

## **Beyond Words: The Significance of Phatic Communication in Instant Messaging**

**Alexandra-Monica TOMA**

“Dunarea de Jos” University of Galați, Romania

Monica.Toma@ugal.ro

### **Abstract**

Despite its non-informative nature, phatic communication is not a residual, peripheral category without significance, as expressing denotation is not the sole goal for coding and decoding messages. People engaging in phatic talk are not just shallowly conversing out of boredom, but attempting to navigate an intricate web of social bonds, adapt, connect, and negotiate their relations. The importance of this side of verbal interaction cannot be understated, as it shines brightly in the light of the emerging digital age. The virtual environment incentivizes people to text, speak, message, and connect to others just to maintain ties and nurture relations, turning the non-informative small talk into a key modern skill one must possess to graciously navigate online social norms.

This study examines phatic devices used in instant messaging on the popular WhatsApp platform. The corpus is selected to display various solidarity and status-differential relationships, in order to examine the difference in the phatic tokens used (neutral, self-oriented and other-oriented) and to explore the distinctions in communicative strategies. Special attention is paid to the role of emojis to express phatic intentions, through quantitative and qualitative analysis of the corpus, revealing their rich pragmatic functions.

**Keywords:** *phatic utterances, phatic tokens, relevance theory, phatic internet, pragmatic functions*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

### *1.1. Phatic communion and phatic communication*

Every good conversation is more than mere transmission of information about the world, as its charm and usefulness strongly rely on the connection established between the interlocutors. In order to create and strengthen this tie, speakers encourage each other, negotiate their roles and engage in casual verbal interactions that we sometimes call small talk. The chatter rising in the streets at rush hours, the incessant and never-getting-old conversations about the weather, the chit-chat between old friends in brief moments of accidental encounter in a shop, the gap-fillers in awkward silences and volatile situations, the murmurs over coffee or a good snack, to name but a few of the many situations of phatic talk, are at the core of human sociability and rapport building. These instances might come across as devoid of deep meaning but are, in fact, key elements of language that can build or destroy bridges between people in an increasingly connected, but rather aloof and jaded social context.

Bronislaw Malinowski was the first to acknowledge these linguistic elements and to give them a name: *phatic communion* (Malinowski 1923), thus emphasising the social and relational roles of language, and highlighting the importance of small talk and phatic expressions in establishing and maintaining social bonds. Decades later, Jakobson (1960) took a more technical and systematic approach, associating the communication elements with

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial 4.0. International License

functions and attributing the phatic function to contact/channel. Although evasive in his description of phaticness, his ideas were taken further by linguists, conversation analysts, and communication researchers, who have endeavoured to explore how exactly people manage contact.

Consisting of utterances not meant to convey specific information, but rather to establish a connection (Wang, Tucker & Haines 2012, p. 85) through “shared feelings, good-will or general sociability” (Miller 2015, p. 3), the so-called chit-chat keeps the conversation going smoothly, creating a friendly atmosphere during interactions. Consequently, phatic utterances refer to expressions or statements that serve specific social functions, commonly used in everyday conversations to establish rapport, maintain social relationships, or fill conversational gaps (West & Turner 2011; Makice 2009; Mais 2017).

One of the most sensible frameworks for analysing phatic utterances is proposed by Laver (1975), who relates phatic devices to social norms and considers that the speakers’ choices signal solidarity and relative social status. The researcher calls such options *phatic tokens*, and classifies them as neutral, other-oriented and self-oriented, thus marking the focus of the conversation and the type of approach. He also introduces the concept of anti-phatic communication, which resides in gestures that disengage the bond between speakers, signalling a lack of interest, boredom and disrespect. For this study, it is also important to highlight the opposition Laver analyses between solidarity and non-solidarity, as the social status differences are of utmost importance when tackling conversational patterns.

There are also more grim views on this matter, as Baudrillard, introducing the concept of phatic communication in media theory, remarks on the symptomatic difference between Malinowski’s communion and Jakobson’s model, the former being the living proof of the distance between speaker and listener in modern society, which only simulate communication. “Contact for contact’s sake becomes the empty form with which language seduces itself when it no longer has anything to say.” (Baudrillard 1981, p. 164) Baudrillard is concerned about the loss of contact and the existence of a technological medium that distorts true face-to-face interactions and deplors the cold seduction and the narcissistic spell of electronic and information systems.

## 1.2. *Relevance theory*

The use of phatic utterances posed a set of problems for classical pragmatic approaches because of their lack of denotation. The Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson 1986) has particularly struggled with the concept, given that it focuses on conveying information relevant enough for the addressee to make the effort to process it. The problem resides in the relevance of the information, as claimed by the researchers who applied this theory to phatic communication (Žegarac 1998). Consequently, they conclude that the relevance does not reside in the propositional content. One has to look further at the communicative intention rather than focus on the informative content. However, phatic utterances have been rehabilitated in recent studies, and accent was placed on the social function and the speaker’s identity in the larger sociocultural scope.

Yus (2019) reinterprets phaticness in virtual interactions, referring to a more nuanced approach of the relevance theory. He proves that phatic utterances may be unintentional and attached to informational contents, they may be non-propositional, they might be both speaker-centred and hearer-centred, and they may contain explicit relevant content. This approach broadens the scope of phaticness, especially in the complex context of internet communication through instant messaging, which bends the rules of classical communication.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial 4.0. International License

### 1.3. *Phatic Internet*

Phatic culture, as Miller calls it, marks “a shift from dialogue and communication between actors in a network, where the point of the network was to facilitate an exchange of substantive content, to a situation where the maintenance of a network itself has become the primary focus” (Miller 2015, p. 398). Phatic Internet interactions are characterized by the exchange of non-substantive, often formulaic expressions that serve to maintain social bonds and facilitate social interactions in the digital realm. In the context of the internet, phatic communication plays a significant role in building rapport and creating a sense of community. To create the feeling of connectedness, users employ a continuously developing set of *paralinguistic digital affordances* (Carr et al. 2016) or *phatic affirmations* (Placentia & Lower 2013, p. 639). Such acknowledgements provide a sense of belonging and, although this does not relate to deeply-rooted values, it might be equally rewarding for the members of the virtual community.

Yus (2019) expands on the concept of phatic Internet and phatic technologies, remarking the pervasiveness of phatic utterances in the virtual environment. The researcher argues that, often enough, even if phatic communication is not fully intentional, the glue that keeps users hooked to their phones is “the phatic residue that *leaks* from Internet acts of communication, beyond the sender user’s intention and the addressee user’s conscious awareness. This “residue” is made up of non-propositional feelings and emotions and these non-propositional effects of a phatic kind very often compensate for the lack of interest that the propositional content objectively conveys.” (Yus 2019, p. 18)

## 2. METHODOLOGY

In order to examine the phatic context of virtual interactions, this study focuses on instant messaging on the popular Whatsapp platform. Aiming to expand on the idea of virtual community and the important role of phatic messages, the materials chosen for analysis are groups with many users, created either to enable communication with close friends (Group 1 – 12 participants aged between 30 - 42) or to facilitate message exchanges for specific purposes (Group 2 – 35 participants aged between 30 - 45). We tracked the verbal interactions in the two groups (in the Romanian language) for one month. The conversations were carried out before the crystallization of the study, in spring 2023, which accounts for the authenticity of the interactions.

The study analysed how informative and phatic messages combine in virtual conversations, proceeding to an in-depth analysis of the phatic devices used by the participants, employing a wide range of communicative strategies, some of them digitally-specific. Careful consideration was paid to openings and closings – in the form of greetings, farewells and warm-up replies, appeals and uptakes – correlative structures that establish the relation between the interlocutors, connective linkers – ways to avoid conversational gaps and connecting the replies, and verbal gap fillers and hedges – macrostructural elements that help speakers to hold the turn by postponing the answer or expressing hesitation (Fadhil 2022, p. 63);

The analysis also considered Laver’s remarks (1975) on phatic tokens and the three main combinations of relationships, drawing upon the distinction between solidary relationships and non-solidary ones (either level or status differential). The selection of the materials is especially based upon this principle, as phatic patterns considerably differ when moving through various stages of social closeness. This is why we chose to analyse a group destined to communicate

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial 4.0. International License

between friends (solidarity), and one that mediates the relation between the teachers and the parents of 3<sup>rd</sup> graders (status difference). Aull also explored this approach, but, while applying Laver’s interpretation grid, focused on instant messages with only two participants and examined only the use of emojis, concluding that the findings “offer an initial look at the complexity underlying phatic communication norms as manifested in the singular and significant nonverbal tokens of emojis” (Aull, 2019: 30).

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Following the analysis of the 2 groups selected, we observed that, as expected, they all employ a combination, in various degrees, of informative and phatic messages. The dynamics are, of course, different, depending on the type of relations established between the users. In a friendly setting, where there is low social distance and difference in power, participants tend to appeal more often to phatic utterances and use more diverse phatic devices than those in the group constituted to enable communication between teachers and parents.

Another general comment pertains to the length of the messages. Group 1 is characterised by shorter messages, with a more dynamic pattern and less attention to punctuation and grammar. Participants share bits of information, receive comments, and come back with further details, in a rich and vivid interaction. Moreover, the friends in the group take turns at being the initiator of the communicative instances, thus replicating, to the extent possible, real-life conversations. Meanwhile, group 2 has a more rigid structure, which could almost be described mathematically. Long messages contain all the informative content required in a certain communicative situation, followed by phatic interventions of appreciation, confirmation or, seldom, request clarification. The group administrators (the teachers) initiate and lead the conversations on most occasions.

#### 3.1. Linguistic phatic devices

We shall first refer to the phatic devices not specific to virtual communication. In the table below, we selected the most frequent phatic tools employed:

| Phatic devices                                 | Group 1   | Group 2   |
|--|---|---|
| <b>Openings (greetings)</b>                    | neata, mneatza, bună, duses, ce faceți, [morning, hi, duses, how are you] | Bună dimineața! Bună ziua! Bună seara! / Seară bună!<br>[Good morning! Hello! Good evening! / Have a nice evening!] |
| <b>Closings (farewells)</b>                    | pa, vă pup, ciao, bye, ne vedem [bye, kisses, ciao, see you]              | Seară frumoasă! O zi bună! Mulțumesc! Mulțumim!<br>[Have a nice evening! Have a nice day! Thank you!]               |
| <b>Appeals, uptakes (correlative patterns)</b> | S1: ..., nu? S2: Mda<br>S1: (...), da? S2: mergem, mergem                 | -   |

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial 4.0. International License

|                                      | S1 (...), bine? S2: bine  |   |         |
|--------------------------------------|---|---|---------|
| <b>Connective linkers</b>            | Eeee..., aaaa..., eheee,<br>aha...  | - | Aaaa... |
| <b>Verbal gap fillers and hedges</b> | Serios? [really?]<br>Nu știu ce să zic... [I'm not<br>sure...]<br>Stai puțin... [Wait a bit]<br>Brb<br>Poate... [Maybe] | - |         |

**Table 1.** Linguistic phatic devices used in the corpus

The interpretation of data collected above proves the assumption that an informal, solidary setting and the close relationships between group participants generate more phatic devices and more creativity in nuancing the conversation, in an attempt to match oral discourse. Openings and closings are well represented in Group 1, and the diversity in use is astonishing. Most such devices are greetings and farewells. In opposition, group 2 makes use of formal openings and closings, and the variety is low.

A thing that stands out is that openings are considerably more frequent than closings, suggesting that, in short communicative exchanges like instant messages, participants feel that the agglomeration of such formulaic devices might be redundant. In Group 2, there are instances when greetings are clustered within the same text, the structure being that of opening + informative content + closing. Most often, replies to such structures employ the same formula (with or without closings) and are rather brief.

In terms of appeals and uptakes, unsurprisingly, only Group 1 provides examples of such devices, whereas Group 2 could not provide us with a single instance throughout the surveyed period. The orality of the exchanges supports using such tools of social connectedness. These turn-taking markers, mostly correlative, support the conversation flow and regulate the bond between participants. Here is an instance of such communicative exchange:

A.

S1: Ai avut și tu așa ceva, *nu?* [You also had something similar, right?]

S2: *Mda.* Nu prea mulțumită... [Yap. Not so pleased...]

B.

S1: *Mergem* și noi la spectacol, *da?* [We are also going to the show, yeah?]

S2: *mergem, mergem...* [going, going...]

The connective linkers follow the same pattern as in the case of appeals and uptakes. High frequency was observed in Group 1, with the role of filling conversational gaps and replicating oral dynamics of verbal interactions. In some cases, connective linkers were used with double role: to constitute the glue that holds together the course of the talk, as well as to delay the answer. In essence, a key feature of such connectors, besides the obvious function as communication regulators, is to signal a light-hearted and relaxed mood, associated with positive politeness strategies.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial 4.0. International License

Macrostructural phatic elements are abundantly used in Group 1, with some examples provided in Table 1. Filling the silence that can be deafening in virtual worlds, asking for permission to delay the answer, expressing amazement and disbelief, verbal fillers and hedges have a variety of functions that relate to an unwritten ritual that maintains contact and connection. Group 1 presents us with several instances of linguistic fillers, while, again, Group 2 has no example of such interventions. This difference can be attributed to the same reason that makes Group 2 void of appeals and uptakes: the relationship between the speakers, the dynamics of the group, and the different politeness strategies employed.

It is also important to point out that gap fillers and hedges tend to be required in interactions with two participants, in order to observe politeness norms, while groups with many interlocutors partially relieve users from the pressure of maintaining contact, as this responsibility is a shared one. This accounts for the lack of such devices in Group 2, where, in terms of proxemics, the symbolic distance is that of the public space, not of an intimate one.

### 3.2. *Paralinguistic phatic devices*

Virtual communication also employs especially designed tools, aiming to compensate some of the boundaries of the digital world. The most prominent example of the electronic communication devices class (also called *paralinguistic digital affordances*) is the popular and versatile emoji, that can be found in abundance in all instant messages. Originating in the attempt to replicate facial expressions and to add emotion to the otherwise bland virtual setting, emojis have long stepped outside their own mold, and became fairly productive conversational strategies that regulate and nuance conversations. Research has analysed their rich pragmatic functions and argued that emojis can sometimes be used as speech acts and that they carry illocutionary force (Derks et al. 2007; Dresner & Herring 2010; Yus 2014). Some authors even suggest that a hybrid language that combines text and image is under development, resulting in a shift from linear decoding of messages to an integrative one (Danesi 2017, p. 13).

Our target material is also rich in emojis used as phatic devices. The table below presents a quantitative analysis of the virtual tools used to render phaticness.

| Phatic devices                          | Group 1                                | Group 2                 |
|---|--|-------------------------|
| Opening                                 | Link, gifs, photo                      | Link (non-phatic)       |
| Closings                                | Emojis (single or accompanied by text) | Emojis (after the text) |
| Appeals, uptakes and connective linkers | Emojis (single or accompanied by text) | -                       |
| Verbal gap fillers and hedges           | Emojis (single or accompanied by text) | Emojis (without text)   |

**Table 2.** Phatic devices typical to virtual communication

As resulted from the table, emojis are a productive social strategy to maintain connectedness and to express positive politeness in virtual environments. The only role we couldn't identify in the corpus is that of conversation opening, but the other types of devices are represented in both groups. This finding is supported by the logic of the conversations. In face-to-face interactions, the verbal greeting is associated with facial expressions. In instant messaging though, emojis are text modulators and are usually placed after the message that needs

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial 4.0. International License

clarification concerning attitude, intention, and behaviour especially at the initiation of the verbal exchange.




In terms of openings, the pattern of using a link is an interesting virtual phenomena. We found such instances in both groups, but the frequency is different. Group 1 has 7 interactions started with a link, while Group 2 presents only 2 such cases. We contend that the friends in the first group use links with a main phatic function. Of course, all videos accessed through the link contain information of some sort (most of them are meant to be funny), but the denotative side is not important in this case. The decision to post is mainly motivated by the intention to reach out to others, to share and strengthen the social bond. In one of the cases, a caption is added that says: this has been my day so far (“asa a fost ziua mea până acum”), which adds extra personal self-oriented information meant to keep in touch with the others.

Group 1 also uses, as a greeting, 2 funny gifs: one wishing the others a nice day, and the other showing how difficult is to start a day without coffee. These are also entirely phatic devices, with the same purpose as described for the links above.








Instead, closings that include one or several emojis are frequent in Group 1, becoming farewell replacers, a fast, effortless and efficient way to end a polite conversation through messages. In the corpus, there were two occurrences of emojis without text used as closings, one with emojis expressing embrace (repeated 3 times) and the other with the emoji sending a heart (only 1 emoji), and in both cases it was reciprocated by the interlocutor with the same pattern. We will call this behaviour *phatic mirroring*, a socio-linguistic strategy aimed to suggest similar levels of affection on both sides, pertaining to virtual politeness and rapport building.

Given that emojis can be ambiguous in interpretation and take on several meanings, being highly dependent on the context, we grouped together the appeal, uptakes and connective linkers and found that Group 1 is rich in such occurrences. In opposition, Group 2 has no such patterns throughout the surveyed period, which can be motivated easily through the more rigid structure imposed by the higher social distance of the participants.



In order to add depth to this study, we made an inventory of the emojis used and attempted to classify them according to Laver’s phatic tokens into neutral, self-oriented and other-oriented. It should not be assumed that the delineation between these categories is clear-cut, but rather a judgement made by analysing the context of the occurrences and by assessing the predominant communicational intention of the speaker. The table does not include preset reactions to messages.

| Type of emoji   | Group 1 | Group 2 | Associated category of phatic tokens |
|---|---------|---------|--------------------------------------|
| Overall number of emojis  | 162     | 21      |                                      |
|  | 122     | 0       | Self-oriented / other-oriented       |
|  | 11      | 0       | Self-oriented                        |
|  | 9       | 1       | Neutral / Self-oriented              |

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial 4.0. International License

|   |   |    |                                |
|---|---|----|--------------------------------|
|  | 0 | 10 | Neutral                        |
|  | 7 | 5  | Other-oriented                 |
|  | 0 | 2  | Other-oriented/self-oriented   |
|  | 3 | 1  | Neutral / Other-oriented       |
|  | 4 | 2  | Other-oriented                 |
|  | 2 | 1  | Self-oriented / other-oriented |
|  | 4 | 0  | Self-oriented / Other-oriented |

The striking difference between the two groups in the number of emojis suggests that these virtual tools are mostly perceived by users as informal, fit for solidarity relationships. Consequently, Group 1 uses 162 emojis, many of them placed in clusters, the most popular being the laughing-out-loud one (with variations). This carries a high significance when assessing the phaticness of the messages because it signals a warm atmosphere, where friends exchange funny comments and inside jokes and, in this way, maintain the connection. It is not without significance that the classical smiley face is not employed, because it is the least emotionally meaningful. Given this user intuition, the other group, while being slightly populated with emojis, employs this smiley 10 times (most frequently used). This is the reason why we consider it to be a neutral phatic token. Slightly impersonal or equidistant for the interlocutors, this unmarked option constitutes a prudent and guarded politeness strategy, to accompany texts meant for status-differential relationships. Neutral tokens build an “emotionally unassertive ground” (Laver 1975, p. 225), where cooperative behaviour is modulated by the intention to allow speakers psychological space. The relationship teacher - 3<sup>rd</sup> grader parent requires such conventional tokens, mirroring the intention to mark openness and kindness in a non-assuming, non-intrusive manner. Here is an example of such a behaviour:

 S1 (teacher): Bună ziua! Părinții care vin să ia copiii astăzi, urcați în clasă să semnați fișele de evaluare. [ Hello. Parents who come to pick up the kids today, please, come up  the classroom to sign the evaluation sheets]

S2 (parent): Mulțumim! (Thank you!)

The structure of the messages above shows a combination of phatic and informative content. The teacher’s greeting, the emoji, and the thanking reply of the parent are phatic utterances, meant to express politeness and express confirmation and connectedness. However, there is a deeper layer embedded in the emoji use, as it can be a way to make an otherwise face-threatening act (a command) less demanding and impolite, thus contributing to a face-saving strategy. This pragmatic interpretation can give a glimpse into the complex undertones a single instance of emoji can carry.

The answer to the teacher’s request also illustrates an important element in virtual group dynamics: when making replies, the members of the parent community act as spokespeople and use the plural (that the English translation cannot render) when expressing thanks, as if they were representatives of the entire group. However, a single phatic answer is often not



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial 4.0. International License

deemed sufficient by the parents, and the above message exchange continues with 5 more thank you's that add nothing new to the conversations besides marking specific identities in the group. Otherwise, this WhatsApp thread is full of repeated replies from the parents, which are variations of the same answer.

Self-oriented emojis appear more frequently in Group 1, which confirms Laver's claim that they are mostly tools of solidary interactants. A particularly interesting one is the sweating smiling face, which is also a self-deprecating strategy when confessing a situation that was a close call. Besides the idea of relief, it is an act that exposes speakers' vulnerabilities and it is used in our corpus only in Group 1. Below, we provide an example where one of the participants admits to having been close to losing her driving license.

S1: Dar nu a fost ușor. Chiar am crezut la un moment dat ca raman fără permis [But it wasn't easy. I thought I would be left without a license 🤦🏻 ]

S2: bine ca nu ai rămas fără. Nu mai mergeai în Grecia. [good that you didn't lose it. You wouldn't go to Greece anymore 🤦🏻 ]

The first emoji is also emotionally illustrative, besides being phatic, while the one contained by the answer is a form of phatic mirroring, blended into a sweetly ironic reply that starts with an equally phatic text showing relief. The second sentence of the answer appeals to the common background of knowledge, which is a productive positive politeness strategy that increases the feeling of belonging to a community.

The other-oriented tokens identified above are more personal, signal a less status-differential relationship and tend to show empathy. Both groups provide examples of such emojis (some of them with dual meaning: self-oriented and other-oriented) but the pictograms that mediate between the two types of relationships are the embracing emoji and the emoji with heart eyes. They were used, depending on the context, to express affection, excitement, encouragement and approval. Here is an instance of such a token:

S1: (picture of a view from Thassos, Greece) Kalimera!

S2: Ce faceți? Ați greșit data. [What are you doing? It's the wrong date.]

S1: Nu începea azi vacanța? Am greșit. Ne ducem să căutăm ceasul lui Florin [Did't the holiday start today? We made a mistake. We are going to search for Florin's watch]

S3: Distracție plăcută! 🤗🤗🤗 [Enjoy your holiday!]

S1: Mulțumim 🤗🤗🤗 [Thank you]

In this case, the initiation of the communication instance is made by posting a photo with the Greek greeting, which is both an informative and phatic act. Given that the friends have scheduled a journey to Greece together, the remarks related to the mistake of the date are a pure display of humour and not a face-threatening act that suggests an actual lapse of speaker 1. Speaker 1 takes the joke further and appeals to the common background of knowledge, referring to a past event known to all the friends in the group. Still, from a pragmatic point of view, humour might be taken a step too further if the exchange were to continue this way, so speaker 3 appeals to other-oriented phatic token: text and emojis, and is answered in the same note, through phatic text and mirroring emojis.

The overall examination of the contexts in the corpus suggests that solidary relations generate more self-oriented and other-oriented phatic content, while status-differential message

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial 4.0. International License

exchanges are richer in neutral and other-oriented, which confirms Laver's assertions, as well as this researcher's expectations.

### 3.3. *Limitations of the study*

The results of this analysis should be taken a step further, by expanding the corpus and increasing the surveyed period, so that the conclusions would be tested on a larger scale. It should also be taken into account that the ages of the participants have to be correlated with the data, considering that the interlocutors belong to a generation that has taken contact with the new technologies at a later stage of their lives and is likely to be less acquainted with some of the digital features. Including in the corpus groups of younger users could also lead to interesting considerations related to the way the digitally literate new generations understand phaticness. We assume that phatic devices would be, in such cases, more varied and that digital paralinguistic tools would constitute most of the phatic methods employed.

## 4. CONCLUSIONS

Phatic communication is more than mere small talk about themes without consequence. It is an intricate and complex strategy to maintain connectedness and social bonds. In virtual worlds, the linguistic means to express it were adapted in order to meet the limitations of the environment. Besides the phatic devices used in face-to-face interactions, such as openings and closings, appeals and uptakes, connective linkers, gap fillers and hedged, online strategies employ paralinguistic virtual-specific tools, such as hyperlinks, emojis, gifs, all aimed to express the desire of the participants to reach out to others and (re)affirm presence.

We conclude that phaticness is a fairly productive and complex communicative strategy where relational goals are deemed more important than the speaker's commitment to factuality, and that, translated in the digital world, this strategy helps users maintain a feeling of closeness which compensates the disembodied nature of this channel. The corpus analysed in this study gives ample room to test assumptions about the particular contexts where phaticness is used to maintain connectedness between the interactants, by conversing in a relatively inoffensive way and exchanging consensual bits of information likely to generate a warm feeling of mutual understanding. The virtual conversations in the two Whatsapp groups surveyed provided us with the opportunity of observing different communication patterns that pertain to phatic communion, organised on the distinction between formal - informal and solidary – non-solidary relationships. The findings shed light on neutral, self-oriented and other-oriented phatic tokens, and on the digitally-specific means to express politeness, and reveal a significant repertoire of attitudes and intentions coded sometimes only through simple emojis. Subtle distinctions in the use of virtual phatic devices (repetition, phatic mirroring etc.) are meant to express a wide range of contextual factors and to code nuanced differences in social distance and power, all oriented towards the communicative goal of staying in touch, albeit remotely.

## REFERENCES

1. Aull, B. 2019, 'A Study of Phatic Emoji Use in WhatsApp Communication', *Internet Pragmatics*, John Benjamins Publishing Company, doi: [10.1075/ip.00029.aul](https://doi.org/10.1075/ip.00029.aul)
2. Baudrillard, J. 1981, 'Requiem for the Media', in Jean Baudrillard (Ed.): *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, St. Louis, Mo., pp. 164–184.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial 4.0. International License

3. Carr, CT, Wohn DY & Hayes RA 2016, '[Like] as social support: Relational closeness, automaticity, and interpreting social support from paralinguistic digital affordances in social media', *Computers in Human Behavior*, vol. 62, pp. 385-393.
4. Danesi, M. 2017, *The Semiotics of Emoji: The Rise of Visual Language in the Age of Internet*, Bloomsbury Advances in Semiotics.
5. Derks, D., Arjan ER, von Grumbkow, J. 2007, *Emoticons and social interaction on the Internet: the importance of social context*, *Computers in Human Behavior*, vol. 23, no. 1, pp. 842 – 849, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2004.11.013>.
6. Dresner, E. & Herring, S. 2010, 'Functions of the nonverbal in CMC: Emoticons and illocutionary force', *Communication Theory*, vol. 20, no. 3, pp. 249-268. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2010.01362.x>
7. Fadhil, ZA 2022, 'The Function of Phatic Communication in the English Language', *English Language, Literature & Culture*, Vol. 7, No. 2, pp. 62-65. doi: 10.11648/j.ellc.20220702.13
8. Laver, J. 1975, 'Communicative functions of phatic communion', in: Kendon A, Harris RM, & Key MR (ed), *Organization of Behavior in Face-to-Face Interaction*, pp. 215-238. The Hague: Mouton & Co., <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110907643.215>
9. Jakobson, R. 1960, 'Closing statement: Linguistics and poetics', in T.A. Sebeok (Ed.), *Style in language*, Wiley, New York, pp. 350–377.
10. Mais-Arevalo C. 2017 'Small talk is not cheap: phatic computer-mediated communication in intercultural classes', *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, DOI: 10.1080/09588221.2017.1304423
11. Makice, K. 2009, 'Phatics and the design of community', *CHI'09 Extended Abstracts on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, vol. 9, pp. 3133–3136. doi:10.1145/1520340.1520445.
12. Malinowski, B. 1923, 'The problem of meaning in primitive languages', in Ogden CK & Richards IA (Eds.). *The meaning of meaning. A study of the influence of language upon thought and of the science of symbolism*, NY: Harcourt, Brace & Company, New York, pp. 451–510.
13. Miller, V. 2015, 'Phatic culture and the status quo: Reconsidering the purpose of social media activism', *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, doi:10.1177/1354856515592512
14. Placencia, ME & Lower A. 2013, 'Your kids are so stinkin' cute! :-): Complimenting behavior on Facebook among family and friends', *Intercultural Pragmatics*, vol. 10, no. 4, pp. 617-646.
15. Sperber, D. & Wilson, D. 1986, *Relevance. Communication and Cognition*, Blackwell Publishers Oxford.
16. Wang, V, Tucker, JV & Haines, K. 2012, 'Phatic technologies in modern society', *Technology in Society*, vol. 34, no. 1, pp. 84–93.
17. West, R. & Turner, L. 2011, *Understanding Interpersonal Communication: Making Choices in Changing Times*, Wadsworth, Boston.
18. Yus, F. 2019, 'A Cognitive Pragmatics of the Phatic Internet', in Mackenzie J, Alba-Juez L. (eds.), *Emotion in Discourse*, John Benjamins, DOI: 10.1075/pbns.302.07yus
19. Yus, F. 2014, 'Not all emoticons are created equal', *Linguagem em (Dis)curso*, vol. 14, no. 3, pp. 511-529, DOI: 10.1590/1982-4017-140304-0414
20. Žegarac, V. 1998, 'What Is Phatic Communication?', in Rouchota V. & Jucker AH (eds.), *Current Issues in Relevance Theory*, John Benjamins, Amsterdam, pp. 327-361.