

# Some thoughts on the phatic communion and small talk in fictional dialogues

Discourse analysis of the extract from the novel *My Other Life* by Paul Theroux

Ludmila Urbanová

*Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University, Brno*

## 1 Phatic Communion Revisited

The substance of the phatic communion in everyday conversation is described by Malinowski (1999 [1926]:302) as ‘free, aimless, social intercourse’. At the same time, the claim is made that ‘language here is not dependent upon what happens at that moment, **it seems even to be deprived of any context of situation** (emphasized by the author of the contribution). The meaning of any utterance cannot be connected with the speaker’s or hearer’s behaviour, with the purpose of what they are doing’ (Malinowski 1999 [1926]:302). In the same vein, Malinowski (1999 [1926]:304) mentions ‘the atmosphere of sociability’ and ‘the give and take of utterances’.

In pragmatic terms, Leech (1983:141-142) mentions the introduction of the **Phatic Maxim** as ‘the activity of talking merely to preserve sociability’: ‘We may, indeed, argue for an additional maxim of politeness, the metalinguistic Phatic Maxim which may be provisionally formulated either in the negative form "Avoid silence" or in its positive form "Keep talking". However, it is inadequate to describe phatic communion as simple avoidance of silence. More positively, such conversation, **if it has no other illocutionary point** (emphasized by the author of the contribution), serves to extend the common ground of agreement and experience shared by the participants. Hence the choice of subject matter tends to be non-controversial, and to concentrate on the attitudes of the speakers, rather than on matters of fact.’

Bakhtin (1999 [1986]:127) contradicts Malinowski’s view in making an observation that ‘a large number of genres that are widespread in everyday life are so standard that the speaker’s individual speech will be manifested in its choice of a particular genre, and, perhaps, in its expressive intonation. Such, for example, are the various everyday genres of greetings, farewells, congratulations, all kinds of wishes, information about health, business, and so forth. These genres are so diverse because **they differ depending on the situation, social position, and personal interrelations of the participants in the communication**’ (the emphasis is indicated by the author of the contribution).

The three above-mentioned interpretations of the phatic function of language have a common core which stresses socializing and mutuality, yet the standpoints taken by the linguists quoted above are very different. Malinowski claims that the phatic communion seems to be context-independent. Leech mentions a possibility of some other illocutionary point which, in my view, explains the potential existence of a context which is other than common, this idea leading to the conclusion that the context can play a role in the phatic

discourse. Bakhtin assumes that the context is ever present and thus crucial for the speaker's choice of phatic devices.

### 1.1 Phatic Communion in Fictional Discourse

In my article 'Implicit and Explicit Dialogic Structure in Fiction' (2002:83-92), I tackled the role of the phatic communion in fiction in relation to the potential convergence of stylistic devices. Phatic communion in my interpretation is defined as 'a ritualistic conversational behaviour' which 'releases the tension at the beginning and at the end of the encounter and bridges the social gap' (Urbanová 2002:90). The role of the phatic communion has been analysed mainly with regard to **the degree of authenticity** (i.e. verisimilitude) in fictional discourse.

In fictional discourse, however, the phatic communion can be frequently utilized by the author rather as a means of **defamiliarization** to achieve such intricacies of meaning as irony, mockery, detachment, humour etc.

In both verisimilitude and defamiliarization, the main function of the phatic communion is that of **establishing a social contact** between the participants in communication. In Malinowski's view, in the phatic communion 'ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words' (1999 [1926]:303) and '...the communion of words is the first to establish links of fellowship...' (1999 [1926]:303). The main feature of phaticity is thus the atmosphere of togetherness.

### 1.2 Convention vs. Individuality in Fictional Discourse

In the present contribution it is my endeavour to confront and verify the three seemingly contradictory interpretations represented by Malinowski, Leech and Bakhtin with regard to the role of the phatic communion in fiction.

My hypothesis will try to show that each of these interpretations is founded in real-life situations and rooted in the two simultaneously functioning aspects overarching human communication, namely **the presence of convention** on the one hand, and the **striving for individuality** and **idiosyncrasy** on the other hand. The apparent contradiction in the understanding of the role of the phatic function of language reflects the synergy of the two poles mentioned above, i.e. convention and individuality.

It seems that instances of the conventional use of the phatic devices are context-free and thus stereotypical (corresponding to Malinowski's view), whereas the idiosyncratic manner of speaking is embedded in a peculiar context of situation, frequently connected with the shift of the literal meaning expressed by the speaker towards a detached view, hesitation and objection mediating **irony** and **mockery** based on exaggeration or understatement (see Leech 1983:139-149).

To break the silence, '...to get over the strange and unpleasant tension which men feel when facing each other in silence' (Malinowski 1999 [1926]:303), as well as to show politeness, interest and curiosity, the speaker tries to restore the **social equilibrium** by using phatic communion and small talk.

**Small talk** is defined by the *New Oxford Dictionary of English* (1998) as 'polite conversation about unimportant or uncontroversial matters, especially as engaged in on social occasions'. According to Holmes (2000:33), however, '...small talk cannot be dismissed as a peripheral, marginal or minor discursive mode. Small talk is one means by which we

negotiate interpersonal relationships, a crucial function of talk with significant implications for on-going and future interactions’.

In my understanding phatic communion and small talk are two different, though interrelated notions. The term small talk seems to reflect a much broader concept of socialization covering different types of talk including phatic, transactional and relational features. The phatic component is thus included in small talk as one of its characteristics.

The communicative strategies used for rendering phatic communion and small talk are in harmony with the Politeness Principle. They can, however, in certain circumstances result in speech behaviour reflecting embarrassing and unforgivable misconduct resulting from an awkward misunderstanding, or a purposeful mocking strategy.

In fiction the current usage is oriented towards **defamiliarization** through which new meanings come into being. In this respect the original politeness incorporated in the phatic communion cannot be taken at face value, since the speech behaviour is re-interpreted and the original polite meanings become shifted, especially for the sake of irony.

## **2 Functions of Phatic Strategies in Fictional Discourse**

The material I have chosen for the illustration of the role of the phatic communion and small talk in fiction is the extract from Paul Theroux’ novel *My Other Life* (1997:102-114). In the analysed discourse phatic communion and small talk are represented by exchanges occurring in a situation when people do not know what to say, because they have never experienced such situations before. The lack of reciprocity is partly due to the fact that encounters with strangers do not entail sharing any common ground.

In the fictional discourse under investigation, phatic communion and small talk are very common. The occurrence of the phatic strategies is determined by an unusual context of situation. The narrator, i.e. the author himself, has been asked to have dinner to meet the Queen.

In the extract the communicative intention of the author is to show how the atmosphere of tension (the invited guests are expecting the arrival of the Queen and talk to her during her visit) influences the speech behaviour of the participants in communication. In a specific situation the ritualistic speech habits become substantially modified. The social gap and the lack of mutual knowledge cause many embarrassing moments and misunderstandings. Bakhtin’s view that phatic communion uses genres which are context-dependent is thus proved.

The interaction conditioned by this extraordinary gathering is far from efficient. However, people are urged to talk to each other by any means. The unnaturally insistent conversation thus consists of contributions which are mostly

- a) redundant**
- b) non-interactive, occurring repeatedly without being answered**
- c) uninformative and incoherent**
- d) casual and banal**
- e) abrupt and haphazard**
- f) ironical**

## 2.1 Linguistic and Non-Linguistic Means in the Phatic Strategies

The existing convention in phatic communion strategies is used in fiction to create new or extra meanings. This process which is understood as **defamiliarization** is defined as follows: ‘Defamiliarization, or creation of meaning, is achieved by using a stylistic code to criticize the limitations of the existing linguistic code’ (Fowler 1986:50). In the fictional dialogues under investigation, several occurrences of a similar wording of the phatic conversations show their primarily conventional character. At the same time, these phatic exchanges become defamiliarized when answered or commented upon by the narrator in a jocular, ironical manner.

### Example 1

*“What are you working on?” a man asked me.  
I began to give him my tentative answer and was relieved that he was not listening.*

### Example 2

*“I say what are you working on? I was asked again by someone else.*

### Example 3

*“What are you working on these days?”  
“Not much,” I said.  
No one listened, no one heard me.*

### Example 4

*The woman on my right smiled at me.  
“What are you working on?”  
“Not much.”  
“Sound super,” she said. “I wish I could write.”  
“So do I,” I said.*

### Example 5

*“What are you working on at the moment,” the woman on my left asked.  
I propped the menu and read from it...*

The absence of stereotypical speech behaviour is utilized by the narrator to create an extra meaning indicating an unconventional character of the speaker.

### Example 6

*The Duke did not ask me what I was working on. He did not say anything.*

The use of **body language** also reflects a phatic strategy. This situation is described in the discourse quoted below in which the body language compensates for a straightforward question. The meaning of the gesture is explained explicitly by the narrator.

### **Example 7**

*The man to her left was attentive, yet he had not so far succeeded in saying anything. He smiled at me. He made a scribbling motion with his hand, a gesture, that was unambiguous; it meant, **Are you working on anything at the moment?***

A very different, contrastive wording is used in a situation when the narrator's private conversation with the Queen is not an instance of a phatic strategy but it is part of a fully developed exchange of views.

### **Example 8**

**"You're in books, aren't you?"**

*"Yes, Mum."*

*"Go back to books, then."*

## **2.2 Narrator's Role in the Interpretation of Phatic Communion**

The phatic communion and small talk in the analysed extract are frequently framed by the narrator's comments on the oddity of the speech behaviour of the individual speakers. Such observations of the narrator show the clumsiness, incoherence, senselessness and absurdity of their chat. In some cases the interaction is marred by contributions which lack clarity and coherence. People seem to communicate but their activity finally comes amiss.

### **Example 9**

*Birdwood was saying, "Actually very unexpected" to a woman who replied, "Perhaps better not to speculate." Were they talking about the royal visit?*

### **Example 10**

*A man was saying, "It's always that way, isn't it" and I had no idea what he was talking about.*

Irony is manifested in situations in which the real topic of the conversation is missing and the weather is resorted to as a **ritualistic replacement**. At the same time, the narrator mocks the typical English small talk strategy, which tends to be prevalently weather-oriented, by his ironical remark preceding the dialogue ***The English guests were the most talkative.***

### **Example 11**

**"I think the sun was trying to come out today."**

**"We've been extraordinarily lucky this winter."**

**"The going at Goodwood was uniquely horrible."**

The weather is the most frequent topic discussed by linguists in connection with the phatic communion and small talk, e.g. in Malinowski (1999 [1926]:303): *Nice day to-day*.

### 2.3 Ritual Talking

In the analysed discourse the conversations with the Queen are labelled ‘ritual talking’ (1997:106). The description of her speech behaviour given by the narrator is the following: ‘*She was formal, certainly, but more than that she was polite*’ (1997:108).

The comments uttered by the Queen are strikingly short, showing moderation and tact. The discussion is centred round events which are already known, contributing to the feeling of solidarity and safety: ‘*Throughout this evening I had seen no evidence of the Queen being told something that she did not already know.*’

#### Example 12

*“Quite,” Her Majesty said.*

*“Oh?,” Her Majesty said.*

*“Yes,” Her Majesty said.*

*“Yes, I imagine so,” Her Majesty was saying.*

*“Yes, it must be so pleasant,” she was saying.*

*“Quite,” Her Majesty said, with feeling.*

*“That does happen,” Her Majesty said. “Yes.”*

On the contrary, the absence of the same ritual is transparent when the Duke has a conversation with the author. The Duke does not show any cooperation, his remarks are unfriendly and extremely negativistic, not showing features of mutuality and reciprocity.

#### Example 13

*“I’m told Vanatu is an interesting place.”*

*“Do you think so?” he said, accusing me.*

*“I don’t know,” I said. “But apparently there’s a group of people in Vanatu who keep portraits of you in their huts.”*

*“I don’t want to hear about it,” the Duke said.*

*“It seems they admire you.”*

*“I don’t want to know this,” he said. He was not smiling. Another sound came out of his mouth.*

### 2.4 Person Deixis

**Person deixis** which is used in the extract differs as to the degree of formality and acceptability. In the context of situation different ways of address are used, ranging from very formal to even vulgar. It can be stated that the address as part of the phatic communion and small talk also tends to be context-dependent.

In the majority of the ritual talking the address is very formal, including expressions such as *Her Majesty, Your Majesty, The Queen, Your Highness, Lady in Waiting*.

#### **Example 14**

*“I was thinking of going there, **Your Highness.**”*

An unusual, unacceptable way of address occurs in the question asked by the narrator as part of the mocking strategy. The humour, however, is not reciprocated.

#### **Example 15**

*“When you were introduced, **Your Majesty**, did they refer to you as “**Missis Kwin**”?”*

This question is not answered. Instead, a comment is made by the narrator: *‘And you certainly did not interrupt Her Majesty. She blinked at me, ignoring what I said, and went on...’*

In the story which the Queen is telling about her visit to Australia, however, she uses a vulgar Australian accent imitating the greeting which was used to welcome her on her visit.

#### **Example 16**

*“**Hile to the Quoin!**”*

The narrator’s comment which follows expresses the reaction: *‘The unexpected accent, the shock of it from Her Majesty in diamonds, caused another howl of pleasure.’*

In the private conversation the familiar address *Mum* is used for the Queen by the narrator on several occasions. This address shows closeness and emotiveness.

#### **Example 17**

*“What you want, young man, is purpose.”  
“Yes, **Mum**,” I said, catching my breath.*

### **3 Conclusion**

In the discourse analysis of the extract from Paul Theroux’ novel *My Other Life* phatic strategies constitute the core of the message. It has been proved that in the fictional dialogues a great variety of subtly differentiated stylistic means becomes utilized by the author, each time the use being contextually bound. It can be concluded that the same phatic means can create different meanings in different contexts and the phatic communion and small talk tend to be context-dependent.

In fiction the phatic communion and small talk are frequently used not as conventional, stereotypical devices establishing a social contact, but mainly as strategies contributing to the process of defamiliarization resulting in the occurrence of new, unfamiliar meanings.

In the analysed material this discourse tactic results predominantly in instances of irony, mockery and uniqueness. Ritual talking is shown both as a conventional and an unconventional communicative strategy.

## References

- Bakhtin, M. (1999 [1986]) 'The Problem of Speech Genres' in: Jaworski, A. and Coupland, N. (eds) *The Discourse Reader*. London and New York: Routledge, 121-132.
- Coupland, J. (ed) (2000) *Small Talk*. Longman Pearson Education Limited.
- Fowler, R. (1996) *Linguistic Criticism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Holmes, J. (1992) *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*. Longman.
- Leech, G. (1993) *Principles of Pragmatics*. Longman.
- Malinowski, B. (1999 [1926]) 'On Phatic Communion' in: Jaworski, A. and Coupland, N. (eds) *The Discourse Reader*. London and New York: Routledge, 302-305.
- Theroux, P. (1997) *My Other Life*. In: *Great New Books from Penguin*, Penguin Books, 102-114.
- Urbanová, L. (2002) 'Implicit and Explicit Dialogic Structure in Fiction' in *Linguistica Pragensia XII:2*, 83-92.

## Literature Consulted

*The New Oxford Dictionary of English*. Oxford University Press 1998.