

A Gender-Based Approach to the Study of Phatic Communication in the Facebook Comments of Iraqi Academic Community

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Abstract

The current study attempts to shed the light on the functions of phatic communication in internet social networks, namely, the famous modern classic, Facebook. This social network service has opened the horizon for entirely different type of social language activities (realized by posts on Facebook) that require interactions (comments/ likes) between cyber users (friends). Those activities are hypothesized to be mainly phatic and carry no informative functions or content-based communication.

The current paper is hoped to achieve its purpose by addressing some main aspects of the issue. The first aspect is the concept of phatic communication along with the different variations of this terminology. It also will discuss its implication in the discourse of social media. Secondly, the study will elaborate the various functions of phatic communication according to Manzo (2014) whose work is a comprehensive remapping of the whole literature of phatic communication. Thirdly, the study will adopt Manzo's (2014) model in analyzing a sample of posts by Iraqi Academic Facebook Users from both genders to extract phatic comments, their types, frequency and gender distribution.

اسلوب مستند الى الجنس في دراسة التواصل التوددي في تعليقات المستخدمين من المجتمع
الاكاديمي العراقي على شبكة فيسبوك
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الملخص

تهدف الدراسة الحالية الى تسليط الضوء على وظائف التواصل التوددي في مواقع التواصل الاجتماعي على الانترنت وخاصة شبكة فيسبوك المشهورة. فقد فتحت شبكات التواصل الاجتماعي الافاق لنشاطات لغوية اجتماعية جديدة بالكامل (متمثلة بمنشورات فيسبوك) التي تتطلب التفاعل (كالتعليقات و الإعجابات) بين المستخدمين للشبكة (الاصدقاء). تفترض الدراسة بان تلك النشاطات غالبا ما تقع ضمن الجانب التوددي من استخدام اللغة التواصلية ولا تحمل اية وظيفة لنقل المعلومات او المحتوى التعليمي.

ويؤمل ان تحقق الدراسة الحالية اهدافها بمعالجة عدة جوانب للمسألة. الجانب الاول هو مفهوم التواصل التوددي بالإضافة الى الاصطلاحات المختلفة لهذا المفهوم و تطبيقاته على الخطاب في مواقع التواصل الاجتماعي. ثانيا، ستقوم الدراسة بتفصيل الوظائف المختلفة للتواصل التوددي حسب نموذج فاييانا مانزو (٢٠١٤) الذي يعد عملها اعادة قراءة شاملة لأدبيات التواصل التوددي. ثالثا، ستتبنى الدراسة مانزو (٢٠١٤) في تحليل عينة من منشورات مستخدمي شبكة فيسبوك من المجتمع الاكاديمي العراقي الذكور و الاناث و استخراج التعليقات التوددية و انواعها و تكرار استخدام كل نوع وتوزيعها بين الذكور و الاناث.

Introduction

Malinowski was the first one to invent the term “phatic communion” in his original work on primitive languages which was first published in 1923. Malinowski (1946) defined phatic communion as "a type of speech in which ties of union are created by mere exchanges of words" (p. 315).. His concept was borrowed and rearranged by Roman Jakobson (1960) to refer "to that function of language which is channel oriented in that it contributes to the establishment and maintenance of communicative contact" (Lyons 1977: 53-54). Apparently, the difference in the definitions reflect the maturity and development of the study in the field of human interaction.

The term "Small talk" is a more simplified way of referring to phatic communication. Schneider (1988) describes the irrelevant nature related to phatic communication as "of little or minor consequence, interest or importance, trifling, trivial, unimportant" as the word "small" indicates (p. 4). He defines small talk as "a form of interaction without real communication" (p. 13). Justine Coupland (2003) also describes it as “sociality is marginalized as a "small concern" (p.2). She justifies such a description as antonymous to "real talk", which is “talk that ‘gets stuff done’ where ‘stuff’ does not include "relational stuff”" (Coupland, 2003, p.2), but rather more practical stuff that needs to get done.

Laver (1974) however, rejects such terminology as "small talk" since it is regarded as the core part of the human representation of language via its exchanges on daily basis (p. 233). In her later work, Coupland (2014) infers a feminist point of view: "the world of 'big talk' is a self-created man's world, and the 'big talk'/'small talk' distinction is either mythological or more evidence of men's obsession with size (or both)" (p. 48).

The present study will use the term "Phatic Communication" for a non-bias viewpoint in addressing the term as well as focusing on its use in everyday language. Moreover, many types of information of a social nature can be derived from mere phatic exchange depending on the discourse in question.

Phatic Communication in Social Media

From the early days of computer-mediated communication, there has been a natural leaning toward phatic communication by users. (Miller, 2008) states that since communication technologies evolved, there has been a media culture that is dominated by phatic communication (p.27).

The concept of "online community" was first attributed to Rheingold in 1993, when he described online communications as "virtual communities", which he defined as "social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace" (in Zappavigna, 2011: 789).

In a 2000 study, Armstrong and Hegel came up with four types of online communities (in Miller 2001: 190):

- "Communities of transaction": those that facilitate the exchange or buying and selling of goods and information.
- "Communities of interest": those that bring together participants who wish to interact about specific topics of interest to them.
- "Communities of fantasy": those that allow participants to create new environments, identities or imagined worlds.
- "Communities of relationship": those that focus on intense personal experiences and create networks of support.

The growth of Web 2.0 has allowed many services to be created that facilitate collaboration in the World Wide Web. They are called "Social Networking Services" SNS and defined as "web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile ... articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection and view and traverse their list of connections" (Boyd/Ellison 2008: 211). The reach of this emergent phenomenon are increasingly attracting the attention of scholars to the study of social networking. The term "Social Media" has been described as "Internet applications that enable the sharing of things" including text, images, video and audio (Van Dijk, 2012: 180).

This technology can be described as being phatic if its purpose encourages users to build and maintain relationships and social

interaction (Miller, 2008). Wittel (2011) noticed was increased connectivity, but less engagement than occurs offline, and this is precisely what phatic communication does: it allows us to bond with more people in a brief manner, so the interaction occurs easily and allows for bond management. These network connections.

People need to socialize in online community as much as real face to face ones. Phatic exchanges in the online social sphere are meaningful to individual users “because they indicate and imply social recognition, online intimacy and sociability” (Radovanovic & Ragnedda 2012: 12).

Model of Phatic Functions

Through the study of the phenomena of phatic communication and the review of literature, it was found that previous works can be categorized as pre-internet works, works within the emergence of internet in the early 1990's, and the latest works since the development of Web 2.0 and the emergence of social networks in 2004 which allows two-sided interaction of users. The main works of Laver (1981), Miller (2008, 2011) remapped the phatic communication theories. In the light of their works, the suggested model of phatic communication was adapted by Manzo (2014) and will be discussed in the present study to be applied on samples of Facebook comments.

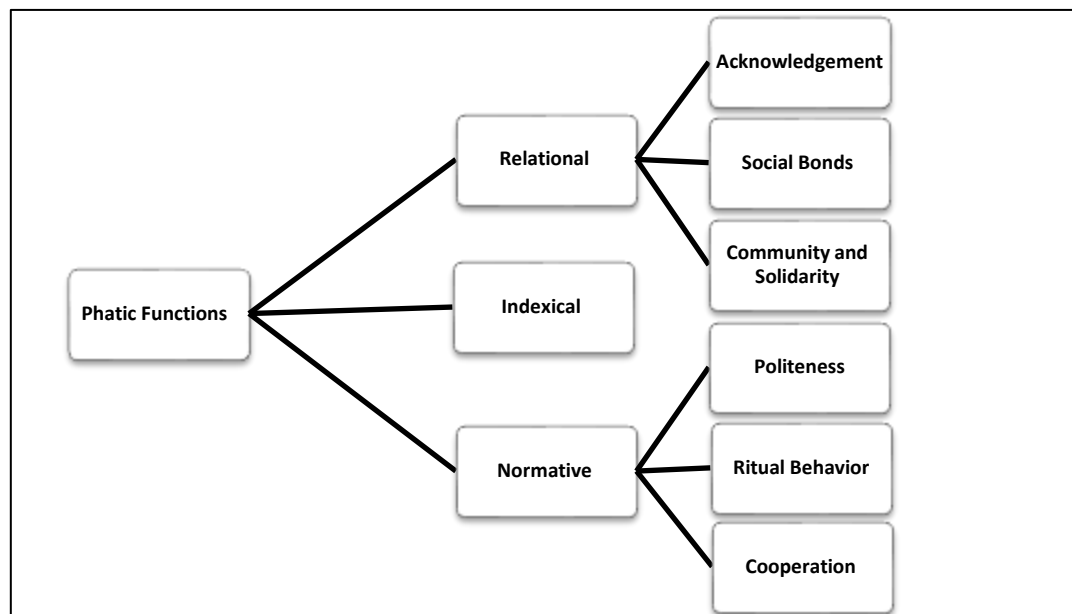


Figure (1) Manzo's (2014) model of phatic functions

The work of Manzo (2014) proposed three phatic functions. Relational function: which is responsible for routine exchanges of

utterances that lead and control the channel of communication. Indexical function which is responsible for introducing the identity and relation between participants. Finally the normative function is responsible for defining the rules of interaction among the participants.

Relational Function

This central function of phatic communication as Malinowski (1946) explained language as a form of action; this helps to represent communication as a performance and as relational tool. According to Malinowski, the opposite of this would be a kind of more ideational talk, what he called "means of thinking", which is an "instrument of reflection" (p. 315).

Senft (2005) represents the relational function by means of utterances of social functions to be used in establishing and maintaining friendly connection among the participants during the opening and closing of communication channel (p.3).

3.1.1 Acknowledgment

Before starting the communication, there has to be a moment of recognition between the participants. That is to recognize the establishment of the channel in the beginning of interaction and ensure its validity for other interactions at the end of the last one. Firth (1972) studies formalized ritualistic behavior in greeting and parting, and interestingly enough he starts with a sort of operative definition for these marginal phases of interaction: "greeting is the recognition of an encounter with another person as socially acceptable. Parting, in a social sense, is the recognition that the encounter has been acceptable." (p.1).

This sub-function perfectly describes the little ceremonies of greeting and farewell which occur when people begin a conversational encounter or depart one. Greetings provide a way of showing that a relationship is still what it was at the termination of the previous co-participation, and, typically, that this relationship involves sufficient suppression of hostility for the participants temporarily to drop their guards and talk. (Goffman 1972: 343)

3.1.2 Social Bonds

Some authors use specifically the terminology “maintenance of bonds” to reference the main function of phatic communication. Other similar terms are used as well to convey the same idea, such as “relational”, “social” or even “friendship”.

Tracy and Naughton (2014) found instrumentality to be the main aspect of focus, given that small talk is useful in "helping individuals accomplish social goals such as managing impressions, putting people at ease, building connection, winning approval and predisposing a listener to one's perspective" (p. 143).

As Laver (1975) noted, quoting Hayakawa: "it is completely impossible for us in society to talk only when we 'have something to say'" (p. 220). Relatedly, Brown and Levinson (1987) explain that communication is seen as a generative mechanism that needs to be constantly "humming" simply in order to know it has not broken down.

3.1.3 Community and Solidarity

Initially, the term was used to describe "group-ness", as opposed to the characteristic individualism, and often isolation, aspect of society (Miller, 2011, p. 186). For Gruzd et al. (2011), "community" is about an imagined set of people perceived as being similar. Perhaps especially when we think about discriminating between similar people that have certain characteristics in common, we find there is a *groupness* that does somehow correspond with similar individuals that share, for instance, origin, race, or sexual preference.

Phatic communication is not only a relevant social tool for the establishment and maintenance of bonds, but consequently, it is as well a mechanism that helps in the foundation of society and even the establishment of community and solidarity (Manzo 2014: 92).

Indexical Function

This function of phatic communication was proposed by Laver (1975) who claims that "phatic communion is the communication of indexical facts about the speakers' identities, attributes, and attitudes" (p.217). Laver defines the indexical function as that which gives information about: "identity and attributes of the interactants, and their

psychosocial relationship" (p. 232). This function can be represented by the titles, nicknames, or titles of love or friendship among participants.

Normative Function

This function of phatic communication encompasses many different functions within it. If we start from a social-constructivist paradigm, reality is something unanimously known to the participants and it is constantly being constructed and re-constructed by them. Holmes (2014) also highlighted social constructivism in his work, given that small talk works as a relationship-building mechanism, a tool that constructs relationships between the participants within a social frame (p.37).

3.3.1 Politeness Maxims

Many authors, like Schneider (1988), use politeness as a frame for phatic communication. Schneider details four maxims of politeness:

1. Tact/generosity: Minimize cost to other/minimize benefit to self.
2. Approbation/modesty: Minimize dispraise of other/minimize praise to self.
3. Agreement: Minimize disagreement between self and other
4. Sympathy: Minimize antipathy between self and other. (schneider, 1988, p. 74)

3.3.2 Ritual Behavior

Jakobson's (1960) phatic function, which he describes as a contact function, is explained as aiming to prolong communication through the exchange of ritualized formulas. This, he claims is the only function we share with animals and the first one we learn as infants (p. 355-356). Ritualization allows for a quicker interpretation of communicational encounters, it facilitates sociability and management of social capital in the case of phatic communication, management of social bonds.

Coupland (2014) distinguishes between rituals and routines in that routines include repeated activities that happen in a broad social environments while rituals have a socio-cultural nature and happen in special occasions like funerals and friendship insults. Routines include conversation openings and closings and the like but they cannot offer cultural significance. (p.p. 58-9)

3.1.3 Cooperation

Another example of the cooperative nature of phatic communication is found in Vigara (1990). In her analysis, she notices different pragmatic connectors that include (Vigara, 1990, p. 299-300; in Manzo 2014: 125-6):

- "Colloquial nexuses": they serve as a link for different phrases, although logic linearity can be affected ("then", "so", "that"). These are often empathized in verbal communication to serve a performance role (like the oral nexus "theeeeeeeen").
- "Thematic nexuses": these introduce a certain orientation in the communicative dynamic, extending it ("anyway", "by the way", "so then", "also").
- "Conversational stimulants": these manage conversational silences and instead convey expressiveness ("let's see", "what else", and the rhetorical "right?").
- "Nonspecific formulas": stereotypical words that help complete meaning without being precise ("and such", "whatever"). These are often used to end a thought and pass to the next one.

Sample

The study community consisted of Iraqi male and female undergraduates, postgraduates, and professors' social networks on Facebook. The sample of the study included five of the most frequent personal post categories for both genders as shown in table (1). The sample was chosen from the researcher's personal Facebook account and included the most frequent Facebook users of both genders.

Table (1) The sample of the study

Post No.	Gender	Type	Description
1	Male	Personal Picture	The user's real picture is posted
2	Female		
3	Male	Status update	A text post written by the user
4	Female		
5	Male	General picture or video	A non-personal media file published by the user
6	Female		
7	Male	Check in	The user's notification of visiting a place
8	Female		
9	Male	Celebration	The user's celebration of a personal occasion
10	Female		

Analysis and Results

The sample of the study was analyzed using Manzo's (2014) model explained above. The total functions and sub-functions included were seven: acknowledgment, social bonds, community and solidarity, indexical function, politeness maxims, ritual behavior, and cooperation.

The total number of comments on sample posts were 653 and the phatic expressions found in those comments were 1193 expressions. The analysis included identifying the phatic functions in each comment and calculating the frequency and percentage of each function in the sample then extracting the average of percentage of each function as shown in table (2).

Table 2 Frequency Percentage and Average of Phatic Function in the Sample of the Study

posts	acknowledgement	social bonds	community and solidarity	Indexical function	Politeness maxims	Ritual behavior	cooperation
1	2.5	27.3	15.2	21.1	9.9	23.4	0.6
2	20.6	12.7	14.3	27.0	11.1	14.3	0.0
3	0.0	0.0	0.0	23.3	76.7	0.0	0.0
4	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	55.6	0.0	44.4
5	1.0	15.2	9.1	31.3	37.4	6.1	0.0
6	0.0	30.3	0.0	12.1	48.5	0.0	9.1
7	24.0	24.0	6.0	24.0	0.0	4.0	18.0
8	41.4	0.0	6.9	27.6	3.4	0.0	20.7
9	0.0	0.8	10.3	19.4	0.8	68.8	0.0
10	0.0	0.4	8.4	34.4	0.0	55.0	1.9
average	9.0	11.1	7.0	22.0	24.3	17.2	9.5

As shown in table (2), indexical function and politeness maxims respectively are the most frequently used phatic functions while cooperation and acknowledgment, respectively, are the least frequently used. However, this distribution varies according to the type of posts and the gender of publisher and commenters. This can be explained as follows:

- a. Ritual behavior consists the highest frequency in celebration posts in both genders in posts 9 and 10.
- b. In post 8, which is a female check in post, acknowledgment sub-function seems to consist the highest level in phatic interaction.
- c. Social bonds consist the highest frequency of phatic communication among males in post 1 which is a personal picture. The same cannot be said in post 2 which is a female personal picture that follows the main stream of indexical phatic function in comments.

The study also analyzed the gender frequency distribution of phatic comments on the sample of the study as shown in table (3)

Table 3 Gender frequency of phatic communication in the sample of the study

Male Posts			Female Posts		
post No.	male	female	post No.	male	female
1	98.01	1.99	2	57.69	42.31
3	100.00	0.00	4	83.33	16.67
5	53.06	46.94	6	100.00	0.00
7	92.59	7.41	8	0.00	100.00
9	98.35	1.65	10	8.97	91.03
average	88.40	11.60	average	50.00	50.00

As shown in table 3, females ,in average, are not participating frequently in male posts, while males have an equal participation in female posts. However, on celebration posts 9 and 10, it seems that this type of post is gender oriented ,i.e. users comment on the same gender's posts more frequently.

Conclusions

The findings of the present study can be summed as the following:

1. The nature of phatic communication in social media follows the core nature of human need for socializing, yet the nature of the discourse has an effect in the distribution and frequency of phatic functions.
2. Iraqi academic Facebook users are highly polite in their posts by showing agreement with the post publisher. This is justified by the highest frequency in using politeness maxims in their phatic comments
3. In their comments, Iraqi academic Facebook users stress on their relationship to the publisher and his/her academic title more frequently

- than other phatic functions which is justified by the high frequency in using indexical function.
4. Conversational phatic functions like acknowledgement and cooperation are the least frequently used in Facebook comments due to the nature of discourse. However acknowledgment has the highest frequency among Iraqi academic female commenters in female check in posts
 5. Iraqi academic Facebook users' phatic comments in celebration are of ritualistic nature.
 6. Female Iraqi academic Facebook users have less participation on male posts, while males participate in equal frequency on female posts.
 7. Celebration posts have more frequency of the same gender than opposite gender in Iraqi academic Facebook community.

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