



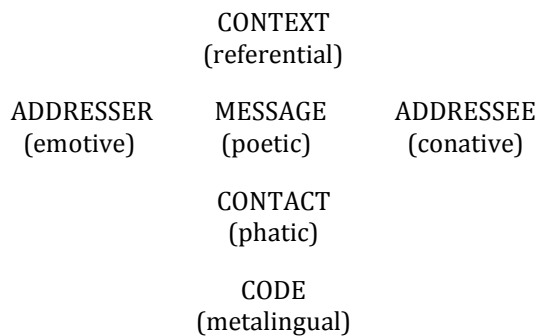
[Phatic Communion] is a flow of language, purpose-less expressions of preference or aversion, accounts of irrelevant happenings, comments on what is perfectly obvious - [there is] always the same emphasis of affirmation and consent. Are words in Phatic Communion used primarily to convey meaning, the meaning which is symbolically theirs? Certainly not! They fulfil a social function, and that is their principal aim, but they are neither the result of intellectual reflection, nor do they necessarily arouse reflection in the listener. Once again we may say that language does not function here as a means of transmission of thought.

B. Malinowski 'Supplement 1: The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages' (1923)

There are messages primarily serving to establish, to prolong, or to discontinue communication, to check whether the channel works ("Hello, do you hear me?"), to attract attention of the interlocutor or to confirm his continued attention ("Are you listening?" or in Shakespearean diction, "Lend me your ears!" - and on the other end of the wire, "Um-hum!"). This set for contact, or in Malinowski's terms PHATIC function, may be displayed by a profuse exchange of ritualised formulas, by entire dialogues with the mere purport of prolonging communication."

R. Jakobson, 'Linguistics and Poetics' (1960)

Roman Jakobson, who in 1920 moved from Russia to Prague, completing his doctorate at Charles University, from where he went to a professorship at Brno, was one of the founders of the *Prague School* of linguistic theory. (In 1939 he fled Czechoslovakia for Denmark and then settled in the U.S.) His model of the speech act provides a matrix for structuralist interpretation of speech and texts more generally:



The ADDRESSER (speaker, writer) sends a MESSAGE (utterance, text) to the ADDRESSEE (interlocutor, reader) referring to a CONTEXT (the world, physical and mental, they both inhabit) using a CODE (e.g. the English language) and a means of CONTACT (it might be a book or a telephone line or, as in conversation, the mutual presence-to-each-other of the interlocutors).

Utterances that in a non-aesthetic context might be classified as dominantly referential, emotive, conative etc. acquire a different status when they occur in an aesthetic context. Phatic language for interlocutors becomes poetic when resituated as the framed text of literature or drama.

The poetic function of language is partly a matter of the way a given discourse is framed and perceived. A declaration of love in verse, for instance, might be primarily emotive for the addresser (a relief for his feelings) or primarily conative if sent to the addressee (persuading her to reciprocate) but if it is published in a literary magazine it is poetic, read "for its own sake." [...] What is it that poetic messages, or messages capable of being received as such, have, that other messages do not have? Jakobson had a highly technical answer to this question: "The poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection to the axis of combination" [...] discourses designed as works of art are characterised by parallelism, symmetry, repetition, contrast and other kinds of binary patterning. The most obvious example is the metrical and phonological patterning of regular verse, which is not required for the referential, emotive, and conative functions of the message.

David Lodge, 'Last to Go: A Structuralist Reading'

Phatic communion occurs in opening (establishing an atmosphere ready for communication), continuing (maintaining, confirming still listening) and closing (breaking off without poisoning the convivial atmosphere) an exchange or conversation. John Laver has proposed that the kinds of comments, or 'tokens', that speakers use in phatic exchanges has a three-fold classification:

- (1) *Neutral tokens* – comments relating to the immediate context of interaction which are not personal to either speaker or hearer
- (2) *Self-oriented tokens* – comments on factors that are personal to the speaker
- (3) *Other-oriented tokens* – comments on factors that are personal to the hearer

The selection of a particular type of token is influenced by important contextual constraints – not least of which is the relative social status of the interactants. When speaking to a superior, one restricts comments to oneself. Were I to encounter the Queen she would probably ask me "And what do *you* do?" I would not ask the same, probably. I might venture, "It's a pleasure to finally meet you, ma'am." (See the extract from Patrick Kavanagh's autobiographical *The Green Fool* for another illustration.)

Conventional phatic tokens differ from language to language, including across dialects. For example, to a British ear to be greeted by "What's up?" feels like being accosted, whereas I gather that to an American ear this is neutral and friendly. In Yorkshire, the latter is achieved by "Now then!" or "All right!", especially when amicably meeting someone passing by with no intention of stopping to pause phatically (friendliness can be very well maintained by this approach of not giving time for fatuity). My first encounter with U.S. border control was in Calgary: I had not yet attuned my ears to the American ways of greeting, and moreover had been queuing with heavy baggage for a long time in the airport hall. Upon finally stepping up, I heard the question "Where're you goin'?", naturally enough I thought, in an airport. I replied "Seattle." This was met with a hostile retort: "Seaddle?! Whadyamean, Seaddle?" It took 20 minutes to persuade him that I was in fact a genuine British subject. The next time I was to have the pleasure of encountering an agent of the state, I beamed "How's it goin'?"

National characteristics often can be perceived in the conventions of phatic communion, such as the seeming preoccupation of the English with weather. (See the extract from Orwell's *Burmese Days*.) Aspects of character can be revealed by idiosyncratic choices of phatic language, disrupting the norms ("How's it hanging?" a chap would always greet me when we met each other as college students, to which one should respond either "To the left" or "To the right").

Formal aspects of phatic language include redundancy, non-interaction (repetitions, unanswered questions), lack of information, incoherence, casualness, banality, abruptness, haphazardness, and irony. Pinter's *Apart from That* was written by an author who cared little for the banality of phone conversations that increasingly intrude on public spaces of trains, buses, trams etc. Isolate a phatic exchange and it may indeed seem fatuous ("idiom focussed into idiocy" as A. Kennedy says in *Dramatic Dialogue*), but its function is maintenance of contact ("Hold the line" - "Hold on"), keeping going (on, nohow on), or even just to bathe in the balmy waters of banality - the origin function is not poetic. Phatic communion can be mined on a formal level (cf. the echoes and repetitions of lyric poetry), for comic effect (held up for inspection, torn away from its original function), creation of suspense (how much longer can they continue the exchange without actually saying anything?), and a symbolic, metaphorical level (keeping a conversation going as holding on to life, silence as death - who knows who will be next to go? cf. the world as a stage). These aspects can be all found in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Pinter's *Last to Go*. John Cage maintained "I have nothing to say and I am saying it": he was very much a sociable artist, reaching out for communication with others.

A rupture in the atmosphere established by phatic communion can be effected by switching to a referential mode (awakening to rude reality) or refusing to play the usual game of turn-taking. In Pinter's *Last to Go* the stasis is disturbed at the line where the barman asks "You didn't stop here though, did you?" and the drama consists in recovering the equilibrium and saving the conversation from developing into conflict. Phatic communion can keep feelings hidden, mask underlying reality (whatever *that* might mean), - it is sometimes held that rather than with words we communicate in the silences between them.

Exercise

1/ Record when you can at various points over the month a range of phatic exchanges on meeting people - opening, maintaining and closing conversations. Transcribe exactly as uttered, with all repetitions etc.

2/ Compose a dramatic dialogue, poem, or short prose sketch in which phatic communion plays a primary role, as in the example texts of Pinter, Kavanagh, and Orwell. It might be used as a structuring device (e.g. using the speech rhythms particular to phatic exchanges, or in establishing a colourless background against which a disruption of the phatic exchange gains heightened dramatic effect) or be carried by metaphor to refer obliquely to contact or concealment. Or you might just enjoy defamiliarizing phatic utterances by displacing their context.

Harold Pinter, LAST TO GO (1958)

A coffee stall. A BARMAN and an old NEWSPAPER SELLER. The BARMAN leans on his counter, the OLD MAN stands with tea. Silence.

MAN: You was a bit busier earlier.

BARMAN: Ah.

MAN: Round about ten.

BARMAN: Ten, was it?

MAN: About then.

Pause.

I passed by here about then.

BARMAN: Oh yes?

MAN: I noticed you were doing a bit of trade.

Pause.

BARMAN: Yes, trade was very brisk here about ten.

MAN: Yes, I noticed.

Pause.

I sold my last one about then. Yes. About nine forty-five.

BARMAN: Sold your last then, did you?

MAN: Yes, my last "Evening News" it was. Went about twenty to ten.

Pause.

BARMAN: "Evening News", was it?

MAN: Yes.

Pause.

Sometimes it's the "Star" is the last to go.

BARMAN: Ah.

MAN: Or the . . . whatsisname.

BARMAN: "Standard".

MAN: Yes.

Pause.

All I had left tonight was the "Evening News".

Pause.

BARMAN: Then that went, did it?

MAN: Yes.

Pause.

Like a shot.

Pause.

BARMAN: You didn't have any left, eh?

MAN: No. Not after I sold that one.

Pause.

BARMAN: It was after that you must have come by here then, was it?

MAN: Yes, I come by here after that, see, after I packed up.

BARMAN: You didn't stop here though, did you?

MAN: When?

BARMAN: I mean, you didn't stop here and have a cup of tea then, did you?

MAN: What, about ten?

BARMAN: Yes.

MAN: No, I went up to Victoria.

BARMAN: No, I thought I didn't see you.

MAN: I had to go up to Victoria.

Pause.

BARMAN: Yes, trade was very brisk here about then.

Pause.

MAN: I went to see if I could get hold of George.

BARMAN: Who?

MAN: George.

Pause.

BARMAN: George who?

MAN: George . . . whatsisname.

BARMAN: Oh.

Pause.

Did you get hold of him?

MAN: No. No, I couldn't get hold of him. I couldn't locate him.

BARMAN: He's not about much now, is he?

Pause.

MAN: When did you last see him then?

BARMAN: Oh, I haven't seen him for years.

MAN: No, nor me.

Pause.

BARMAN: Used to suffer very bad from arthritis.

MAN: Arthritis?

BARMAN: Yes.

MAN: He never suffered from arthritis.

BARMAN: Suffered very bad.

Pause.

MAN: Not when I knew him.

Pause.

BARMAN: I think he must have left the area.

Pause.

MAN: Yes, it was the "Evening News" was the last to go tonight.

BARMAN: Not always the last though, is it, though?

MAN: No. Oh no. I mean sometimes it's the "News".

Other times it's one of the others. No way of telling beforehand. Until you've got your last one left, of course. Then you can tell which one it's going to be.

BARMAN: Yes.

Pause.

MAN: Oh yes.

Pause.

I think he must have left the area.

Recorded on BBC Third Programme in 1964 with Harold Pinter as MAN & Geoffrey Bayldon as BARMAN

Further on the road I passed MacEntaggart's house. Old Mac, as he was called, was an ex-schoolmaster. He taught in the same school that I had attended. He was dismissed for drink. My father spent one day at MacEntaggart's school and thought one day too long. Old Mac was a rough schoolmaster. He was one of the most inquisitive men you could know.

'Good morning, young man,' he addressed me.

'Good morning, I returned.

'Lovely morning,' he said.

'Not too bad,' I agreed.

'How's your father, and your mother?'

'They're very well.'

'Have you many pigs?'

'Twelve,' I lied.

'Ahem, ahem,' he coughed. 'Did you see John MacCaffrey as you came along?'

'Damn to the sight or sight'

'Where are you going?'

'To a turf bog.'

'Who are you going to work for?'

'Oul' Quinn.'

'Can you spell Antitrinitarians?'

'I must be moving,' I explained.

I moved off and though I didn't look back I could feel his school-masterquizzical eyes on the small of my back like indigestion.

Patrick Kavanagh, *The Green Fool* (1938)

They walked up the road, he to the left of her and a little behind. He watched her averted cheek and the tiny gold hairs on her nape beneath the brim of her Terai hat. How he loved her, how he loved her! It was as though he had never truly loved her till this moment, when he walked behind her in disgrace, not even daring to show his disfigured face. He made to speak several times, and stopped himself. His voice was not quite steady, and he did not know what he could say that did not risk offending her somehow. At last he said, flatly, with a feeble pretence that nothing was the matter:

'It's getting beastly hot, isn't it?'

With the temperature at 90 degrees in the shade it was not a brilliant remark. To his surprise she seized on it with a kind of eagerness. She turned to face him, and she was smiling again.

'Isn't it simply baking!'

With that they were at peace. The silly, banal remark, bringing with it the reassuring atmosphere of Club-chatter, had soothed her like a charm. Flo, who had lagged behind, came puffing up to them dribbling saliva; in an instant they were talking, quite as usual, about dogs. They talked about dogs for the rest of the way home, almost without a pause. Dogs are an inexhaustible subject. Dogs, dogs! thought Flory as they climbed the hot hillside, with the mounting sun scorching their shoulders through their thin clothes, like the breath of a fire—were they never to talk of anything except dogs? Or failing dogs, gramophone records and tennis racquets? And yet, when they kept to trash like this, how easily, how amicably they could talk!

George Orwell, *Burmese Days* (1934)

She stretched herself up on tiptoe and peeped over the edge of the mushroom, and her eyes immediately met those of a large blue caterpillar, that was sitting on the top with its arms folded, quietly smoking a long hookah, and taking not the smallest notice of her or of anything else.

The Caterpillar and Alice looked at each other for some time in silence: at last the Caterpillar took the hookah out of its mouth, and addressed her in a languid, sleepy voice.

'Who are *you*?' said the Caterpillar.

This was not an encouraging opening for a conversation.

Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865)

Harold Pinter, APART FROM THAT (2006)

Two people on mobile phones.

GENE: How are you?

LAKE: Very well. And you? Are you well?

GENE: I'm terribly well. How about you?

LAKE: Really well. I'm really well.

GENE: I'm so glad.

LAKE: Apart from ... oh you know ...

GENE: I know.

LAKE: Apart from ... oh you know ...

GENE: I do know. But apart from that ...?

LAKE: How about you?

GENE: Oh you know ... all things considered ...

LAKE: I know. But apart from that ...?

Silence.

GENE: Sorry. I've lost you.

LAKE: What do you mean?

GENE: I ... I lost you.

LAKE: No, you didn't ... I'm right here where I was.

GENE: Anyway, where were we?

LAKE: Sorry?

GENE: I mean ... apart from all that ... how are you really?

LAKE: Terribly well.

GENE: Well you certainly sound well.

LAKE: I am ... apart from ... oh you know ...

GENE: Yes, I know.

LAKE: But you're well ... anyway.

GENE: I'm wonderfully well, to be honest.

LAKE: I'm really glad.

GENE: Apart from ... you know ...

LAKE: But apart from that ...

Silence.

GENE: What?

LAKE: Apart from that ... how are you really? ... Apart from that?

Recorded on BBC2 Newsnight in 2006 (Harold Pinter & Rupert Graves) and BBC4 (Jeremy Irons & Indira Varma).