

On the Phatic Interpretation of Utterances: A Complementary Relevance-Theoretic Proposal

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I suggest a theoretical approach to the production and interpretation of phatic utterances aimed at complementing other previous accounts. These argue that utterances are normally interpreted as phatic either because of their occurrence in particular conversational phases forming fixed adjacency pairs with other utterances, or because interlocutors activate specific frames and process them in a particular way. Besides, the extant relevance-theoretic (Sperber and Wilson, 1986, 1995) analysis of these utterances has focused on the linguistic properties that make utterances be interpreted as phatic, but has not explained how a speaker has to produce an utterance so that the hearer interprets it as phatic and why phatic utterances contribute to the creation of a feeling of solidarity and ties of union between interlocutors..

1. Introduction

Since the anthropologist Bronislaw K. Malinowski (1923) described phatic utterances, little advance has been made in the study of them and their communicative functions, for some authors limited their contributions to repeating his ideas without further elaboration or offered a very negative characterisation of them. On the contrary, others tried to go beyond these works and explain the reasons why individuals interpret some utterances as phatic. Thus, some conversation analysts have shown that this is due to the structural properties of some utterances and their occurrence with others in very specific conversational phases, while some pragmaticians have maintained that the activation of some knowledge structures

and the way in which individuals process them condition their interpretation. More recently, within the framework of Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson, 1986, 1995), other pragmaticians (Žegarac, 1998; Žegarac and Clark, 1999a) have suggested an alternative approach, according to which interlocutors interpret utterances as phatic if the information that they convey does not satisfy specific expectations of obtaining a certain informative benefit.

However, these works have not accounted for the cognitive operations that speaker and hearer have to perform in order to produce and interpret respectively a phatic utterance, nor why phatic utterances contribute to the creation of a feeling of solidarity and ties of union between interlocutors. Therefore, in this paper I will try to offer a complementary proposal based on a more general analysis of phatic utterances that I have developed over the last few years (Padilla Cruz, 2004a)¹. In order to do so, firstly, I introduce some of the different perspectives on phatic utterances, starting with Malinowski's (1923) work. Secondly, I review the two groups of explanations about why individuals interpret utterances as phatic. Then, I introduce the extant analysis of phatic utterances based on the pragmatic paradigm of Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson, 1986, 1995) by Žegarac (1998) and Žegarac and Clark (1999a). Finally, I present the complementary proposal that I have developed which is also based on Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson, 1986, 1995) and the notions of *metarepresentation* (e.g. Sperber, 1994) and *metarepresentational uses* of utterances (Noh, 2000). I would like to underline that this is a theoretical proposal, as I agree with Sperber and Wilson (1986, 1995: 278-279, 1987, 1997: 148-149) that one of the aims of research in pragmatics must be to formulate convincing hypotheses about linguistic production and comprehension, centred on the mental processes that interlocutors carry out, and which should then empirically tested and verified in subsequent work.

2. Phatic utterances

When studying the linguistic behaviour of some Melanesian and Oceanic tribes, Malinowski (1923) observed narrative episodes which were not used to convey new and unknown information but were employed as a means of social interaction with a predominantly emotive function. This author called *phatic communion* “[...] [the] language [which] is used in free, aimless, social intercourse” (Malinowski, 1923: 476). However, this linguistic behaviour is not at all exclusively restricted to those tribes but is a common and recurrent practice in most Western cultures because it is “[...] a type of speech in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words” (Malinowski, 1923: 478). Among its most frequent manifestations, the author mentioned a plethora of formulaic expressions of greeting, questions about the interlocutors' health, well-being, family, etc., narrations about apparently irrelevant facts or comments about topics that may seem obvious or trivial, such as the weather (Malinowski, 1923: 476-479). Their *raison d'être* is to avoid silence which can originate an unpleasant tension that may, in turn, have negative consequences for social interaction, since taciturnity is regarded in some cultures as an

evident sign of hostility or bad mood.

Malinowski's (1923) work involved a more precise characterisation of an area of communication that had not until then been clearly identified, and made progress in the analysis of the functions of language. Nevertheless, as Laver (1975: 215) complains, "[...] the very act of identification has seemed to inhibit further inquiry", which might have been due to the traditional excessive emphasis of Linguistics on the study of form at the expense of a deeper insight into the communicative functions and realisations of phatic communion. In fact, Coupland, Coupland and Robinson (1992: 207) have shown that many of the linguists who have dealt with phatic communion or phatic utterances have only repeated Malinowski's (1923) ideas. This was the case of Lyons (1968: 417), Hudson (1980: 109) or Silva (1980), who mentioned that phatic communion creates or maintains a feeling of solidarity and social well-being among interlocutors.

But Malinowski's (1923) legacy also consists of an ambiguous approach to phatic communion. Although this linguistic behaviour is considered essential for social interaction because of the ties of union that it creates, it is a type of discourse whose most remarkable feature is its triviality, obviousness or lack of interest. As a consequence, in other later descriptions some authors (e.g. Abercrombie, 1956: 3, 1998: 672; Turner, 1973: 212; Leech, 1974: 62) have assigned a negative value to it and stressed its defective nature as regards the transmission of referential information.

It can be concluded that these approaches presuppose an alternative type of discourse in which there is an authentic exchange of information and where language is not simply used to establish or keep the interactive contact between individuals (Coupland, Coupland and Robinson, 1992: 210). This has resulted in a distinction between an *informative* and a *social* type of discourse, which can be traced back to Malinowski's (1923) original distinction between language used as an *instrument of reflection* or as a *mode of action*, and has been present in our linguistic tradition in other dichotomies between two functions of language, which have reinforced the idea that "[...] talk was either giving information ('communication'), or doing something social ('phatic communion')" (Tracy and Naughton, 2000: 71).²

Although this negative characterisation suggests that individuals regard an utterance as phatic when they are aware of the triviality or merelessness of its content, other authors have attempted to explain how and why individuals interpret utterances or fragments of discourse as being aimed at avoiding silence and establishing or keeping interactive contact. In the next section I will review some of their proposals about this issue.

3. The phatic interpretation of utterances

The studies that account for the reasons why individuals interpret some utterances as phatic can be classified in two groups. On the one hand, there are those that relate their phatic interpretation to their being constituents of discourse structures occurring in very specific conversational phases. On the other hand, are those studies that argue that the phaticity of

an utterance is not one of its inherent properties, but depends on the interlocutor activating particular mental structures and on the way in which he processes it. I devote the following two subsections to each of these groups of studies.

3.1. The influence of conversational structure

As has been pointed out, phatic communion is manifested through a wide array of linguistic tokens, such as greetings, comments or remarks about trivial or obvious matters, and questions and answers, most of which are organised as discourse sequences typically occurring in the marginal phases of interaction. In many cases, these sequences consist of *adjacency pairs* (e.g. Schegloff, 1972; Schegloff and Sacks, 1973; Sacks, 1992) which, following Hoey (1991: 67), are *frozen* pairs owing to their little variability and high predictability³. This favours interlocutors' interpretation of such utterances as phatic (Coupland, Coupland and Robinson, 1992; Coupland, Robinson and Coupland, 1994), particularly because many of them are not understood as first topics (Schegloff and Sacks, 1973: 300). On the contrary, they do not transmit authentic factual information because they "[...] [are] oriented toward the interactional, relational aspect of communication" (Pavlidou, 1994: 490).

Conversational analysts (e.g. Schegloff, 1972; Schegloff and Sacks, 1973; Schegloff, Jefferson and Sacks, 1977; Sacks and Schegloff, 1979; Sacks, 1992) proposed an initial criterion of *strict adjacency* that can be applied to this type of pair and according to which, the first element of a pair must be followed by a second one. However, this criterion was later on replaced by another of *conditional relevance*, which establishes that the realisation of the first element creates in the speaker very specific expectations about the occurrence of possible second elements that the hearer must produce, some of which are *preferred* whereas others are *dispreferred* by the former (Pomerantz, 1978, 1984; Sacks and Schegloff, 1979; Schegloff, Jefferson and Sacks, 1977).

In my opinion, the phatic interpretation of some utterances may be conditioned by the fact that an interlocutor perceives them as being constituents of highly predictable frozen pairs occurring in the opening or closing phases. Thus, if an individual responds to an utterance with another that is the preferred element of the pair that both constitute, he may be indicating understanding that his interlocutor's intention was for him to interpret the first utterance as phatic. In this way, following Bilmes (1988: 74), the second element confirms that the first one has been interpreted correctly, as in (1) below. Although an individual may intend the hearer to process an utterance as phatic, the hearer may not necessarily recognise this, so that, if the second element were the dispreferred one, he would be communicating that he has not understood it as phatic, as in (2):

(1) A: How are you doing?

B: Fine, thanks.

(2) A: How are you doing?

B: Well, I've got a terrible headache today and my legs...

3.2. The importance of cognitive structures and information processing

In addition to the importance of conversational structure, Kasper (1984), Bahns, Burmeister and Vogel (1986: 698), and Schneider (1987, 1988) have stressed that individuals' phatic interpretation of an utterance relies heavily on the activation of mental *frames* and the way in which they process linguistic data. Within such cognitive structures, individuals store information of different nature. Some are higher-order frames which contain general abstract information, such as social values and conventions about interaction or specific exchanges, whereas others are lower-order frames in which individuals store more specific knowledge about, for instance, the grammatical rules of their language.

When interpreting linguistic data, hearers may carry out *bottom-up* processing by establishing a connection between those data and their lower-order frames, or they may also process them *top-down*, if they activate higher-order frames and search for data that match those frames. As Kasper (1984: 3) points out, both procedures interact with each other, but bottom-up processing appears more suitable when communicative situations are not conventionalised – which prevents hearers from predicting what will go on in them – or when they cannot activate specific frames, while top-down processing seems appropriate for communicative situations that are highly conventionalised, when hearers have very firm expectations about exchanges or when they have activated many higher-order frames.

Concerning the interpretation of utterances in the opening phase of a conversation, Kasper (1984: 10) sustains that hearers may reach a phatic interpretation if they activate very specific higher-order frames about that context and process them top-down. Such frames allow interlocutors to predict the occurrence of conversation movements to a certain extent and perform the desired discourse functions because they contain information about, for example, the necessity to greet other interlocutors, who must greet first, the need to exchange phatic tokens, their content, or about how interlocutors can generate phatic sequences. But they will also need a bottom-up analysis in order to confirm whether the activated frame is valid to process subsequent movements as phatic or whether they have to shift to another frame. Bottom-up processing of the linguistic form of utterances is also called for in order to determine their degree of formality or to select another that is cohesive with a previous one, as in (3), which contrasts with (4) whose second element is not cohesive with the first⁴

(3) A: How are you doing?

B: I'm fine, thanks.

(4) A: How is it going?

B: I'm fine, thanks.

In contrast to the initial phase of a conversation, bottom-up processing is preferable in the medial phase of an exchange because utterances are not so conventionalised and interlocutors may expect a wider variety of conversational topics (Kasper, 1984: 12). Accordingly, in a conversation such as (5), bottom-up processing of the first interlocutor's third turn [3a] leads the second interlocutor to activate a frame of phatic conversation and interpret it correctly as phatic, as she shows with the phatic comment [4b]. This gives rise to a new phatic comment, [5a], which does not provide very precise information. Nonetheless, the second interlocutor shifts then to a frame of information exchange, as can be deduced from [5b], because she does not use bottom-up processing and does not take into account the formal properties of the previous utterance; the vagueness of the response would have been a clear sign that the other interlocutor is acting within a frame of phatic exchange:

- [1a] Colin: Hello, Angela!
 [1b] Angela: Hello, Colin!
 [2a] Colin: On your own, then.
 [2b] Angela: Oh, yes.
 [3a] Colin: (sighs) God, the rush hour!
 [3b] Angela: (laughs)
 [4a] Colin: (sighs)
 [4b] Angela: You've worked until now?
 [5a] Colin: Yes, I've been quite busy this afternoon, quite busy.
 [5b] Angela: Oh, what have you done?
 [6a] Colin: Oh, I went to a lecture at three o'clock and then... er... talking to a few people about it, afterwards, till about five. Taken me nearly an hour to get back. Tube's terribly full. Uh, you know what it's like.
 [6b] Angela: Well, of course. (Adapted from Kasper, 1984: 9)

Similarly, Coupland, Coupland and Robinson (1992) and Coupland, Robinson and Coupland (1994) have shown that in geriatric surgeries the activation of specific frames biases the interpretation of a general question such as 'how are you?' either as a phatic token or as an inquiry about authentic personal information, whilst Coupland and YlännemcEwen (2000) have illustrated that a topic like the weather can also have a phatic or non-phatic interpretation in travel agencies. As can be observed, these proposals explain some of the mental factors that contribute to the phatic interpretation of utterances. However, they do not consider whether there are other cognitive factors that condition their phatic interpretation. This is an issue that has been tackled by some Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson, 1986, 1995) pragmatics, so I turn to it in the next section.

4. Relevance Theory and phatic utterances

Within pragmatics, Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson, 1986, 1995) is currently one of the most fruitful models, as it has involved a true revolution in this field by offering solutions to many linguistic problems. In this section I will first summarise its theoretical postulates and then discuss the analysis of phatic utterances suggested by some of its practitioners.

4.1. Basic theoretical postulates

Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson, 1986, 1995) is aimed at explaining why an individual selects one interpretation of an utterance out of many possible ones and believes it to be the interpretation that the speaker might have intended to communicate. It conceives communication as an *ostensive-inferential* activity in which the speaker modifies the hearer's *cognitive environment* – i.e. the set of facts that are *manifest* to him or, in other words, which he can represent mentally – with an utterance because she has an *informative intention*, which is the set of assumptions that she intends to make manifest to him (Sperber and Wilson, 1986, 1995: 58). In addition, communication is understood as an *overt* process in which the speaker also has a *communicative intention*, which is her intention to make manifest to the hearer that she has indeed that particular informative intention (Sperber and Wilson, 1986, 1995: 61).

For the hearer to recover the interpretation intended by the speaker, he will have to *contextualise* the utterance by relating the information he obtains from its linguistic decoding to a subset of the information he has already stored, which constitutes his *context* for interpretation (Sperber and Wilson, 1995: 108). The result of this process is *cognitive effects*, that is, the *strengthening* or *contradiction* of old assumptions, or *contextual implications*, which are new assumptions that can only be derived from the joint interaction of the information conveyed by the utterance with the old information the hearer possesses. However, this requires some *cognitive effort* from the hearer, which depends on his effort in selecting a suitable context for interpreting the utterance and its psychological complexity, since its syntax or unusual lexical items may render it more difficult to understand (Wilson, 1993: 348).

Sperber and Wilson (1986, 1995) claim that the hearer will choose a particular interpretation of an utterance if its processing yields a satisfactory amount of cognitive effect that offsets the cognitive effort invested in obtaining them, i.e. if he finds that particular interpretation *relevant*. Furthermore, the hearer must also have some expectations of relevance and think that he will indeed recover those effects; otherwise, he will not pay attention to that utterance. An utterance becomes *irrelevant* if the assumptions made manifest are not related to any assumption that the hearer entertains, if the hearer already possesses those assumptions and their strength is not altered by the processing of the utterance, or if they are incompatible with the assumptions of the hearer and are so weak that they cannot modify them (Sperber and Wilson, 1986, 1995: 120-121).

According to Sperber and Wilson (1986, 1995: 157, 270) and Wilson and Sperber (2002: 251, 256-257), individuals are always interested in establishing the *optimal* degree of relevance of the information that they receive, so utterances must communicate a *presumption* of their own optimal relevance: their production must be accompanied by a tacit guarantee that their processing will provide the hearer with cognitive effects that compensate his processing effort and that they are the most relevant ostensive stimuli that the speaker can think of, depending on her abilities and preferences. From this presumption of optimal relevance, Sperber and Wilson (1995: 260) formulate the *Communicative Principle of Relevance*: “Any act of ostensive communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance”⁵. This principle inspires the *relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure*, which leads the hearer to follow the interpretive path that requires the least cognitive effort possible when testing his interpretive hypotheses of an utterance and to stop when his expectations of relevance are satisfied (Wilson, 1999: 136; Wilson and Sperber, 2002: 259). This procedure reflects that the fact that the hearer easily accesses one interpretation of an utterance makes him believe that that interpretation is the one that the speaker intended to communicate. Similarly, this procedure makes it quite reasonable that the hearer should stop at the first interpretation that satisfies his expectations of relevance: there should not be more than one optimally relevant interpretation of an utterance, since that would cause him the additional unnecessary effort of deciding about one of them.

4.2. The extant Relevance-Theoretic approach to phatic utterances

Within the framework of Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson, 1986, 1995), Nicolle and Clark (1998), Žegarac (1998) and Žegarac and Clark (1999a) have tried to explain why an individual recovers a phatic interpretation of utterances. Like other authors, they also think that the *phaticity* of utterances is not one of their inherent features but depends on the interpretation that interlocutors make of them.

Thus, Žegarac (1998: 334-341) argues that some utterances with which interlocutors frequently initiate a conversation do not communicate any information that achieves an optimal level of relevance because processing them in the most easily accessible context does not yield cognitive effects or results in very few of them. By virtue of the Communicative Principle of Relevance (Sperber and Wilson, 1995), it would be expected that the interaction of the assumptions constituting the speaker’s informative intention with those present in the hearer’s context results in enough cognitive effects to compensate his cognitive effort. However, the assumptions made manifest by those utterances are already manifest in the cognitive environment of both interlocutors, so they do not achieve an optimal level of relevance because of the speaker’s informative intention but because of the fact that she has a communicative intention.

Accordingly, Žegarac (1998: 335) shows that an utterance such as (6) will be interpreted as phatic if it is already manifest to the interlocutors that there is a postal strike that very day:

(6) There is a postal strike today.

Since the speaker's intention is not to inform the hearer about this fact, as he is already acquainted with it, he will reach an *implicated conclusion*⁶ such as (7) about the speaker's desire to maintain interactive contact:

(7) The speaker is willing to communicate with me.

According to Žegarac and Clark (1999a: 329-334), the interpretation of an utterance is phatic if it implies a proposition referring to the speaker's desire to speak with the hearer. Therefore, phatic utterances are utterances that give rise to a phatic interpretation and *phatic communication* includes ostensive acts of communication that are interpreted as phatic. Finally, they also state that an individual may be quite likely to recover a phatic interpretation of an utterance if its linguistic form is easy to process (Žegarac and Clark, 1999a: 336). Thus, a hearer will regard (8) as phatic because of its form; if the speaker did not intend him to do so, she would have to resort to another formulation, such as (9) or (10), where the additional linguistic material increases the hearer's processing effort and allows the speaker to show her real interest in the hearer:

(8) How are you?

(9) How are you these days?

(10) How are you now that you've had the operation?

Although Žegarac (1998) and Žegarac and Clark's (1999a) account offers a criterion that enables us to recognise this type of utterance, it has been severely criticised by Ward and Horn (1999), who contend that it reduces a very complex linguistic phenomenon to the mere indication of willingness to establish or maintain interactive contact. As I have commented elsewhere (Padilla Cruz, 2004a: 329), their conception of phatic communication might have been influenced by the belief in the existence of a purely informative discourse that makes manifest new assumptions which the hearer can combine with old ones in order to derive cognitive effects. However, phatic utterances result in very few or no cognitive effects at all so they would not be truly informative utterances.

Ward and Horn (1999: 556-557) also find a series of methodological problems in their proposal, for they think that, by relying on the notions of mutual manifestness and cognitive environment, Žegarac (1998) and Žegarac and Clark (1999a) adopt an omniscient view of communication, in which either the environment determines what each individual can mentally represent or the interlocutors share a certain knowledge that indicates in which circumstances they are more likely to be able to entertain some assumptions. Nevertheless, Žegarac and Clark (1999b: 572-574) maintain that individuals can manipulate their interpretive context so as to make sure that a phatic interpretation of an utterance will be optimally relevant, even if another non-phatic one could also be so. This is only possible if their cognitive environment includes assumptions about different ways of interacting, the

relevance of particular conversational topics or the social norms which establish what counts as appropriate linguistic behaviour. That knowledge conditions the hearer's comprehension by limiting the assumptions that he will make about how the speaker intends an utterance to be optimally relevant⁷. For this reason, Žegarac and Clark (1999a: 336-337) conclude that the more frequently an utterance or topic is used with a specific purpose, the stronger the connection between it and that purpose and, likewise, the more frequently an utterance is used to achieve a particular interpretation, the stronger the link between that utterance and that interpretation.

Furthermore, Ward and Horn (1999: 562) also think that Žegarac (1998) and Žegarac and Clark (1999a) do not offer adequate methods for determining whether an utterance is more or less phatic even if Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson, 1986, 1995) can help predict when individuals are likely to derive phatic interpretations. They also question the statement that utterances will be interpreted as phatic if they require little cognitive effort. Nonetheless, these critiques are difficult to understand because Ward and Horn (1999) admit that the usage of non-conventionalised phatic utterances can significantly increase the cognitive effort of the hearer and yield additional cognitive effects. According to Žegarac and Clark (1999b: 566), what causes certain utterances be interpreted as phatic is the existence of systematic correspondences between particular situational contexts where they are used, their linguistic and paralinguistic features and the communicative functions in such contexts. Although the notion of phatic communication is rather intuitive, it is precisely the similarity arising between the interpretations of a wide array of utterances sharing specific characteristics that helps interlocutors identify them as phatic.

Even though Žegarac (1998) and Žegarac and Clark (1999a) offer an alternative explanation of the phatic interpretation of utterances, based on the way such interpretations achieve an optimal level of relevance, I consider that they fail to take into account some of the previous contributions on phatic utterances and to address a very important aspect of these utterances in social interaction: the creation of a feeling of solidarity and ties of union between interlocutors. For this reason, in the next section I will present a complementary proposal aimed at answering this problem, which is also based on Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson, 1986, 1995) and on the *metarepresentational use* (Noh, 2000) of this type of utterance.

5. A complementary Relevance-Theoretic proposal

As mentioned above, this proposal is a theoretical explanation which reflects on the linguistic properties of phatic utterances, the origin of the effects that they cause and the cognitive operations that interlocutors are believed to perform in order to achieve them. In the previous section it has been shown that utterances are assigned a phatic interpretation when the assumptions that they make manifest are already manifest in the cognitive environment of both interlocutors (Žegarac, 1998; Žegarac and Clark, 1999a). It should be borne in mind that the notion of cognitive environment is not only restricted to the

physical setting which is mutually manifest to the interlocutors but includes other *contextual sources* which they can access, such as their encyclopaedic, factual, biographic or mutual knowledge (Yus Ramos, 1997-1998, 2000, 2000-2001). I think that it is precisely the fact that some assumptions are previously manifest to interlocutors which is an essential factor in the production and comprehension of phatic utterances as well as in understanding the generation of the effects associated with phatic utterances, as it implies that individuals will have mental representations about the facts, events, states of affairs or opinions to which these utterances refer. Besides, since interlocutors share that cognitive environment, it will also be rather likely that a certain degree of similarity should arise between the assumptions that they entertain and the assumptions that those utterances make manifest, which favours solidarity and ties of union. From my viewpoint, individuals can exploit these features during the production and interpretation of phatic utterances in order to generate these effects, as I show below.

5.1. On the metarepresentational nature of phatic utterances

Sperber and Wilson (1986, 1995: 228-229) argue that an utterance may describe an existing or desirable state of affairs when its logical form represents that very state of affairs. On the other hand, if its logical form represents another public or private representation because of the similarity arising with the logical form of that representation, the utterance interprets it, i.e. it is a *metarepresentation* (e.g. Sperber, 1994). That relation of similarity originates because the utterance and that representation share a series of logical and contextual implications, and increases as the number of those implications increases.

In her work on metarepresentations, Noh (2000: 74-78) introduced the notion of *metarepresentational use* of utterances, which alludes to cases in which utterances represent other acts of communication. She distinguished between *metalinguistic* and *interpretive* metarepresentational utterances: the former metarepresent abstract linguistic expressions while the latter metarepresent other utterances or thoughts⁸. Within this last type of metarepresentations she grouped what she termed *echoic metarepresentations*, by means of which the speaker also transmits a certain attitude towards the metarepresented content. Among the different attitudes she can convey, Wilson (1999: 147) highlights a *dissociative* or rejecting attitude, typical of irony (Sperber and Wilson, 1986, 1995) or denials (Carston, 1996); a *questioning* attitude, characteristic of echo-questions (Blakemore, 1994; Noh, 1995, 1998, 2000), and another of *endorsement* or acceptance. The transmission of one particular attitude is crucial in the interpretation of an echoic metarepresentational utterance as it achieves an optimal level of relevance because of that attitude. Wilson (1999: 148) includes echoic metarepresentations within the broader class of *attributive* metarepresentations, by means of which a speaker attributes the metarepresented content to another individual.⁹

In my opinion, another factor which determines the production of phatic utterances by a speaker and their interpretation as such by a hearer is their metarepresentational character: the speaker can metarepresent with utterances other utterances, thoughts,

opinions or assumptions manifest to both individuals and the hearer may realise that these are indeed manifest to himself. So, in Sperber and Wilson's (1986, 1995) terms, phatic utterances can be regarded as cases of interpretive utterances because the speaker metarepresents one or some of the public or private representations that are mutually manifest to the hearer and to herself. In other words, these utterances are interpretive metarepresentations (Noh, 2000) and, as such, they are interpretations that the speaker makes of assumptions, thoughts or opinions about a state of affairs that are mutually manifest to both interlocutors in the cognitive environment that they share.

Like any other utterance, a phatic utterance interprets or metarepresents the speaker's own thoughts, opinions or assumptions. But similar thoughts, opinions or assumptions may also be manifest to the hearer because both interlocutors share the same cognitive environment. Therefore, I think that by means of a phatic utterance the speaker metarepresents her own thoughts, opinions or assumptions and, simultaneously, metarepresents those of the hearer's. In this case, phatic utterances are examples of attributive metarepresentations of the thoughts, opinions or assumptions which the speaker thinks the hearer entertains.

In order to illustrate this, consider the following situation. An individual goes to the hairdresser's because she wants her hair cut as it is becoming long and untidy, she would like to change her hairdo and have a new and more fashionable look. In such a situation, assumptions such as those in (11) would be manifest to her, and might have, as logical or contextual implications, assumptions such as those in (12):

- (11) a. My hair is very long.
 b. My hair is untidy.
 c. My hair needs cutting.
 d. I do not like this hairdo.
 e. This hairdo makes me look horrible.
 f. I would really like to have another hairdo.
- (12) a. A haircut will make me look much better.
 b. A new hairdo will make me look more fashionable.
 c. A haircut will prevent my hair from growing in an untidy way.
 d. A new hairdo will make me look more attractive.

Obviously, some or all of those assumptions will also be manifest to the hairdresser, who, because of his encyclopaedic knowledge, is perfectly aware that people normally get their hair cut to look better, more attractive or just for the sake of a change. As he is doing his work, he utters (13), whose propositional content is trivial in that situation and is consequently interpreted by the customer as phatic, since the assumptions that it makes manifest are already manifest to her:

- (13) Your hair is very long.

By uttering (13), the hairdresser is metarepresenting some of the assumptions manifest to himself and, in addition, some of the assumptions that he thinks his customer entertains. Thus, he is attributing to her the manifestness of those assumptions. The hairdresser senses that those assumptions are also manifest to his customer because both of them share the same cognitive environment. However, as Sperber and Wilson (1986, 1995) affirm, the existence of a mutual cognitive environment does not mean that the two interlocutors entertain exactly the same assumptions but rather similar ones, as their perception of reality or their storing other assumptions influences the degree of manifestness of some of them. For this reason, when uttering (13), the hairdresser is metarepresenting at one and the same time both his own assumptions and other very similar ones which he attributes to the customer. The assumptions metarepresented by him may in turn have logical or contextual implications similar to the logical or contextual implications that the customer may draw from the assumptions manifest to herself (12).

Nevertheless, with the phatic utterance the hairdresser does not only metarepresent attributively the thoughts, opinions or assumptions manifest to the customer. His sharing of the same cognitive environment as the customer and the accessing of contextual sources, such as his biographical or encyclopaedic knowledge about the latter, also makes manifest to him that his customer has a particular attitude towards those thoughts, opinions or assumptions, and that enables him to determine it. Thus, for instance, thanks to his biographical knowledge about the customer, the hairdresser may know that she is the sort of person who loves short hair, is always in fashion and changes her hairstyle every now and then. In that way, the hairdresser can draw a conclusion about her attitude towards the metarepresented thoughts, opinions or assumptions.

Following Wilson (1999), I believe that, by means of a phatic utterance, the speaker metarepresents the assumptions whose manifestness she attributes to her interlocutor and also expresses an attitude towards them. For this reason, the speaker makes an echoic use of them or, in other words, her utterance becomes an echoic attributive metarepresentation. In my opinion, the attitude expressed by the speaker must be one of endorsement or acceptance of the metarepresented assumptions. With that attitude she indicates and provides the hearer with further evidence that she shares the thoughts, opinions or assumptions that her utterance metarepresents and, simultaneously, the assumptions manifest to him. Therefore, I think that phatic utterances achieve an optimal level of relevance with a phatic interpretation because the speaker metarepresents thoughts, opinions or assumptions that are mutually manifest in the cognitive environment shared with the hearer, informs the hearer that she is saying or thinking something which resembles his thoughts, and has an attitude of endorsement or acceptance towards those assumptions.

As in the case of irony (Sperber and Wilson, 1986, 1995), it must be stressed that for a phatic utterance to produce the cognitive effects intended by the speaker, the hearer must recognise that that utterance is echoic, identify the metarepresented thoughts, opinions or assumptions and understand that the speaker's attitude towards them is one of endorsement or acceptance. Moreover, although in the previous example some of the assumptions

metarepresented are easily recoverable or accessible, in other situations the speaker may also metarepresent assumptions that are not immediately accessible or that the hearer may not directly identify because their manifestness is due to some previous phenomenon or behaviour, or they are part of their cultural or biographic knowledge (Sperber and Wilson, 1986, 1995; Hamamoto, 1998; Seto, 1998).

Imagine that a group of former university students who spent some years together in a hall of residence meet for dinner at a restaurant several years after having ended their studies and left the hall. All of them enjoyed their time at the hall quite a lot for they shared great experiences going out to pubs, discos or parties, meeting and making new friends, discovering the meaning of comradeship, etc. Since they lived and spent so much time together, they have stored in their minds, as part of their biographical knowledge, assumptions about different aspects of the time spent in hall. Moreover, their time in hall has been a recurrent topic of conversation on previous occasions when they have gathered. For this reason, some of the assumptions that each of them entertains individually will also be manifest to the others and some of them will even be very similar or practically identical. Imagine now that one of those former students utters (14) during the dinner:

(14) Our days in hall were incredibly wonderful!

The other fellows will interpret the utterance as phatic because the assumptions made manifest are already manifest to them. In this case, a past phenomenon, such as the life of a group of students in hall, or a previous behaviour, such as having talked about it in the past, are the source of the manifestness of the assumptions constituting part of their biographical knowledge. Therefore, by uttering (14), the speaker is metarepresenting assumptions that are manifest to herself and which she senses are also manifest to her audience because they share a similar cognitive environment; the speaker echoes those assumptions and transmits at the same time an attitude of endorsement or acceptance towards them, thereby communicating to the audience that she shares similar, if not identical, assumptions.

5.2. On the generation of solidarity and ties of union

From my point of view, the human ability to metarepresent the thoughts, opinions or assumptions attributable to another person and the pragmatic processes intervening in linguistic comprehension play a crucial role in generating a feeling of solidarity and ties of union between interlocutors. As with any other utterance, when processing a phatic utterance the hearer will have to enrich some of the linguistic components of its logical form in order to obtain a fully-fledged propositional form, i.e. he will have to recover its *explicatures*.

Thus, in addition to the pragmatic processes of disambiguation and reference assignment of linguistic elements such as 'your' in (13) or 'our' in (14), the customer will have to enrich the scalar predicate 'long' and determine to what extent the hairdresser

considers her hair to be long, whereas the audience at the dinner will have to enrich 'wonderful' in order to determine what the speaker exactly means by this concept. After doing so, if the explicatures recovered allow the customer and the audience to appreciate that both they and their interlocutors assign the adjectives a value which coincides or is very similar, they will deduce that there is a certain degree of similarity between the assumptions that they entertain and those metarepresented by their respective interlocutors. If this happens in the previous examples, the customer may conclude that there is a certain agreement between herself and the hairdresser as regards the length of her hair, whereas the other fellows at the dinner may infer that they and their mate have the same opinion about the wonderfulness of their days at the university hall of residence. Therefore, when processing phatic utterances hearers can verify that the metarepresented assumptions resemble some or all of the assumptions manifest to themselves, and the determination of their degree of similarity depends partially on pragmatic processes.

On the other hand, as Sperber and Wilson (1986, 1995), Wilson (1995, 1999) or Noh (2000) explain, the degree of similarity or identity between assumptions which are manifest to hearers and those that speakers metarepresent using a phatic utterance depends on the logical or contextual implications that the two sets of assumptions share, so that the more implications they share, the greater the degree of similarity between them. Accordingly, if assumptions such as those in (12) are manifest to both hairdresser and the customer, the customer will realise that the degree of similarity between her own assumptions and those of the hairdresser's is high. Likewise, if the audience at the dinner can derive, as logical or contextual implications, assumptions referring, for instance, to their desire to relive those days, to be a university student in hall again, to meet the same type of people, etc., and senses that some or all of them are also manifest to their interlocutor, the audience will note that the degree of similarity between their respective sets of manifest assumptions is also high.

For this reason, I think the production and interpretation of phatic utterances contributes to the bringing about of a feeling of solidarity and ties of union between interlocutors if the speaker is able to metarepresent assumptions that are similar to those of the hearer and expresses her endorsement or acceptance of them, if the hearer then obtains an explicature that coincides, to a greater or lesser extent, with the speaker's informative intention, and if he recovers some logical or contextual implications that are similar or identical to those already manifest to himself. The greater the degree of similarity between the explicature that the hearer obtains and the speaker's informative intention, the greater the degree of affinity between the two individuals. Likewise, the more logical or contextual implications shared by the assumptions manifest to both interlocutors, the greater the degree of agreement between them and, consequently, the stronger their feeling of solidarity and their ties of union. Finally, if the hearer recognises the attitude of the speaker towards the metarepresented assumptions, he will have additional evidence that she believes or thinks something that is similar to his own opinions or thoughts, and that they have a common similar viewpoint about it.

6. Conclusion

In this paper I have suggested an analysis of phatic utterances as echoic attributive metarepresentations with which the speaker expresses an attitude of endorsement or acceptance of metarepresented assumptions. In my opinion, this analysis has two immediate consequences.

On the one hand, as has been observed above, the reviewed studies of phatic utterances show that the phaticity of an utterance may be determined by factors such as its occurrence in a particular conversational phase being part of an adjacency pair, the activation of specific frames, the performance of a certain processing or by the fact that the assumptions that it makes manifest are already manifest in the interlocutors' cognitive environment. In addition to these factors, I think another one can be added: a hearer can interpret an utterance as phatic if he realises that the speaker is metarepresenting assumptions whose manifestness she is attributing to him and, at the same time, conveying an attitude of endorsement or acceptance of those assumptions.

On the other hand, as regards the creation of solidarity and ties of union between interlocutors that has been attributed to phatic utterances, I believe that it is a direct consequence of the similarity or identity that arises between the assumptions manifest to each individual, which the speaker is able to metarepresent using a phatic utterance, and of the transmission of an attitude of endorsement or acceptance. The hearer can determine that similarity or identity through the pragmatic processes of enrichment of the logical form of the utterance or testing whether those assumptions have similar logical or contextual implications. Moreover, the transmission of that particular attitude towards the metarepresented assumptions contributes positively to the hearer realising that the speaker also entertains thoughts, opinions or assumptions which share a certain similarity or identity with those that are manifest to himself.

However, due to the theoretical nature of this work, it must be admitted that it is necessary to empirically test the hypotheses formulated in it. Therefore, it should be verified whether speakers notice that the assumptions made manifest by a phatic utterance are already mutually manifest in their cognitive environment and are also likely to be manifest to their interlocutors, if they perform the cognitive operations described and if they are aware of them. Furthermore, following Wilson's (2003) suggestions, it would also be advisable to investigate whether psychically handicapped individuals have any difficulty in processing phatic utterances or process them differently.

Notes

1. For a discussion of other issues related to phatic utterances, see Padilla Cruz (2001, 2002, 2004b, 2004c, 2004d).

2. See Coupland and Yläñne-McEwen (2000: 179) for a similar comment, and Gómez Morón (1998) or Holmes (2000), among many others, for critiques against the inappropriateness of these distinctions.

3. As Schegloff (1972) explains, the fact that some pairs are practically invariable does not exclude the possibility of expansion or insertion of other linguistic elements because of the interlocutors' mood or social relationship (e.g. Sifianou, 1989; Sacks, 1992) and other sociocultural conventions operating (e.g. Silva, 1980; Jakubowska, 1999; Sherzer, 1999).

4. Kasper (1984: 11) also warns and illustrates that an excessive focus on utterances and bottom-up processing may lead to erroneous interpretations and misunderstandings.

5. Sperber and Wilson (1995: 260) also propose the more general *Cognitive Principle of Relevance*: "Human cognition is oriented towards the maximisation of optimal relevance".

6. Sperber and Wilson (1986, 1995: 194) distinguish between *implicated premises* – i.e. assumptions that the hearer can retrieve from his memory and which lead him to a particular interpretation – and *implicated conclusions* – i.e. assumptions that he believes that the speaker expected him to derive so as to reach an optimally relevant interpretation.

7. See Nicolle and Clark (1998) and Žegarac (1998) for some remarks on the importance of *conventionalisation* and *standardisation* processes for the interpretation of phatic utterances.

8. See Noh (2000) for some examples.

9. In an analogous way, there are cases of *non-attributive* metarepresentations when the speaker mentions utterances that she expects the hearer to produce in a particular communicative situation (Wilson, 1999).

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