functions to neutralize the threat of taciturnity. As such, it is essential to distinguish between utterances that tell about a certain state of affairs without affecting the nature of the relationship between the interlocutors and the ones that particularly connect with the relationship in question. It is not always so easy to draw the borderline between these two functions of utterances, but it is also true that the next two examples are different from each other in terms of the speaker's disposition towards maintaining a social relationship with the hearer [2]:

1) The manager asked to see you a minute ago. (John to Suzan, in the morning, they are colleagues, Suzan walks into the office).
2) It's a lovely day. (John to Suzan, in the morning, they are officemates, Suzan walks into the office).

It is possible to assert that the first example belongs to the information communicated strongly, whereas the second one has basically to do with John's communicative intentions, i. e. as soon as he involved himself with Suzan, he shows some social attitudes towards her [2].

The purpose of phatic communication concerns the process of interaction, not its substance. In other words, the purpose may be to prolong communication, to discontinue communication, to check whether the communication channel is operational ("Hello, can you hear me?"), to attract attention, or to confirm continued attention ("Are you listening?"). Thus, phatic communication operates when the message is not intended to provide information, i. e. there is no communication problem to solve. Nevertheless, the phatic act of communication is not a waste of time or effort. Even though no new information is sent, the act ensures that existing communication channels are open and usable [14].

Furthermore, the breaking of silence is the first act to establish fellowship. Making gossip also serves phatic communication as it makes closer superiors in informal situations in the absence of someone else within the hearing distance. In addition, diffusing anxiety is a further social goal of such type of communication that can be non-committal [18].

Finally, phatic communication as an act conveys important information about the needs and wishes of the interlocutors. For example, when using certain speech acts such as complimenting, those speech acts tell an addressee that he is being approved of. This kind of information is conveyed indirectly through the speech act. Saying something like ''I like your shirt.'' is therefore often more than just a compliment –it is a solidarity marker [3].

5. Phatic Communication and Politeness

The study of phatic communication and politeness can be seen as going beyond considerations of what is linguistically communicated. Phatic communication refers to communication whose main aim has to do with social relationships between interlocutors and depends relatively weakly on the encoded meanings of the words used. Politeness is taken account of by taking advantage of the notion of 'face'. It is considered cross- culturally and an account of ways is developed by means of which interlocutors modify behavior to enhance, protect or attack each other's face. Then, both studies of phatic communication and politeness are concerned with aspects of social relationships and with something that goes beyond meanings derived directly from the linguistically encoded meanings of words [5].

Furthermore, phatic communication is very much related to politeness. First of all, engaging in phatic communication is the polite thing to do. Second, both phatic and polite utterances are frequently realized by the use of standard forms [5].

However, politeness is not necessarily a feature of phatic communication: communicative behaviour can be polite or impolite while being, or not being, phatic. Then, the extent to which phatic communication is institutionalized is intrinsically connected with culture [5]. Phatic communication differs in its formality, length, and subject matter according to the culture. What is appropriate in one culture may not be appropriate in another. For example in the USA businesspeople think that to be informal is a form of showing confidence. This is not the case in other countries, however, i.e. to be informal and not to use titles might be considered rude or make others feel not at ease [6].

6. Conclusions

It seems fitting so far to draw some general conclusions from the prior discussion of such a kind of communication

that is quintessentially social, i. e. phatic communication.

Phatic communication is a type of communication in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words. It is that which on the surface appears to be insignificant in that it offers very little to an interlocutor as far as information exchange is concerned. However, phatic communication conveys important information about the interlocutors' wishes and needs. Phatic communication is generally used to serve social and bonding functions like establishing and maintaining a friendly and harmonious atmosphere between interlocutors. Phatic communication is regarded as a social lubricant, in the sense that it does not convey information, but it only keeps communication lines open. Phatic communication is achieved by certain devices, like openings and closings, appeals and uptakes, connective linkers, and verbal fillers and hedges. Finally, it is inferred that phatic communication and politeness are strongly related in the sense that they are both concerned with aspects of social relationships and with what goes beyond what is linguistically communicated.

As a result of the conclusions mentioned above, it is recommended to take account of the types of phatic expressions that are used to create ties of unions.

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