

# Teaching to Be Phatic: a Pragmatic Approach

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

When teaching how to begin a conversation in English, teachers normally explain that its opening phase is characterised by an exchange of *ritual* speech acts that include *greetings*, *welcomes* and *how-are-yous* (Edmondson and House 1981: 98). They also comment that these speech acts are formulaic (Coulmas 1981; Kasper 1984) and that their structure is that of an *adjacency pair* (e.g. Schegloff 1972; Schegloff and Sacks 1973). Quite often, they focus on the differences in the performance of these speech acts in the L1 and the L2 (Silva 1980). In addition, teachers usually mention that a minimal initial pair of ritual speech acts is expanded with *phatic sequences* in which participants ask and answer questions, and deal with ‘safe topics’ that constitute *small talk* (Kasper 1989; Pavlidou 1994).

However, in some cases they only tell their learners that the content of those phatic utterances must be obvious, trivial and unimportant. This idea seems to be derived from a linguistic tradition that stressed the unimportance of the propositional content of phatic utterances in terms of information transmission and portrayed them as linguistic devices aimed at recognising each interlocutor’s presence (Abercrombie 1956; 1998; Turner 1973; Hudson 1980). Even fairly recently, in their Relevance Theoretic (Sperber and Wilson 1995) analysis of phatic communion, Žegarac (1998) and Žegarac and Clark (1999) have suggested that phatic utterances do not achieve an *optimal* level of relevance because their processing does not result in *contextual effects* that offset the *cognitive effort* that the hearer has to invest to interpret them, since the assumptions they make manifest are already manifest in both interlocutors’ mutual *cognitive environment*<sup>1</sup>. According to these authors, phatic utterances

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<sup>1</sup> According to Sperber and Wilson (1995: 39), a fact or assumption is *manifest* to an individual if he can have a mental representation of it, and the set of facts or assumptions that he can mentally represent constitute his *cognitive environment*.

would be optimally relevant because of the speaker's *communicative intention*<sup>2</sup>. For this reason, many teachers do not devote much time to addressing phatic utterances in the classroom and do not explain to their students if there are different types of these utterances, how they can select their topics, which topics can be chosen, whether there is any restriction on their usage depending on the social relationship that they have or wish to establish with their addressees and the implications that this may have for social interaction.

In other cases, following another perspective on phatic communion (Malinowski 1923; Lyons 1968; Silva 1980; Leech 1983), teachers emphasise that the phatic utterances appearing at the opening phase of a conversation contribute to the creation or maintenance of a feeling of solidarity and well-being between interlocutors, as well as to the establishment of ties of union between them. Nevertheless, they are not able to account for how these effects are generated or how learners can achieve them.

Therefore, the aim of this work will be to suggest some guidelines for the teaching of phatic utterances in the ESL class. In order to do so, I will firstly present some of the extant classifications of phatic utterances that can be used in order to distinguish the kinds of phatic tokens that learners may resort to when starting a conversation. Secondly, I will suggest how the selection of topic for these utterances can be taught. Then, I will make some considerations about the usage of phatic utterances that can be taken into account so as to avoid possible misunderstandings. Finally, I will propose a model for explaining how and why these utterances originate a feeling of solidarity and ties of union.

## 2. DIFFERENTIATING PHATIC UTTERANCES

Most works on phatic communion coincide in drawing a distinction between two types of phatic utterances: those that refer to the setting where a conversation takes place or any other external element (1, 2), and those referring to its participants (3, 4). Thus, Laver (1974; 1975; 1981) differentiates between *neutral* and *personal* phatic utterances, which can allude to the speaker (*self-oriented*) or to the hearer (*other-oriented*). These types correspond to what Ventola (1979: 270-273) calls *indirect* and *direct approaches*, and to what Edmondson and House (1981: 58-59) term *remarks* and *discloses*.

- (1) Wintry morning again.
- (2) Great view.
- (3) Hot work, this.

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<sup>2</sup> A speaker's *communicative intention* is her intention to make manifest to the hearer that she has an *informative intention* (Sperber and Wilson 1995: 61). This is the set of assumptions the speaker wants to make manifest to the hearer (Sperber and Wilson 1995: 58).

(4) That looks like hard work.

Therefore, after mentioning when phatic utterances may occur at the beginning of a conversation, teachers could draw this twofold distinction and point out that, in any case, their content should be about facts, events or things “[...] both speaker and hearer are assumed to be equally familiar with” (Edmondson and House 1981: 58). However, this would not be enough to approach the selection of topics for phatic utterances, so they should also provide learners with more detailed information about this issue.

### 3. SELECTING THE TOPIC FOR PHATIC UTTERANCES

As mentioned above, it is commonly accepted that the *phaticity* of utterances resides in the triviality or obviousness of their content, which might lead teachers to tell their students that any topic would be valid as long as it is trivial or obvious. Ventola (1979), Thomas (1983), Tannen (1984) or Schneider (1987; 1988) maintain that interlocutors tend to avoid some topics, regardless of their intimate social relation, and that there are serious intercultural differences regarding how personal those topics can be. Although seemingly obvious, teachers could remind learners to avoid overly technical or very specific topics, such as death, illnesses, sex or income, which are considered taboo for small talk by some cultural groups (Schneider 1987: 251). This is why the most frequent topics are the weather, interlocutors’ health or any matter with which they are equally familiar and about which they can have a similar opinion (Ventola 1979: 268).

As regards the way in which topics are selected, Schneider (1987: 252-254; 1988: 84-86) argues that it is done on the basis of the information elements contained in the mental *frames* that interlocutors access. Thus, following his work, teachers can comment that the topics of the phatic utterances at the beginning of a conversation tend to be related to any element of the immediate situation. For subsequent utterances, students can either speak about other elements present in that very frame, which gives rise to more specific topics, or activate a new frame associated with a distinct element of that situation, which generates another general topic.

Accordingly, students could be trained to visualise the different elements of the frame they access in a particular situation and think of what they can say about them, taking into account that what they say should be similar to the opinion that they believe that their potential addressees may have, for this is essential for an utterance to be phatic and for the achievement of some communicative effects, as will be shown below. After this, teachers could focus on how and with whom students can use the different types of phatic utterances previously distinguished.

#### 4. USING PHATIC UTTERANCES

Laver's (1974; 1975: 223; 1981: 302) most remarkable contribution to the study of phatic utterances was maybe relating their usage in the UK and USA to the interlocutors' *status* and degree of *solidarity*<sup>3</sup>. He observed that (i) in a solidarity relationship, the interlocutors can normally resort to both neutral and personal phatic utterances; (ii) in a non-solidarity relationship with no status difference, they tend to avoid personal utterances and select neutral ones, and (iii) in a non-solidarity relationship with a status difference, this factor determines their linguistic choices. Thus, in this last context, if a lower-status individual addresses another of higher status, the tendency is to resort to self-oriented phatic utterances and avoid other-oriented ones. On the contrary, when addressing a person of lower-status, a person of higher status can use other-oriented utterances and avoid self-oriented ones.

Laver (1975: 224-225) also concluded that the behaviour of interlocutors with a non-solidarity relationship in agreement with these patterns has two consequences. On the one hand, if they are equals and select neutral phatic utterances, they are offering each other a certain degree of solidarity. On the other hand, if their status is different, there seems to be a convention in the UK and USA that permits the superior to invade the psychological space of the inferior but that, in turn, prevents the latter from invading that of the former. In this way, phatic utterances reinforce that status difference<sup>4</sup>.

Therefore, based on Laver's (1974; 1975; 1981) observations, students could be informed that an erroneous choice of the type of phatic utterance in particular social contexts may have serious consequences for the relationship they wish to establish or maintain with their addressees. If they are not equals and have a non-solidarity relationship, a self-oriented utterance employed by the superior may mean a momentary offer of solidarity to the inferior and a cancellation of their status difference. However, the inferior's usage of an other-oriented utterance may be regarded as an invasion of the superior's psychological space. On the other hand, if they are equals, the speaker's usage of a self-oriented phatic utterance may also be understood by the hearer as a temporary invitation to establish bonds of solidarity, while her usage of an other-oriented utterance may be interpreted as a demand to do so.

In this way, teachers can provide students with valuable information that may help them avoid undesired *sociopragmatic failures* (Thomas 1983; Padilla Cruz

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<sup>3</sup> These terms seem to be equivalent to Brown and Levinson's (1978; 1987) *relative power* and *social distance*, respectively.

<sup>4</sup> See Padilla Cruz (2004a; 2004b; 2004c) for a discussion on how interlocutors infer this.

2001), which would negatively affect the perception that their interlocutors might have of their personality. However, there still remains an issue that teachers should include in their programmes: how and why phatic utterances contribute to the generation of a feeling of agreement and ties of union between individuals.

## 5. GENERATING SOLIDARITY AND TIES OF UNION

As mentioned above, phatic utterances only make manifest assumptions that are already manifest in both interlocutors' mutual cognitive environment (Žegarac 1998; Žegarac and Clark 1999). This implies that both individuals will have mental representations about the facts, events or states of affairs to which those utterances allude. Since interlocutors share that cognitive environment, it is also likely that there is a certain degree of similarity between the assumptions they entertain and the assumptions that those utterances make manifest, and that the two sets of assumptions share some logical properties.

Following Sperber and Wilson (1995: 228-229), elsewhere (Padilla Cruz 2004a) I have considered phatic utterances as *interpretive* utterances that metarepresent one or several of the assumptions manifest to the interlocutors interacting in a mutual cognitive environment, or, using Noh's (2000) terminology, as instances of *interpretive metarepresentations*. Accordingly, as any other utterance, a phatic utterance metarepresents, first of all, the speaker's own thoughts, but, since the speaker and the hearer share a mutual cognitive environment where some assumptions are manifest to both of them, by means of that utterance the speaker would also metarepresent assumptions that she thinks are manifest to the hearer. Therefore, phatic utterances are what Wilson (1999: 148) calls *attributive metarepresentations* of the assumptions whose manifestation the speaker attributes to the hearer.

Moreover, as with any other utterance, a speaker can also express her attitude towards the assumptions metarepresented in a phatic utterance, so she echoes them and the utterance becomes an *echoic attributive metarepresentation*. In the case of phatic utterances, I think that the attitude the speaker transmits must be one of *endorsement*, acceptance or approval of the metarepresented assumptions. With that attitude, she provides the hearer with additional evidence that she shares the assumptions attributed to him.

In my opinion, these features of phatic utterances can help teachers account for the generation of the feeling of solidarity and the establishment of ties of union between interlocutors. Due to the fact that they share a mutual cognitive environment, some of the assumptions metarepresented by the speaker with a phatic utterance may be similar or even almost identical to those the hearer entertains. Consequently, when processing it, the hearer will have to verify if

this is so. For this reason, he will first have to pragmatically enrich some of the constituents of its *logical form*. In the case of an utterance such as (2) above, the hearer will have to enrich the scalar predicate ‘great’ and determine to what extent the view is so. When he recovers the *explicature* of the utterance, he will then infer whether the value he assigns to that adjective coincides to a greater or lesser extent with the value that he thinks that the speaker has assigned to it. Next, the hearer will check whether the assumptions metarepresented by the phatic utterance and his own assumptions share some logical or contextual implications because the more implications they share, the more similar those assumptions. Thus, (2) may imply that the view is great enough to take a picture of it, to stop and look at it, etc. If these implications are manifest to both the speaker and the hearer, the degree of similarity between the assumptions manifest to each of them will increase.

From my point of view, teachers could remark that the feeling of solidarity and the ties of union between interlocutors are a direct consequence of their intuitions about the similarity or identity of their own assumptions and those metarepresented by phatic utterances. Therefore, teachers should encourage the students to be aware of the importance of reflecting on what they think about particular facts, events or elements of the setting of the conversation and foreseeing what their potential addressees may think. If they sense that they may have similar opinions about those facts, events or elements, they will be more likely to achieve solidarity and establish ties of union with their addressees.

## 6. CONCLUSION

As will have been observed, phatic utterances are rather complex linguistic devices that should not be overlooked or disregarded in the ESL class. Their correct usage and interpretation requires a knowledge of their different types, how their topics are selected, when each of their types can be resorted to in the target culture, the diverse communicative effects that interlocutors may achieve with them, or why and how they can achieve them. Therefore, I agree with Thomas (1983) or Bou Franch and Garcés Conejos (2003) – among many others – that teachers should include in their praxis discussions about the sociopragmatic factors intervening in the production of these utterances, which must be complemented by remarks about the cognitive processes underlying utterance interpretation (e.g. Levinson 1983: 53; Garcés Conejos 2001: 133). In this way, teachers will undoubtedly contribute to the positive development or improvement of students’ metapragmatic awareness and pragmatic competence, which are decisive for communicating effectively in the L2. However, as Garcés Conejos (2001: 141) correctly points out, although this pedagogic intervention is essential, it is absolutely necessary that teachers previously

acquire a solid theoretical training in pragmatics. If they lack it, they will miss the systematicity that a thorough and contrasted knowledge in that field of linguistic description provides.

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