

# Phatic communion

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In the first supplement to C.K. Ogden's & I.A. Richards' *The meaning of meaning*, Bronislaw Malinowski discusses "The problem of meaning in primitive languages". Three years after his first explicitly linguistic paper on 'Classificatory particles in the language of Kiriwina' (Malinowski 1920) and 12 years before the publication of the second volume of his book *Coral gardens and their magic* (Malinowski 1935), where he presents his 'Ethnographic theory of language', this is the second primarily linguistic paper of the master of Trobriand ethnography, who emphasized from the very beginning of his research the importance of linguistics for anthropology in general and for ethnography in particular (see e.g., Malinowski: 1915: 501; 1922: 1-25).

Malinowski developed his ethnographic theory of language mainly in connection with his attempts to translate the Trobriand Islanders' magical formulae. He characterized his — pragmatic — theory of meaning as a theory that insists on the "linking up of ethnographic descriptions with linguistic analysis which provides language with its cultural context and culture with its linguistic reinterpretation. Within this latter [...]" Malinowski has "[...] continually striven to link up grammar with the context of situation and with the context of culture" (Malinowski 1935: 73). For Malinowski speech is part of the context of situation in which it is produced, language — in its primitive function — has an essentially pragmatic character, and "meaning resides in the pragmatic function of an utterance" (Bauman 1992:147).

In his contribution to Ogden's & Richards book Malinowski also refers to the conception of 'context of situation' which is so important for his theory of language. In the central section of this article he emphasizes that language — at least in its primitive function — has to be regarded as a mode of action rather than as a countersign of thought; and that to understand the use of a complex speech situation requires the understanding of the situation in which it occurred and the action it accomplished. Malinowski then introduces the concept of 'phatic communion' into linguistics. Discussing language used in what he calls "free, aimless social intercourse", mentioning "inquiries about health, comments on weather" (Malinowski 1936: 313), and greeting formulae, Malinowski points out the following:

[...] to a natural man another man's silence is not a reassuring factor, but on the contrary, something alarming and dangerous [...]. The breaking of silence, the communion of words is the first act to establish links of fellowship, which is consummated only by the

breaking of bread and the communion of food. The modern English expression, 'Nice day to-day' or the Melanesian phrase 'Whence comest thou?' are needed to get over the strange unpleasant tension which men feel when facing each other in silence.

After the first formula, there comes a flow of language, purposeless expressions of preference or aversion, accounts of irrelevant happenings, comments on what is perfectly obvious [...].

There can be no doubt that we have a new type of linguistic use — phatic communion I am tempted to call it, actuated by the demon of terminological invention — a type of speech in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words [...]. 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, they are neither the result of intellectual reflection, nor do they necessarily arouse reflection in the listener [...]. Each utterance is an act serving the direct aim of binding hearer to speaker by a tie of some social sentiment or other. Once more, language appears to us not as an instrument of reflection but as a mode of action [...].

[...] 'phatic communion serves to establish bonds of personal union between people brought together by the mere need of companionship and does not serve any purpose of communicating ideas. (Malinowski 1936: 314-316)

Thus, Malinowski's concept of 'phatic (from Greek *phatos*, 'spoken') communion highlights — what ethologists would call — the 'bonding function' of language (Senft 1987: 111-112). Konrad Ehlich (1993: 317) quite plausibly interprets Malinowski's use of the word 'communion' with its religious connotation as a means for emphasizing the intensity of this type of speech. Malinowski's concept was borrowed and slightly modified by Roman Jakobson (1960) in his expansion of Karl Bühler's (1934) 'organon model of language' 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). I assume it is most probably because of Jakobson's rather influential paper that nowadays most linguists and anthropologists refer with the technical term 'phatic communication' to Malinowski's concept. However, the term 'phatic communication' that many writers have used to refer to Malinowski's concept is not really an alternative to the term 'phatic communion'. As Adam Kendon (personal communication) points out, the term 'phatic communication' is probably used because people tend to forget the more general meaning of the term 'communion'; it is precisely that achievement of 'rapprochement' through the use of speech — a kind of communion, indeed — that Malinowski emphasized, and this is different from what is often thought to be the meaning of 'communication'. Before I discuss the concept in more detail, I want to note that 'phatic communion' should not be confused with Austin's 'phatic act' which is defined as "the act of uttering certain vocables or words, i.e., noises of certain types belonging to and as belonging to a certain vocabulary,

in a certain construction, i.e., conforming to and as conforming to a certain grammar, with a certain intonation, &c." (Austin 1975: 92).

To briefly summarize again, based on Malinowski's definition and influenced by Jakobson's concept of the 'phatic function of verbal communication, the terms 'phatic communion (and 'phatic communication') are generally used to refer to utterances that are said to have exclusively social, bonding functions like establishing and maintaining a friendly and harmonious atmosphere in interpersonal relations, especially during the opening and closing stages of social — verbal — encounters. These utterances are understood as a means for keeping the communication channel open. It is generally claimed that phatic communion is characterized by not conveying meaning, by not importing information; thus, phatic utterances are described as procedures without propositional contents. Greeting formulae, comments on the weather, passing enquiries about someone's health, and other small talk topics have been characterized as prototypical examples for phatic communion ever since Malinowski's coining of the term. However, a search on the literature reveals that research dealing explicitly with 'phatic communion is a relatively neglected area in linguistics. Why is this so?

First of all it has to be mentioned that with the exception of 'Firthian linguistics' (Mitchell 1957, 1975; J.R. Firth 1957) and M.A.K. Halliday's work, Malinowski's functionalist pragmatic ideas about language had little influence in Europe. With respect to the USA, Noam Chomsky's student Terence Langendoen presented in 1968 a criticism of Malinowski's linguistic theory, arguing amongst other things that in 'The problem of meaning in primitive languages' Malinowski "failed to prove that the meaning of utterances is in any way related to contexts of situation" (Langendoen 1968: 25). Nevertheless, in the USA, Malinowski's ideas about speech as action certainly had much influence on the ethnography of speaking paradigm as well as on discourse and conversation analysis.

But it is exactly with one of the leading figures of the ethnography of speaking' approach that we find a rather severe objection against one aspect of Malinowski's concept of 'phatic communion. With the definition of the concept, Malinowski also claimed that his outline of a semantic theory is "throwing some light on human language in general" (Malinowski 1936: 310). However, this only slightly hedged claim that concepts of his theory of language are universal, is explicitly refuted by Dell Hymes (1967, 1972, 1974). Hymes refers to the 'ethnographic record' that suggests that "phatic communication is far from universally an important or even accepted motive" (Hymes 1972: 40). Hymes mentions Sapir (1949: 16, 11) and quotes Gardner (1966: 398) who points out that the Paliyans of south India "communicate very little at all times and become almost silent by the age of 40. Verbal, communicative persons are regarded as abnormal and often as offensive" (Hymes 1972: 40). In addition, on the basis of his own personal fieldwork experience, Hymes points out that with the "Wishram Chinook of the Columbia River [...] one does not talk when one has nothing that needs to be

said" (Hymes 1974: 127). However, Hymes does not clarify whether the "almost silent" Paliyans never exchange greetings, e.g., under certain circumstances; and he does not elaborate either on the concept of what it is with the Wishram Chinook that "needs to be said". David Crystal (1987: 10-11) points out that

cultures vary greatly in the topics which they permit as phatic communion. The weather is not as universal a conversation-filler as the English might like to think! For example Rundi women (in Burundi, Central Africa), upon taking leave, are quite often heard to say, routinely and politely, 'I must go home, or my husband will beat me'.

However, this criticism is somewhat incoherent. One of the things one may do in leave-taking, even if one is English, is to refer to some sort of external reason that explains that one is no longer free to stay. Adam Kendon (personal communication) pointed out that for example henpecked husbands in pubs have been known to talk along the same lines: "The old lady will have it in for me if I don't scapa". Hence the Rundi women are doing just what English people do — although what constitutes the unavoidable circumstance that compels a person to leave is a matter of cultural variation. Thus, we can summarize that the universality of the concept of 'phatic communion' as well as the universality of conversational topics that are claimed to be characteristic for phatic communion have been questioned by writers like Hymes and Crystal. We have to conclude that this issue is indeed a matter for further research.

However, this discussion with respect to the universality of the concept only partly helps to explain why we find only a few studies that explicitly deal with 'phatic communion' as defined by Malinowski. Is there something wrong with the concept, one is tempted to ask? To find an answer to this it may be helpful to go back to Malinowski's definition and see what topics he mentioned as typical examples for phatic communion. Besides "inquiries about health, comments on weather", and the "modern English expression, 'Nice day to-day'" he refers to "the Melanesian phrase 'Whence comest thou?'" (Malinowski 1936: 313, 314). How do the Trobriand Islanders — with whom Malinowski worked and lived together and who inspired his linguistic theorizing — express this 'Melanesian phrase' in their language? And does this expression really function as an act of phatic communion (only)?

In Kilivila, the Austronesian language of the Trobriand Islanders, we find the following greeting formulae that are similar to our European greetings, which can probably be traced back to the influence of European and Australian missionaries: *bwena kaukwau* (good morning), *bwena lalai* (good day), *bwena kwaiyai* (good afternoon), and *bwena bogi* (good night) (Senft: 1986). However, these formulae are only used in rather formal situations. The general greeting formula on the Trobriand Islands consists of the question *ambeya* or its shortened form *ambe* which literally translates as 'where' and which can be glossed here either as 'where are you going to?' or, according to the situational context, as 'where are you coming from?', or, if you like, as 'whence

comest thou?'. In a social encounter situation the participants ask each other this question and answer it as accurately and as truly as possible, usually in the form of complex serial verb constructions such as *Bala bakakaya baka'ita basisu bapaisewa* ('I will go, I will take a bath, I will come back [to the village], I will stay [there], I will work'). This greeting formula certainly signals friendliness and opens the communication channel. But what is really happening? With this form of greeting Trobriand Islanders signal and assure persons addressed — and greeted — in this way that they can completely rely on their status as members of a community where everybody cares for the other. This implies a person's security within the community's social net, and this also guarantees a person's secure way to her or his destination, a secure stay, and a secure way back home to where he or she came from. Keeping these functions in mind (which, by the way, are not — etic — interpretations but represent my phrasing of explanations my Trobriand consultants gave me at a very early stage in my field research), the meaning of these greeting formulae becomes evident: if anything may happen to Trobriand Islanders on their way — be it by the influence of evil spirits or because of 'black magic', or because of a more 'profane' accident like breaking one's leg on the small, narrow, and stony paths or being hit by a falling coconut — they can be sure that their whereabouts are (roughly) known and that people will search for them and help them. Thus, the greeting formula cannot only be regarded as a 'ritual' of friendly encounter; as a binding ritual it also signals security within the social net of the community in which it is used. I understand this kind of greeting as a form of 'ritual communication' on the Trobriand Islands (Senft 1987: 107-108, 1991: 245-246; see also Senft in Eibl-Eibesfeldt & Senft 1987: 92-94, and Huxley 1966). Without going into more detail here, I want to emphasize that even on the Trobriand Islands "the Melanesian phrase 'Whence comest thou?'" obviously conveys more than the social function of creating a bond between speaker and addressee, because the phrase initiates routine exchanges that are rich in information — and one wonders why this function escaped the great ethnographer's attention.

The observation that there is generally more behind an utterance which is said to serve only a phatic function, also holds for all of the rather few studies that explicitly deal with the concept of 'phatic communion'. Thus, in his anthology *Conversational routine* we find a contribution by Florian Coulmas in which he emphasizes for Japanese that although "most apologies observed in everyday interaction" seem to be "desubstantialized routines with no semantic content, merely functioning as means of 'phatic communion'" the situation is more complex: "the functionally similar employment of apology and gratitude expressions must be seen as a significant reflection of social values and attitudes prevailing in Japanese culture" (Coulmas 1981: 87).

In the same volume, John Laver points out that the "linguistic behavior of conversational routines, including greetings and partings, as well as pleas, thanks, excuses, apologies and small talk, is part of the linguistic repertoire of politeness"

(Laver 1981: 290) as analyzed by Brown & Levinson (1978). Discussing utterances of phatic communion, he finds that besides the two social functions already mentioned by Malinowski (viz. to "defuse the potential hostility of silence" and to allow participants in a social verbal encounter "to cooperate in getting the interaction comfortably under way": Laver 1981: 301), these linguistic routines also have a third and probably more important function in the initial phase of conversation: "phatic communion [...] allows the participants to feel their way towards the working consensus of their interaction [...], partly revealing their perception and their relative social status" (Laver 1981: 301).

In an earlier, and most important paper for the discussion of Malinowski's concept, Laver (1975) elaborates on all "communicative functions of phatic communion" in detail. In this paper, he first points out that "the fundamental function of the [...] communicative behavior that accompanies and includes phatic communion is the detailed management of interpersonal relationships during the psychologically crucial margins of interactions" (p. 217). He then describes and analyzes the functions of so-called 'phatic communion utterances in the opening and closing phases of interaction, especially with respect to the transition phases from "noninteraction to full interaction" and from "interaction back to noninteraction" (p. 232), as well as the role of phatic communion with respect to interactional consensus and as a kind of 'rite of passage'. After his minute analyses of all the functions of phatic communion, Laver (p. 236) concludes the following:

[...] phatic communion [...] serves to establish and consolidate the interpersonal relationship between two participants [...]. phatic communion is a complex part of a ritual, highly skilled mosaic of communicative behaviour whose function is to facilitate the management of interpersonal relationships. The information exchanged between the participants in this communicative process is not primarily referential information, but rather is indexical information about aspects of the participants' social identity relevant to structuring the interactional consensus of the present and future encounters. The function of phatic communion thus goes beyond the creation, in Malinowski's phrase, of 'ties of union': it certainly does serve to establish such broad ties in that the tokens of phatic communion are tokens exchanged in the ritual transactions of psychosocial acceptance, but it also provides the participants with a subtle tool for use in staking indexical claims which shape and constrain their detailed relationship in the crucial marginal phases of encounters when their psychological comfort is most at risk.

Thus, Laver modifies and broadens Malinowski's concept, emphasizing and proving again that "language is used to convey more than the propositional content of what is said" (Levinson 1983: 42).

It was mentioned above that Malinowski's ideas about language had much influence on discourse analysis and conversation analysis. Thus, although Malinowski may have failed to fully define a linguistic concept which he observed and for which he

coined the term 'phatic communion', he may still be regarded as one of the founding fathers for an important approach in linguistics that has since refined, rephrased and expanded his own ideas and theories about language. Moreover, at least within the study of language use in Oceania, Malinowski's concept of "language as a mode of action" and his "emphasis on understanding utterances within their context of situation" (Watson-Gege 1986: 149) are still highly valued and appreciated. In general, it seems that within linguistics, anthropology, and anthropological linguistics some of Malinowski's basic ideas about language and culture continue to be thought-provoking. With explicit reference to Malinowski as "an ethnographic precursor" (Goodwin & Duranti 1992: 14), social scientists have for instance started 'rethinking context' (Duranti & Goodwin 1992). Thus, although some of his ideas about language — such as the concept of 'phatic communion' — have to be modified and redefined, there still seems to be much in Malinowski's research from which we can learn and profit.

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