

*Analysis of Phatic Utterances in Fictional Dialogue: A Case study of Austen's Persuasion*

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***Abstract:***

Any conversational exchange can be informational or phatic. Occasional exchanges are of no lesser importance than the informative content of the dialogue. One needs to establish the channel of communication by setting up a social environment which is conducive to the exchange of ideas among the participants. The present qualitative corpus based study was conducted to investigate a sociolinguistic framework designed for the analysis of naturally occurring conversations. Laver's theoretical framework of phatic communion was applied to analyze phatic utterances in Austen's Persuasion. Based on the theory, the kinds of comments or tokens that speakers use in phatic exchanges are classified as neutral tokens, self-oriented and other-oriented tokens. The conversation samples of persuasive criteria were selected for phatic communion, and thereby explain the process of persuading someone to think differently. The findings revealed that phatic communion can be informational and meaningful to follow certain special aims, as this paper demonstrated the novel's phatic communions followed the aim of persuasion.

**Key words:** neutral tokens, other-oriented tokens, phatic communion, self-oriented tokens.

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## 1. Introduction

Phatic communication, or more commonly known as small talk, is described as conversation for the sake of talking or conversing. In general, phatic communion is taken to mean the kind of ritualistic linguistic behavior which characterizes the beginnings and endings of conversations. This normally includes the formulaic gambits of greeting and parting (for example, ‘Hello’, ‘Good morning’), along with a set of stereotypical remarks concerning the weather. Malinowski, who actually coined the term in the 1920s, defined phatic communion as “a type of speech in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words” (Malinowski 1972, p.151). Furthermore, he stressed that in a phatic exchange the actual words are used to fulfill a social function, and that is their principal aim, but they are neither the result of intellectual reflection, nor do they necessarily arouse interest in the listener (Malinowski, 1972).

Malinowski then introduced the concept of phatic communion into linguistics. Discussing the language used in what he called “free aimless social intercourse”, he mentioned “inquiries about health, comments on weather” (Malinowski, 1936, p. 313), and greeting formula. It is important to reiterate Malinowski’s comment that phatic communion has an important social function. Amongst other things, this ‘small talk’ helps avoid uncomfortable silences at the beginning and ending of conversations. This is particularly relevant to encounters with new acquaintances. However, the kinds of topics chosen for phatic exchanges are not normally referentially significant. Such remarks are not intended to convey important or ‘newsworthy’ information; nor are they to be interpreted as such by an interlocutor.

In an important paper for the discussion of Malinowski’s concept, John Laver (1975) elaborated on all ‘communicative functions of phatic communion’ in detail. In that paper, he first pointed out that “the fundamental function of the communicative behavior that accompanies and includes phatic communion is the detailed management of interpersonal relationships during the psychologically

crucial margins of interactions” (p. 217). He then described and analyzed the function of so-called ‘phatic communion’ utterances in the opening and closing phases of interaction, especially with respect to the transition phases from “noninteraction to full interaction” and from “interaction back to no interaction” (p. 232) as well as the role of phatic communion with respect to interactional consensus and as a kind of ‘rite of passage’. Thus, Laver modified and broadened Malinowski’s concept, emphasizing and proving that “language is used to convey more than the propositional content of what is said” (Levinson, 1983, as cited in Senft, 2009, p. 231).

Padilla Cruz (2005a) suggested a theoretical approach to the production and interpretation of phatic utterances aimed at complementing other previous accounts. He, apposite this research, employed relevance theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1986, 1995) and argued that utterances were normally interpreted as phatic either because of their occurrence in particular conversational phases forming fixed adjacency pairs with other utterances, or because interlocutors activated specific frames and processed them in a particular way.

Applying pragmatic view of politeness as a strategic behavior in phatic expressions was investigated by Padilla Cruz (2005b). He explored three different pragmatic approaches to the teaching of instant messaging politeness of phatic utterances in English. He subscribed to the pragmatic view of politeness as a strategic behavior, and followed Brown (2000, p. 83) in that he also understood politeness as a special way of treating people, saying and doing things in such a way as to take into account the other person’s feelings. He employed different methods to achieve different objectives about phatic expressions.

The other work around pragmatic areas was conducted by Kulkarani (2012) to investigate phatic communion in instant messaging. In contrast to Cruz (2005b), he did not consider the pragmatic view of politeness as a strategic behavior. He proposed that

the physical channel involves the attention that speakers must pay to each other in an interaction while psychological connection is achieved through showing interest and expressing agreement.

Ekanath (2012) identified the phatic cues in instant massaging interactions used to achieve contact between speakers and highlighted the interactional work done by interlocutors in maintaining contact. But another researcher, al-Qinai (2011) explored the effect of misinterpreting culturally divergent phatic communion formulae in an English-Arabic context. Other sociolinguistic parameters such as topic, setting, age, sex and social status were considered. The three previous research studies that were already mentioned, worked on phatic, while their objectives, methods and conclusion were different.

Zegarac and Clark (1999) in their paper about phatic interpretations and phatic communication, considered how the notion of phatic communication can best be understood within the framework of Relevance Theory. In contrast to Cruz (2005a), they did not investigate in the framework of politeness. They argued that the term 'phatic' should be applied to interpretations, and they explored predictions about phatic interpretations which followed the framework of Relevance Theory, including the claim that phatic interpretations should be derived only when non-phatic interpretations were not consistent with the Principle of Relevance.

Hakim (2012) and Parastica (2009) analyzed phatic communions in the movies based on different approaches. The first study was analyzed by using transcription, as well as identifying, marking up, and the relationship between cultural or situational aspects of the conversation with the language used. But Parratica's study (2009) used the socio-pragmatics approach to describe the forms of phatic communion employed by characters in the movie.

Cruz (2007) argued that phatic communion influences the ties of union between interlocutors. There have been two different attitudes toward phatic utterances. First, some linguists considered phatic communion as linguistic devices to establish or maintain relationship between interlocutors, because it does not significantly aim at

improving the interlocutor's knowledge (e.g. Abercrombie, 1956, 1998; Coulmas, 1981; Edmondson and House, 1981; Hudson, 1980; Leech, 1974; Turner, 1973). But some true and authentic discourse can be classified as informative, which is the opposite of what can be termed as social or interactive (e.g. Coupland, 2000; Coupland and Ylänne-McEwen, 2000; Holmes, 2000a; Tracy and Naughton, 2000). Second, other linguists have seen in phatic utterances a fundamental mechanism for social interaction because of the feeling of involvement, agreement, union or solidarity that they create between interlocutors (e.g. Coupland, Coupland & Robinson, 1992; Coupland, Robinson and Coupland, 1994; Leech, 1983; Lyons, 1968; Schneider, 1988; Silva, 1980).

## 2. Methodology and Framework

This study was drawn upon John Laver's important research on phatic communion. In a paper entitled 'Communicative Functions of Phatic Communion' (Laver, 1975), he has offered a useful description of the kind of strategies that speakers use in the opening and closing phases of conversation. Laver has developed his theory in the following way. He has proposed a three-way typology, which is intended to account for the literal reference of the phatic tokens. The first category is neutral tokens. These comprise references to factors concerning the context of situation, which are not personal to either the speaker or hearer. In English, such tokens are frequently comments on the weather. There are, however, other kinds of neutral tokens. Laver has provided some examples of variations on this theme: 'Great view' (to a fellow tourist) or 'About time these trains were cleaned' (to a fellow passenger). Clearly, in all cases neutral tokens have relevance to factors affecting both participants equally. The remaining two categories are self-oriented tokens and other-oriented tokens. Self-oriented tokens refer to factors personal to the speaker, whilst other-oriented tokens refer to factors personal to the listener. Examples of the former category would be 'Hot work, this' or

'My legs weren't made for these hills'; whilst examples of the latter category would be 'How's life?' or 'Do you come here often?' (Kendon, et al, 2011)

The last aspect of phatic communion that Laver (1975) has discussed in the opening phase of interactions was concerned with the indexical management of interpersonal relations between the two participants, and has had an ethological bias, to do with considerations of territoriality; when one participant is static in space, and the other is moving towards him, in whatever type of physical locale, then, unless there are overriding special reasons, there seems to be a strong tendency, both in Britain and America, for the "incomer" to initiate the exchange of phatic communion. A number of conclusions spring from this, all deriving from the general notion that by breaking the silence first, the speaker defines some aspects of the role he is prepared to play in the oncoming interaction. Firstly, the speaker recognizes that in some sense the static listener is in a closer psychological relationship with the immediate territory than he is, and that in a way the listener can be regarded as the owner of the territory. Secondly, he acknowledges his own awareness of the fact of his invasion of the listener's territory. Thirdly, he declares in effect that his intentions are pacific, and offers a propitiatory token. Fourthly, merely by speaking, and implicitly inviting the listener to participate in a linguistic interaction with him, the speaker asserts a claim to sociolinguistic solidarity with the listener. If the listener accepts the invitation to a spoken interaction, then by implication he gives the speaker a safe-conduct to enter his territory without making him suffer a counter display of hostility (Laver, 1975).

In the closing phase of interaction, the sequence of the stages is the mirror image of the stages of the opening phase. In the first stage, it allows the participants to achieve a cooperative parting, in which any feelings of rejection by the person being left can be assuaged by appropriate reassurance from the person leaving. One channel characteristically exploited for the exchange of such transition signals

is the visual channel. In a private, two-person interaction, a sudden prolongation of the typical duration of eye contact seems to function as one transitional signal; in nonprivate encounters between two interactants, such as the party situation, or social meeting at conferences, avoidance of eye contact for a longer period than conventional during the medial phase, often coupled with 'roaming' gaze, seems to have the same function. Another transition signal is a greater shift of orientation or of posture than typically occurs in the medial phase. Other signals include an overt glance at one's watch, or a facial expression such as a slight smile coupled with a raising of one's eyebrows, where the momentary interactional state of the medial phase makes no call for such an indication of apparent cordial, attentive agreement. Linguistic signals of transition from the medial phase include the same sort of vague, curtailed utterances as are used in the transition from the opening phase to the medial phase, such as "Well..." Secondly, it serves to consolidate the relationship between the two participants, by means of behavior which emphasizes the enjoyable quality of the encounter, the mutual esteem in which the participants hold each other, the promise of a continuation of the relationship, the assertion of mutual solidarity, and the announcement of a continuing consensus for the shape of encounters in the future (Laver, 1975).

Laver's Phatic Communion framework was applied to some short sequences of phatic in a worth classical British fiction. All the examples were taken from Jane Austen's *Persuasion* (1993). It was tried to select the phatic between two chief characters of the novel. The book exceeds 200 pages and is composed of two Volume with twelve chapters and a canceled chapter that is added at the end.

### 3. The Analysis

Before analyzing the examples by using the Laver framework, it is necessary to say a few words on the plot of the novel even at the expense of spoiling the story of those yet unfamiliar with the text.

Anne Elliot is the middle daughter of a foolish, spendthrift baronet. Eight years ago, being twenty years old, she was acquainted with a remarkably fine young man, captain Wentworth. They fell rapidly and deeply in love. Whereas her god mother, Lady Russel who deprecated the connection in every light, persuaded her to refuse his proposal. Captain became unconvinced and sad. Then, where in chapter 7, he comes back without giving any special attention to Anne. However, conversations which occur between them persuades him to declare his proposal at the final chapter of the novel.

Example (a) below was selected from the ninth chapter of the novel. This example is the first dialogue, after eight years, between Captain Wentworth and Anne Elliot; captain walked into the room and surprisingly found himself almost alone with Anne Elliot, so deprived his manners of their usual composure:

(a) He started, and could only say, "I thought the Miss Musgraves had been here –Mrs. Musgraves told me I should find them here" before he walked to the window to recollect himself, and feel how he ought to behave. 'They are upstairs with my sister-they will be down in a few moments, I dare say' had been Anne's reply, in all the confusion that was natural." (p. 60)

In this example, Captain initiated a usual phatic exchange. Several points should be mentioned concerning this phatic token merit discussion. First, Captain selected a neutral token: he refers to a matter which was not personal to either the speaker or hearer; talking about the Miss Musgraves. Being surprised and embarrassed because of meeting her and being alone with her, he tried to ask about Miss Musgraves to pretend that he did not come to see Anne and he did not pay any attention to her. He also changed his location to hide and overcome his embarrassment. Anne was also surprised and confused about meeting him, moreover her reply was neutral. Second, although the protagonists were in the stressful situation, their phatic use of language was emotionally uncontroversial material.

It is also worth noting the discussion of providing an appropriate place at which to introduce another of Laver's observations on phatic communion. This concerns Laver proposition of the following



formula: "When one participant is static in space and the other is moving towards him, in whatever type of physical local, then...there seems to be a strong tendency...for the 'incomer' to initiate the exchange of phatic communion." (Laver, 1975, p. 226)

This formula is certainly adhered to, as Captain, the 'incomer', offers the phatic token to the protagonist, who is static in space. The speaker recognized that in some sense the static listener is in a closer 'psychological relationship' with the immediate territory than he is and that in a way the listener can be regarded as the owner of the territory (Laver, 1975). This is clearly the case with respect to example (a). Here, the static listener is positioned squarely within the territory of his interlocutor and, as he is also surprised, he is likely to be in a close 'psychological relationship' with this territory.

The next example was chosen from seventh chapter of volume two. It is related to the time when Anne, her cousin and the captain were in a café, waiting for the rain to stop, so they can go out. After a while they decided to go home, so for a farewell:

(b) Anne and her cousin walked off together [...] a gentle and embarrassed glance, and a 'good-morning to you', being all that she had time for, as she passed away. (p.138)

In this example, Anne used the neutral token 'good morning to you' to initiate the linguistic signals of closing phase, but in contrast to example (a) he did not receive any response from addressee. As Laver (1975) explained in non-private encounters between two interactants, avoidance of eye contact for a longer period, often coupled with "roaming" gaze, seems to have the function of performing appropriate signals of transition, indicating the desire for the onset of the closing phase and the end of the medial business phase. In this example, Anne used a gentle and embarrassed glance to perform the appropriate signals of transition from the medial phase to the end.

The following exchange occurred between Captain and Anne in chapter eight from second part of the book. Captain Wentworth and

some other people had been invited for dinner by Anne's family.

When the door opened again, Captain Wentworth walked in alone. Anne was the nearest to him, and approaching a little, she instantly spoke. He was preparing only to bow and pass on, but her gentle:

(c) 'How do you do?' brought him out of the straight line to stand near her, and make inquiries in return, in spite of the formidable father and sister in the background." (p.141)

Several interesting things happened in this exchange. First, in contrast to example (a) the incomer, Captain, did not start the conversation, but the participant standing there, Anne, was the beginner of the communication by using greeting words that were neutral tokens. The reason that Captain felt anxious about facing Anne's family, was may be because he never forgot the refusal of his proposal. Anne who loved him like she did before, wanted to show her feeling and persuade him to stay there some more, she also wanted to cover up her father and sister's inattentions. Secondly, unlike example (a), the propitiatory aspect of the token is strengthened by contextual clues. For instance, the adjective clue 'gentle' appeared in the reporting clause, but in the previous example, captain tried to regain his calm by changing his situation, but not through intra textual clues identical to this example, there he acknowledged the phatic purpose by going toward her and making inquiries in return.

The next example, which happened in a music concert was related to the last lines of the chapter eight. When Anne's cousin, Mr. Elliot, sit down beside her to ask for some explanation about the Italian song which was next to be sung, she could not refuse and a few minutes, though as few as possible, were inevitably consumed; and when she abled to turn and look as she had done before, she found herself accosted by Captain Wentworth, in a reserved hurried sort of farewell. 'He must wish her good-night. He was going-he should get home as fast as he could.'

(d) 'Is not this song worth staying for?' said Anne, suddenly struck by an idea which made her yet more anxious to be encouraging. 'No!' He replied impressively,

there is nothing worth my staying for; and he was gone directly. (p.149)

Some considerable points in the example were: first, it should be noted that this phatic exchange differed significantly from the previous two examples in that example (d) was a farewell phatic, i.e. remarks that speakers made at the end of the conversation. But two previous examples were related to the phatic communions at the beginning of the conversation. Second, it was clear that Wentworth selected a self-oriented token: he referred to the matter which was personal to the speaker. Furthermore, his remark significantly was about an AB event as defined by Labov and Fanshel (1978). AB events, in a dyadic interaction, concern information which is known to both speakers. In this case Captain (speaker A) was referring to an AB-event; He decided to leave there, because he could not bear her attention to Mr. Elliot. Anne (speaker B) found out the reason of his left from there. It was part of the shared knowledge of the interactants. Third, although Anne tried to state the encouraging words to persuade him to stay more and managed to consolidate their relationship in the same way as what Laver defined (1975) in the second type of consolidatory token which make explicit reference to the continuation of the relationship, the captain's words were a little emotionally controversial, impressively refusing her request and going directly, which made Anne anxious about their relationship. The other point value for indicating is that here the person who intended to go, Captain, started and closed this phatic.

The following example was selected from chapter ten. Anne, who was in her sister's house, after misunderstanding happened between which mentioned in example (d), met captain again; Captain Wentworth left his seat, and walked to the fireplace; probably for the sake of walking away from it soon afterwards, and taking a station, with less barefaced design, by Anne.

(e) 'you have not been long enough in Bath,' said he, 'to enjoy the evening-parties of the place.' 'Oh! No. The usual character of them has nothing for me. I am not card-plyer.' 'You ... did not use to like cards...' (p. 176)

In this example the incomer, Captain, began the conversation by selecting the other-oriented tokens. He tried to start the conversation with emotionally uncontroversial and stimulating words that encouraged her to speak about her feelings, ideas and habits. He was going to improve their relationship by reminding her of the nice past common events. The relationship in the next chapters would lead to them getting married.

#### 4. Conclusion

The results of the analysis were indicated in a Token Realization Matrix (see Table 1) to bring the various strands of discussion together. This matrix is developed to provide a convenient way of looking at the important features of each example, not it is not based on strictly quantifiable qualities. It should also highlight to a certain extent, some of the significant deviations.

Table 3.1: *Token realization matrix*

Example	Position opening phase	Position closing phase	Incomer initiates	Material emotionally uncontroversial	Positive Acknowledgement by addressee
A	✓	×	✓	✓	✓
B	□	✓	□	✓	×
C	✓	×	×	×	✓
D	×	✓	×	×	✓
E	✓	×	✓	✓	✓

The first column of the matrix is indicating that three examples (a, c& e) were related to the opening phase of the phatic, but examples (b & d) were concerned with the closing phase of the phatic (column 2). The next column shows that in examples (a & e) the incoming participant initiated the opening phatic, in example (c), however, another participant started the opening phatic, and in example (b & d) the character who was going to go out, began and closed the farewell phatic.

There are some points which need to be explained. First, by looking across the matrix, it can be seen that examples (a) and (e) realized all four features and represented the general form of phatic initiations in Persuasion. Thus, these two examples reflected the intra-textual norm for phatic initiation in the novel, but since in example (c) incomer did not initiate the phatic, this characteristic differentiated example (b) from examples (a & e) and general forms of phatic initiations.

Example (b) in one case was different from other examples; It was not acknowledged by the addressee, while in the other four examples listener did answer the speaker. In other cases, examples (b & d) were distinguished from other examples; as related to the closing phase of phatic, the person who was going to go out, closed the phatic. Moreover, in example (d) the content of phatic was controversial.

Secondly, example (a) which was related to the first visit of two main characters, was without any persuasive words from the two participants, but in examples (b, c & d) she tried to show her interest in him with equanimity and good-temper. In example (b), she managed the situation as she intended, but in example (c) she could not encourage him to stay more, so he quit there because of misunderstanding. While in example (d) he along with her partner encouraged her to talk more about the good past events and showed his interest in her. These demonstrated that she was successful in improving their past relationship and showing her love and now it was the captain's turn to do the same. These investigations demonstrated that how phatic can be meaningful and effective in conveying a person's intention.

There are still many cases left on the study of phatic communion. It is suggested to other researchers who are interested in socio-linguistic study to do a research focused on the same points about phatic communion depicted in other movies. Yet, they may look at it from different point of view such as the phatic communion structure or the phatic communion response. It is also possible for the researchers to

conduct the study on other sources such as drama and novels.

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