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## An Error Analytic Study of Phatic Communication as Used by EFL College Students in Tikrit University

دراسة تحليلية للخطأ في الاتصال كما استخدمها طلاب كلية اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في جامعة تكريت

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**Abstract:** Many of the utterances negotiated by English speakers are composed of words seem to be different from that expected by hearers, but nevertheless, hearers go back to, and must remember that what is said is really intended to them. In this case those utterances are supposed to be phatic, otherwise a pragmatic failure may occur.

This study supports a full description of phatic communication in English. A theoretical account is presented about the subject, then, a practical side clarifies to what extent our students have information about phatic communication, with a conclusion.

**الخلاصة:** العديد من المحادثات المستخدمة من قبل متحدثي اللغة الانكليزية تتكون من كلمات تبدو غريبة ولا تمت بصلة للموضوع الرئيسي بين المتحدثين، ورغم ذلك يقوم المتلقي بربط الأفكار وفهم القصد الحقيقي من قبل هكذا محادثات. في هذه الحالة تعتبر هذه المحادثات تبادلية مخصصة لفتح المحادثات الحقيقية.

هذه الدراسة مخصصة لإعطاء وصف كامل لهكذا محادثات. وهي عبارة عن جانبين: الأول نظري وفيه نقدم كل المعلومات المتعلقة بالموضوع. والثاني تطبيقي يكشف مكامن الخطأ لدى طلابنا تجاه الموضوع مع النتائج.

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## **1. Phatic Communication**

Phatic communication is not an easy subject, though our language is engaged with it every day. It is important to present a full description of the subject.

### **1.1 Historical Review**

Phatic communication has deep roots in the history of linguistics when it first introduced by the anthropologist 'Malinowski' in 1923. Malinowski adopted this concept from Greek '*phatos*', which means "spoken". Malinowski was, actually, trying to find a theory for the speech of strangers when they meet together and begin a speech seems to be nothing than for the purpose of the conversation continuum.

The subject, then, was borrowed to Roman Jakobson in 1960; and Lyons in the late seventies, where they modified important functions for phatic communication. (Senft, 2009: 226-29).

However, the subject has been expanded and developed in recent years due to the many theories appeared, not to apply, the "Relevance Theory"; and has viewed and negotiated by linguists as an important subject in social and learning communication as follows.

### **1.2 Definition**

Cruz (2005: 227-8) mentions that phatic communication is that speech which is used to open and close a conversation between two speakers trying to "build a social relation" before negotiating their real ideas or go directly in a conversation. Phatic communication serves a social function in language, so that it has no meaning at all. In this definition, Cruz depends on Malinowski's claim that phatic communication is: "the language which is used in free, aimless, social intercourse... a type of speech in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words" (Malinowski, 1923: 476-79; quoted in Cruz, 2005: 228).

Cao (2007: 173) stresses that phatic communication is that "small talk" which refers to the use of language mainly for interpersonal meaning where "information transition" is neglected at this point, " that is, the whole purpose of speech is to establish and maintain the social bonds of the interactants".

Bickmore (2003: 47) admits the fact that Phatic communication is "unconnected" with the main conversation of speakers. He gives the following example in the situation of two strangers meet together, one of them say:

**1. Lovely day.**

(ibid.)

According to Bickmore, this utterance do not have the property of having "impact on hearers, such as describing states of the world or predicting or

explaining human behavior". In this regard, Holba (2008: 493) indicates that "phatic communication refers to those small utterances that precede the big ones".

However, it is not to view phatic communication as being one short utterance. Žegarac (1998: 346) goes on to add that it can be a whole conversation, but it is characterized as being "small" in the sense that it has one meaning whatever words are used, long or short; that meaning is to be understood as a social one. Goodall et al (2010: 44) admit this fact and say that phatic communication can at least be a "dialogue". Consider the following conversation between A and B:

**2. A: Hi!**

**B: Hi.**

**A: So how are you?**

**B: Fine, and you?**

**A: Good!**

**B: So what's new in your department today?**

**A: Not much, and you?**

**B: The same. You know how it is. That's why they call it "work".**

**A: Yeah, I guess. Well, see you later.**

**B: Okay. See you.**

(ibid. :45)

For Goodall et al, phatic communication is the repeated form of "small talk", like (2) above, that "acts as a kind of social lubricant that encourages a surface level of collegiality and friendliness". (ibid.).

Žegarac (1998: 344) maintains that phatic communication is the interaction of "greetings and gossiping" where meaning is "almost irrelevant". For him, "**how are you?**" is the best example of phatic communication.

### **1.3 Terminology**

There is no diversity in the label of phatic communication throughout its linguistic history; it has some different labels according to the aspects that phatic utterances perform in the language.

Elyachar (2010: 2) mentions that Malinowski's first concept was "phatic communion" and not "communication", it is developed to take the latter name because those utterances are uttered by participants in nearly all communication types, i.e., it is not limited to a group of people being relatives or strangers.

The other important label is "small talk", as stated by many linguists, such as Žegarac (1998: 344); Glasgow (2008: 13); Bickmore & Cassell (2000: 13); Bickmore (2003: 6); Schneider & Barron (2008: 100) and many others. All those writers admit that phatic communication is a small talk regarding the empty content it carries.

Other labels found are: "opening indicators" (Nord, 2008: 287); "frozen forms" (Shammas, 2005: 34); "compliments" (Boyle, 2000: 23); "preparatory

talk", "prefatory exchange" (Akindele, 2007: 10); "ritual speech" (Rothenbuhler, 2005: 66); "phatic labor" (Elyachar, 2010: 35); "cheap talk" (Farrell & Gibbons, 1988: 58); "phatic talk" (Glasgow, 2008: 32) and "social talk" (Kao, 2008: 61).

#### **1.4 Aspects of Phatic Communication**

According to Holba (2007: 110-14), the following are the main aspects of phatic communication:

- a. Phatic communication is driven by emotional tendencies.
- b. It carries purposeless expressions of preference or aversions, statements about irrelevant matters, or comments about what is already known.
- c. It may involve a lack of commitment or an intentional ambiguity to a communicator's own factuality.
- d. It shows degrees of reticence or withheld commitment to openness, seriousness, and truth.
- e. It focuses on the channel of communication itself instead of potential ideas.
- f. It is dull and pedestrian, empty, and sometimes 'mere politeness'.
- g. It becomes problematic when it becomes the normal mode of communication.

Senft et al (2009: 228) mention that phatic communication is characterized as being meaningless and that it doesn't convey information, for this reason it is best described as "procedures without propositional contents".

Stenning et al (2003: 187) has the same view, they admit that phatic communication is empty in content, and that is revealed when participants end this type of conversation without having "learned much about each others' opinions, desires, etc". They provide the following example as an evidence:

**3. A: Hi, how's it going?**

**B: Good, how are you?**

**A: Fine. Nice day, eh?**

**B: Yeah, fantastic.**

**A: Anyway, see you around.**

**B: Yeah, see you.**

(ibid.)

Stenning et al maintain that this kind of communication serves to reinforce social groupings and has nothing with information exchange as discussed below.

#### **1.5 Informative Vs Phatic Communication**

Nurhayati (2010: 1-3) stresses that utterances in conversations should be understood as having either an informative intention or as having a phatic one. Informative utterances are absolutely different from phatic ones; phatic utterances

are used by speakers only for the sake of conveying an effective or social message rather than referential informative one. So that, phatic utterances contain no informative meaning; they are used to create a relationship between the speaker and the hearer, "such as in an awkward situation, sitting with a stranger, want to apologize to someone or may be in approaching someone who somebody love". Nurhayati presents the following example of phatic in awkward situation (with its context):

**4. Context:** Deco was waiting for the teacher for the next lesson. At the room he saw a girl that he never knows before and was sitting alone. He came to her and tried to take a conversation with her.

**Deco: Hi! Do you want to join this class?**

**Girl: Yes.**

**Deco: I never see you before! Do you always join this class in this period?**

**Girl: No. usually I join before this period, because some problem so I join in this period. How about you?**

**Deco: I always join in this period.**

(ibid.: 2)

According to Nurhayati, this conversation is phatic because the speaker is only trying to widen the relationship with the girl whom he didn't meet before. So that, no informative point seems to be dominant here. The same applies to the utterances such as: "**how do you do?, nice to see you, it is a nice day, good afternoon, good bye**, etc." which seem to show a social message rather than provide information".

For Stenning et al (2003: 3-4), communication is viewed from two main perspectives: phatic and informative "ideational". The first concentrates on communication as establishment of social relationships, while "the second concentrates on the transfer of ideas". For this reason, "these two major perspectives dominate sociological and cognitive approaches to communication respectively".

Kao (2008: 11, 15-16) points out that "informative talk" reflects a purposive referential information uttered for specific goals and contain meaningful negotiation such as "transactional talk, business talk, educational talk", etc.; while phatic talk represents "casual" and "relational talk" which focuses on "rapport interaction"; it serves interpersonal goals and contains unimportant "superficial topics without any clear purpose (e.g., weather and sharing of personal experience)".

Nicolle & Clark (1998: 187) give two different examples with two different contexts using "how are you?" to show the difference between informative and phatic talk:

**5. Context:** Mary is a colleague of Peter and has not seen Peter since the previous day. They have a good working relationship.

**Mary: How are you?**

**Peter: Fine. How are you?**

**6. Context:** Jane is a doctor to whom Peter has come for advice about his back pain. The setting is Jane's surgery.

**Jane: How are you?**

**Peter: Well, I've been having problems with my back...**

Nicolle & Clark explain that the talk in (5) does not seem to carry any information about Peter's health, while in (6) the matter is different because Peter is really experiencing problems that he has to tell to doctor Jane; so, (6) is not phatic.

### **1.6 Types of Phatic Communication**

This section represents other concern of this study due to the developments regarding the types of the subject. Actually, as discovered by many linguists, phatic communication falls into two main types: *conventionalized* and *standardized* phatic communication. Both types, as pointed by Bytyei (2009: 6), are used to communicate only, and not to convey information.

#### **1.6.1 Conventionalized Phatic Communication**

Markopoulos et al (2009: 187) pose that conventionalized phatic communication is drawn from the fact that we use certain utterances in everyday conversational openings and closings frequently to the extent that they became part of our conventions. Everybody has come to realize that "**how are you?**", for example, is used to serve a purpose of communication rather than to ask about health.

Thorne (2003: 45) also claims that conventionalized phatic utterances are the forms of utterances such as "hello, how do you do, good morning, good bye, see you later, etc. "that we used to include them in our conversations before we start to negotiate our real ideas".

Nicolle & Clark (1998: 185) admit that conventionalized phatic utterances require no effort to be interpreted as phatic ones; hearers may understand the intended meaning without requiring any process of interpretation.

#### **1.6.2 Standardized Phatic Communication**

According to Žegarac (1998: 330-31) Standardized phatic communication has the same function of conventionalized phatic communication in that they both used to build a social relationship between speakers. What differs here is the utterance; unlike conventionalized phatic communication, standardized phatic utterances are not realized easily.

Žegarac claims that phatic communication is also possible without social conventions, discussed above, despite the fact that standardized utterances are not

conventions that we learnt to use to open and close a conversation. Standardized utterances are used by people in particular topics (the weather, the addressee's welfare, certain occasions, etc.), such as the following:

**7. Nice weather, isn't it?**

**8. How long was your holiday?**

**9. It is Sunday today!**

Standardized utterances are so tied with the contextual information; the hearer may rely on the contextual assumptions and then interpret the speakers intended meaning. For this reason, standardized phatic utterances require what Žegarac calls "encyclopedic knowledge" (ibid: 331). Consider the following example:

**10. There's a postal strike today.**

(ibid. )

According to Žegarac, this utterance is forwarded from Peter to Mary. Peter was not in accordance with Mary lately so that he wanted to open a friendly conversation with her; so, he seized the chance of the postal strike in order to inform Mary that he is not angry with her anymore. In this case Mary would understand Peter's intention that he wants only to communicate with her.

## **2. Procedures**

In order to be able to extract the weak and strong points that students have towards phatic communication in English, certain procedures are followed to achieve the main aim of this study. This section deals with the practical side of the study; it shows some information on the selection of the sample, a description of the test that has been applied, and the results that have been arrived at.

### **2.1 Population and Sample Selection**

The sample of the study is reflected by the students of the fourth stage in the Translation Department in Tikrit University, It is thought that the subject of phatic communication requires the fourth stage to be involved, because they are in their final stage and they are supposed to have learnt much throughout their four years of study. The number of the students selected is 40 out of 67.

### **2.2 Description of The Test**

The test of this study is build on the assumption that phatic communication is somehow unfamiliar to the students. Therefore the test shows whether the students are able to differentiate between informative and phatic communication without a help or a hint to do so (see the appendix below). The test contains ten conversations to provide a chance for the students to have more than one conversation in different occasions.

### **2.3 The Scoring Scheme**

The test consists of a question, the question contains ten items. The whole items are scored out of 10 marks; each item in the question has been given one

mark. Zero score is given for both incorrect and neglected items as the response is considered to be incorrect.

## 2.4 Test Reliability

The reliability of the test reflects the consistency of the scores of the same members to whom the test is presented. The present test contains 10 items, the reliability of the test is measured by correlating the odd and even scores of the students (Ingram, 1974: 15-16).

Harris (1969: 16) indicates that the reliability coefficient is that which falls between (1.0), indicating perfect reliability; and zero, which then the test is considered useless. The reliability coefficient of this test was found to be (0.89) indicating that the test is reliable.

## 2.5 Test Administration

The test was administered to 40 students in their four stage of the Translation Department in the college of Arts on the 20<sup>th</sup> of March 2014. The instructions were given to the students and they were asked to write their names on the examination sheets in order to participate seriously in the test.

## 3 Results of the Test

This section is presented to analyze the errors of the involved sample. Actually, their errors have been identified and classified accordingly.

The question of the test is constructed to determine whether the students of the fourth class in the Translation Department are capable to recognize and identify phatic communication. The following table illustrates the main results of this task.

**Table (2)**  
**The Results of the Test**

No. of Item	No. of Correct Answers		No. of Wrong Answers	
1	11		29	
2	6		34	
3	10		30	
4	15		25	
5	16		24	
6	17		23	
7	11		29	
8	18		22	
9	8		32	
10	9		31	
<b>Total with Percentage</b>	<b>121</b>	<b>30%</b>	<b>279</b>	<b>70%</b>

These results provide evidence that the students failed to achieve what they are required to do in this test. They did not realize the phatic communication provided in the items of this question of the test, and the great number of their errors (70%) indicates that there is a gap in their comprehension for what is meant by phatic communication.

#### **4. Conclusions**

The conclusions of this study are derived from both the theoretical and the practical parts, as follows:

1. Phatic communication represents a channel of communication serving a social function in discourse. The forms that are used to represent phatic communication differ according to the context; but whatever form is used it has nothing other than showing interpersonal tendency.
2. Any expression regarded to be phatic carries no information to be exchanged; information exchange normally starts after or before phatic communication.
3. Phatic communication carries an intended meaning which is thought to be the simplest one, phatic communication requires no process of interpretation to be understood because speakers already know that it is phatic.
4. The study examined the students' knowledge about phatic communication in English. It is concluded that the students in the Translation department, College of Arts, Tikrit University have recorded weak achievements in the test reached to (70%). This indicates that the students' lack knowledge of the main points mentioned earlier about phatic communication.

## Appendix

**Q: Show whether the following conversations are PHATIC or INFORMATIVE:**

## References

No.	Situation	Conversations	Phatic	Informative
1	On a bus	A: Does this bus go to the train station? B: No. You have to get off at the bank and take the A52. A: How long is the ride? B: About ten minutes.		
2	The Weather	A: Beautiful day, isn't it? B: Yes, it's not like what the radio said at all. A: I wish it would stay this way for the weekend. B: As long as it doesn't snow!		
3	At A railroad Station	A: What time does the train for Boston leave? B: 9: 25 on Track 12. A: When does it arrive. B: It should be there at 11: 45, but it may be a little late.		
4	Introductions and Opening Conversations	A: Mary, this is Joe's brother David. B: I'm very glad to meet you. C: It's pleasure to meet you. B: How do you like Texas so far? C: It's really different from what I expected.		
5	Special Greetings	A: Happy New Year! B: Thank you! Same to you. A: Have you got any plans? B: I've been invited over to a friend's. And you? A: My roommate's having a party.		
6	At the Dentist's Office	A: When did your toothache start? B: It's been this way for a few days. A: Let me take a look at it. B: What do you think? A: You've got an abscess.		
7	At a Cocktail Party	A: Hi I'm happy you could make it. B: Well, I've been looking forward to seeing you. A: What can I get you? B: I'd love a Lemonade.		
8	At A Drugstore	A: I'd like to have this prescription filled. B: It'll only take a few minutes if you want to wait. A: Have you got something for chapped lips? B: Rub this cream on every four hours.		
9	Apologizing	A: I'm afraid I spilled coffee on the tablecloth. B: Oh, don't worry about it. A: I want to apologize. Is there anything I can do? B: Just forget about it. I never did like it anyway.		
10	At A Hotel	A: Do you have a single room for two nights?		

		B: We only have a small suit. A: What's the rate? B: \$50.00 a night, including breakfast.		
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