

Phatic, the: Communication and Communion

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What does one need to make contact? How do people use, create, and work upon the channels (see Channels of Human Communication) that keep them in touch? Why do we incessantly talk about the weather? As technology has revolutionized how we connect, linguistic anthropologists and others interested in language have turned toward the notion of phaticity. What they have found is less a single empirical object than two tangled threads of inquiry, separable into *communion phaticity* and *contact phaticity*. Reflecting on ideologies of contact helps explain why scholars so often entangle these threads and clarifies the big questions at phaticity's core.

The term “phatic” comes from Bronisław Malinowski's (see Malinowski, Bronisław) phrase “phatic communion.” He introduced the phrase as a gloss for talk concerned with “establish[ing] bonds of personal union” rather than communicating information. Researchers since Malinowski have replaced “phatic communion” with just “phatic” and used this form – derived from the Greek *phatos* [φάτος] or “spoken” – for the notion as a whole (note that J.L. Austin [see Austin, J.L. (John Langshaw)] uses “phatic” in an unrelated sense).

In Malinowski's original sense of *communion phaticity*, phatic talk is aimed at building rapport. Like the chatter that bubbles up while purchasing coffee, waiting for the bus, or between rinses at the dentist, this phatic talk is sociable talk meant to commune rather than communicate. Research has shown it to be an intuitive but often misleading notion. Similar to “small talk” or “chit-chat” (see Coupland 2014), it is haunted by assumptions about how language and sociality normally work, making it an unwieldy analytic, easier to sketch with a familiar example than to specify in formal terms. The central idea that phatic talk is non-informative also presumes a narrow understanding of “information” as denotational. This idea has, at times, turned communion phaticity into a residual, catch-all category, a bin into which anything that seems redundant, denotationally vacant, highly patterned, or even broadly “pragmatic” can be tossed. *Maybe it's just phatic*, goes the refrain. In sifting out phatic talk, studies of communion phaticity also often obscure the denotational and referential dimensions of the examples they provide to support their claims, implying that speakers using phatic talk simply hum or scat through conversation (Rampton 2015, 85; see Duranti 1997 for a similar point regarding greetings).

Communion phaticity is quite different from *contact phaticity*. This sense of the term was introduced by Roman Jakobson (see Jakobson, Roman). In the late 1950s, Jakobson designated the phatic as one of his six functions of language. The phatic function, he wrote, is defined by an orientation toward *contact*, or the “physical

channel and psychological connection between the addresser and the addressee, [that enables] both of them to enter and stay in communication” (1960, 353). Presumably, Jakobson adopted Malinowski’s term in part because Malinowski (1946, 314) mentioned issues of contact and framed phatic communion as a “function of speech” in his original formulation; but in Jakobson’s brief discussion of the phatic function, he shifts phaticity’s emphasis away from the formation of social relations and toward a focus on how people technically achieve contact and experiment with that achievement. Jakobson was not particularly concerned with the discrepancies between his and Malinowski’s uses of the term, and in his short comments on the phatic function he provided examples of phatic signs (or signs functioning phatically, to be more precise) that Malinowski probably would have excluded: for instance, “messages primarily serving to establish, to prolong, or to discontinue communication, to check whether the channel works ... to attract the attention of the interlocutor or to confirm his continued attention” (1960, 355). Broadly, Jakobson’s idea of the phatic involved a more technical understanding of the circuit of communication, no doubt influenced by his reading of, and interactions with, information theorists and cyberneticians such as Claude Shannon, Warren Weaver, Norbert Wiener, and Donald MacKay.

Jakobson wrote little about what contact phaticity should include, but linguistic anthropologists, conversation analysts (see *Conversation Analysis [CA]*), and researchers in communications have since explored how people manage contact. Often without invoking the notion of phaticity explicitly, they have shown that contact “is a pervasive concern and a contingent accomplishment” that people manage, regulate, and work to achieve as they interact (Sidnell 2009, 132). They have documented how interlocutors use “back-channel” cues, shifts in gaze (see *Gaze*), repairs (see *Repair: Error and Correction*), and adjustments in bodily orientation (see *Body, in Interaction*) to create varieties of physical and psychological contact; they have tracked how actors manage face-to-face involvements alongside technologies such as cellphones and automobiles; and they have studied moments of inattention, in which humans try to ignore others, whether to avoid harassment, aggression, or distraction.

This body of work has revealed several dimensions of contact phaticity, often without explicitly theorizing them (see Zuckerman 2016). Here I tentatively summarize: (i) There are no grounds for studying contact phaticity as a strictly linguistic function; rather, the management of talk involves many of the same tools and problems as the management of semiotic communication broadly (Kockelman 2017); (ii) phaticity is a prominent dimension of most acts of attention (see *Attention (and Joint Attention)*) (e.g. angling one’s head around a tall man at a concert) and addressivity (e.g. trying to capture another’s gaze at a crowded event, see *Audience (and Audience Design)*); (iii) phaticity is as much a property of signs aimed at establishing or maintaining contact as it is a property of signs aimed at breaking or avoiding contact, at disattending to or ignoring others, at disrupting connections or making noise; (iv) contact is often asymmetrical (e.g. one can see another without being seen or hear another without being heard) and differently distributed across modalities; different modalities of contact often have meaningfully different properties and affordances (e.g. text messages and letters move differently across time and space, see *Media as Channel*;

Modality, Multimodality); (v) contact is usually not best imagined as powered by an on/off switch (Sidnell 2009, 134); rather it can be achieved at different gradients and nested in hierarchies of involvement; (vi) there is a distinction between the testing of the possibility of contact and its presupposition. Think, for instance, of the difference between a sound check and a singer's cooing into a microphone; (vii) there are meaningful similarities and differences in how humans make contact versus how other sentient and non-sentient entities do (see *Communication, Animal*); and (viii) finally, humans often treat the management or achievement of contact as itself meaningful.

This last point is particularly important. It invites us to move beyond the technical dimensions of contact toward local understandings of it. As a slew of recent studies have shown (Slotta 2015; Ansell 2017; Nozawa 2015; Lemon 2018), contact is grist for the ideological mill (see *Language Ideology*). Across cultures, contexts, and individuals, actors reproduce and produce ideologies of contact, thematizing it (or its absence), reflecting on it, and treating it as both a means for communicating and as an end in itself (Zuckerman 2016). The ubiquity of such contact tropes hints that contact might be particularly susceptible to ideological elaboration. The diversity of such tropes shows that the nature of this elaboration is not determined by the technical requirements of making communicative contact (Keane 2014, 11; on semiotic ideology see Keane 2018). To analyze contact phaticity, it is thus crucial to distinguish between the management of contact and semiotic ideologies that treat such contact as an index of something else. The mere fact that one is in the process of speaking or listening to someone, for instance, can be taken to index many forms of sociality, mental states, or kinds of person. Looking at one's phone rather than one's interlocutor can at times be rude, but at other times it can fit unobtrusively into an established hierarchy of involvement or be a sign that someone is dealing with an emergency. Stopping to chat with someone on the street might be friendliness or it might be harassment.

This creates an analytic problem for scholars of phaticity. Neither linguistic anthropologists nor others interested in the topic have centrifuges with which they can separate "mere contact" and ideology about it into opposite ends of a test tube. That task, for those brave or foolish enough to undertake it, would be more like trying to pick the ink from a magazine. But not being able to cleanly separate ideology from contact does not mean that researchers should begin their analyses by collapsing the two. Rather, separating the management of contact from semiotic ideologies that treat it as an index of something else helps heuristically. That is, the distinction can help lead analysts away from naturalizing tropes of contact and keep them alive to contact's semiotic (see *Semiotics*) flexibility across cultures, situations, and actors.

Research that conflates rather than separates communion and contact phaticity obscures this flexibility, assuming the pragmatic and performative effects of contact. It ties phaticity, a key analytic for talking about contact, to assumptions about what contact tends to do, namely, build rapport. This is clear, for example, in work studying the effects and affordances of new communicative technologies (see *Language, the Internet, and Digital Communication*). Some influential researchers in this field argue that phatic signs are signs aimed toward maintaining conviviality *and* contact, a "sociable connection" (Miller 2017, 261). Miller (2008, 395), for example, argues that

as people use technologies to connect in new ways, the communicative landscape is shifting from “substance” to “contact,” to a “phatic media culture” in which “content is not king, but ‘keeping in touch’ is.” This research imaginatively approaches a crucial contemporary issue but, fostered by the double meaning of phaticity, it also problematically links technologically mediated communicative contact with a particular kind of sociality. Surely, researchers into new media using the idea of phatic communion have captured how some people, at some times, orient toward technologies such as the Facebook “like” button, but they have also homogenized engagements with technology. Careful research into phaticity must document, not presume, the nature of any given engagement, its historical providence, its relation to offline communications, and the social and semiotic ecology in which it was created.

Contact phaticity’s conceptual entanglement with communion phaticity has muddled the exploration of contact. But it has also evinced something about contact, generally: its productivity as an ideological affordance. That is, the confusion around phaticity is a symptom of a broader human obsession with contact. Clarifying the confusion is thus a step toward understanding it, toward coming to terms with the heterogeneous ways people engage with contact and imagine such engagement as meaningful. How does a communicative relation become a relationship? What can it mean to “poke” someone on Facebook, to send a blank postcard, or to face another “in silence” (Malinowski 1946, 314)? The notion of phaticity invites researchers to explore these questions by studying the explicit, tacit, and ideologically infused answers people give in response.

SEE ALSO: Attention (and Joint Attention); Audience (and Audience Design); Body, in Interaction; Channels of Human Communication; Communication, Animal; Conversation Analysis (CA); Gaze; Jakobson, Roman; Language Ideology; Language, the Internet, and Digital Communication; Malinowski, Bronisław; Media as Channel; Modality, Multimodality; Repair: Error and Correction; Semiotics

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