



RESEARCH PAPER

**Mediating Intimacy through Phatic Tokens in Social Media
Communication: A Pragmatic Inquiry**

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ABSTRACT

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People nowadays have most of their conversations on social media apps. They use many phatic tokens while having online conversations. The present study aims to analyze the types of phatic tokens youngsters use in their conversations on social networking sites. Laver's theory of phatic tokens and Scheff's Bond Theory have been used as theoretical framework for better understanding of this discursive mechanism of phatic communication. Following mixed method approach, a small scale corpus of whatsapp real interactions have been collected from 10 participants and analyzed using mixed method approach. Data reveal that phatic tokens perform the function of conflict avoidance hence very helpful in keeping harmony and balance in the community or a society. It is suggested that knowledge and awareness about the phatic communication should be made compulsory at all levels in different social institutions to create social bonds and minimizes the damages caused by conflicts and tensions, through applications of phatic communications

Introduction

Phatic communication (PC), or small talk, characterizes the beginning and closing of conversation with usually stereotypical remarks. Malinowski (1972) explained the term as the speech used to create bonds or social union simply by exchanging of words which perform a social function being the main purpose, but they neither arouse interest in the listener nor the result of intellectual reflection.

Man's nature has an inclination for social dependence and needs to communicate with other fellow beings in order to develop social bonds. In a society, people interact and socialize through communication in order to express their feelings, desires or give-and-take information. PC is also a way through which humans socialize. It is commonly referred as "Small Talk" in which the use of language is to express your feelings and desires instead of exchange of information. The concept was originated from the Greek language meaning "spoken" and propounded by Malinowski in 1920. Later on, this concept was included in linguistics. Malinowski described PC as the one which creates the ties of union merely by exchange of words.

With the advent of technology, PC has become common on the platform of electronic media. As we know, social media constitute a big part of our lives and in today's world; most of our communication takes place on this platform. We are always active keep posting and sharing our thoughts on social networking sites like Facebook, Whatsapp, Instagram and Twitter. The researchers have chosen to analyze the phatic tokens (PTs) people use for social interaction on these platforms in typical Pakistani context. Pragmatic competence is imperative to be acquired by the non-native speakers of English language but this competence is not easy to acquire by them. At the first place, awareness regarding its importance for the non-native speakers and learners is quite important.

The study as such accomplishes two innovative goals. It puts forward a small corpus of PC, to give a much needed theoretical model and then use it in order to have a deeper insight the ways in which PC is a relevant discourse today. These goals will grab the attention of readers to rethink the importance of PC and PTs, a process that the preset study embraces. It is also hoped that the study will contribute in creating the awareness to comprehend the multiple features of PC and PTs thus become aware of different types and purposes they serve in our Pakistani society as well as the other communities around the globe. By understanding the different types and features of phatic tokens, it enables the expected outcomes of every action we perform in our social spheres. Hence, it increases our social interactions. In a situation, where an awkward silence can prevent us from an on-going conversation, phatic tokens can pave the ways and play an important role in breaking the ice.

Literature Review

A majority of researchers perceive PTs to be limited to oral communication however, the study aims to broaden the scope of PTs and provide a holistic

approach to these tokens as used in communication. The scope is much broader than is perceived by majority of the researchers which encompasses the socio pragmatic function apart from the other functions mentioned earlier.

Scheff (1990) was concerned with the study of emotional/relational world, mental illness, collective violence and restorative justice. He developed a theory of social bonds which is referred as Bond Theory. He claimed that Individuals are not isolated human beings so his underlying principle was social cohesion for the maintenance of social bonds attained through specific social structures of individuals. One of the main argument of the author is that sociology motivation is always explored as the study of human behavior that includes the study of motives and the psychology as well but does not take too much into account the environment and the social background of the individual which is the inherited and the most important characteristic of sociology. Scheff (1990) argues that in each interaction provides the link between the social structure and individual and the interlocutors seem to use the resources of an entire society in understanding the interaction occurs at any moment or in any context. That was the reason that he takes on a micro-social approach (TALKING BIG ABOUT SMALL TALK) to have a keen look on the study of society as a whole. Bonds, if seen in the economic light, are very much in consonant with Bourdieu (1986b)'s use of the word "capital" when he describes the structure of society. Now we can accept the economic meaning as either labor or active and passive assets, but Bourdieu affirmed two other forms and meanings of capital, which are social and cultural, which are both subject to transformation into economic capital. It is very clear that we can say that cultural capital is a body of knowledge of various kinds related to culture; and social capital is a combination of social systems and social relations. It is the nature of man to be emotionally, mentally and physically dependent on each other in order to survive. Consider an example of trees that are bonded to the earth in order to survive just as we are bonded to each other by living in a society. Now, it can be observed that bonding depends on the language that is being used by the people that considers the system of signs and signals that are also arbitrary therefore talking big about small is also ambiguous because relation between language and meaning is not static.

According to Laver (1975), there are tokens used in phatic communication. He gave three major types of tokens that are neutral, other-oriented and self-oriented tokens. Laver claims that these tokens are used by the people in their daily conversations. Neutral tokens do not refer to any of the participant whereas other-oriented tokens refer to the listener. Self-oriented tokens are used by the person who is socially superior.

Malinowski (1923), in his essay “The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages” gave the term “Phatic Communion” describing it as ties of union being created by just exchange of words. Whenever we interact with each other, a bond is built and maintained but it can also be threatened or rebuilt that is possible only with discourse, depending on what instead of how we say. In order to comprehend the meaning, one must have the knowledge of linguistic, semiotic, cultural and contextual cues. Scheff (1990), distinguishes his works from all the other works that were proposed by other scholars; however in his book, he failed to give the concept of healthy bond, nonetheless, he managed to give the concept of intact bond that is somehow related to the healthy bond. By the word intact what he meant was the characteristic nature of bond that is considered ideal for the health of a social structure and vice versa. But it can cause harm to the society if the bond is damaged by the failure of a successful interaction. As far as precautionary measures are concerned, there must be a constant monitoring process known as bond management. Due to these reasons of complexity and complicatedness in bonding, Scheff (1990) believed that bond is an ongoing process, not once for all activities in fact if it is to remain intact, it should be put to test constantly, evaluated, assessed and renewed and that was the reason Scheff considers each and every interaction having an impact on the existing bond, that can be either negative or positive. Scheff (1990) relates the intact bond to the notion of secure social bonds, according to him these bonds are neither independent nor dependent from each other rather they are interdependent. And these secure social bonds are the main ways and forces that hold the society together. Next, he gives the concept of closeness and distant relationship: according to him one must be close enough to each other in order to recognize each other’s needs, wants, desires and wishes but far enough to accept those needs, wants considering the external and internal factors in order to gain “attunement”. According to Scheff, it can be explained as the mutual understanding, thoughts and feelings that can be found in romantic relationships but the relationship with other generation. It is the basic need in the development of genuine, real and pure bonds that is the necessity of the healthy and intact bond. So, it is the part of bond management which plays a pivotal role in the foundation and stability of the society.

Laver (1975) offers a wide variety of linguistic tokens which are used in phatic communication. He introduces ‘Neutral Token’ (NT) according to which the speaker talks about the things that are easily accessible to all of the audience or listeners like weather talk or if you are in a party and you are talking about the things you are experiencing mutually. He also refers to this token as “safe” because the situation or the topic they are talking about is known to both, the speaker and

the listener. Neutral Tokens are basically used to start a conversation. The other categories of tokens Laver gave are Self- oriented (SOT) and Other- oriented Tokens (OOT). Laver says that when tokens point to something that are concerned with only the speaker they are self-oriented and when the speaker also refers to the other person they are other-oriented Tokens. For example, self-oriented tokens are "It is hot, right?" or "I am enjoying this party". In the same way, other-oriented tokens can be "Are you enjoying the party?" because the speaker is referring to the other person. In contrast to (NT) this type of tokens are used at the end of an interaction. Neutral tokens can be used by any type of participants but the self and other-oriented tokens cannot be used by any person of any status.

Laver also gave the idea of anti-phatic communication which is the use of gestures which indicate that the person is uninterested and it breaks the bond between the two participants. When you are talking to someone, you have a bond with him but as soon as the bond breaks your communication or interaction stops. Smoking is a gesture of antiphatic communication. Another example can be texting through mobile. People actually use texting as a way to avoid from the situation going on around them. By doing this, they are breaking the bond because they are simply not interested in the talk.

He has also described in detail the opening phase of a PC. He says that first, the participants make eye contact then they greet each other from a distance, then they greet each other physically and then they start a conversation. Laver has further described the types of tokens used in greeting and parting as direct address greetings, general greetings and parting tokens. Greeting tokens can be "Good morning", "Good afternoon" and parting tokens are "Bye", "Take care" etc.

Aull (2019) in her study analyzed the emojis people use during their Whatsapp conversations and how the emojis show solidarity between the participants. According to her, social media is a very powerful tool for communication in this age of technology. During social media communication and especially Whatsapp, people also transmit their message nonverbally that is through the use of emojis. She analyzed the Whatsapp communications between students and researchers to find out what emojis they use that fulfills the properties of phatictokens.

Noronha & Malshe, (2015) opine that the phatic function is very important to the process of conversation. In their article, they studied how bloggers use phatic communication in their blogs. They analyzed the data collected from 26 Indian bloggers who wrote blogs in English on their blog sites. They found out that

although blogs are not direct conversations between the blogger and the reader but it does fulfill the role of face-to-face conversation.

Ip, & Wagner, (2008) worked on the role of weblogging as social networking device and talked about how Weblogs effect the young people on the internet and is changing the organizational computing medium. They took interviews from 33 young people who specialized in weblogs. They analyzed the needs and the motivation behind these web loggers. It is evident from the previous studies that a lot of work has been done on phatic communication but to our knowledge, no such study so far has been ventured in Pakistani context. In Pakistani EFL classrooms, this area of pragmatic competence is largely neglected and not taken seriously although it may lead to serious blunders and communication barriers. Moreover, phatic tokens have not been taken as an independent topic of study with its socio cultural peculiarities. The present study, hopefully, is going to fill the gap by providing a better understanding of phatic tokens as used by the youngsters in daily conversations that takes place on social media particularly through Whatsapp.

Material and Methods

The present study per se is descriptive qualitative research. The data have been gathered using mixed method approach and phatic tokens as used in social media communication have been collected and analysed within Laver's framework (1975). Main objective of the present study was to see the social significance of different types of phatic tokens being used by our young generation on social networking sites in Pakistan. In light of this theory, following objectives are formulated to achieve:

- a) To investigate the social significance of phatic tokens
- b) To find out different types of phatic tokens used by the youngsters on social networking sites

The data have been taken from the direct conversation of 10 young female (age group 18 to 22) Pakistani users of Watsapp taking place between friends and between teachers and students. These participants have been requested to share their private conversations with their friends and teachers. The data consist of the phatic expressions and phatic posts by the participants.

Analysis

The collected data is coded and categorized in different groups for a rigorous analysis. Analysis revealed the following types and patterns.

Neutral Tokens

The first conversation is of a girl who posted a status on Whatsapp which was a video of the view of Multan after rain. The other girl replies to her status as:

Friend,1: (Status of the view)

Friend,2: Wao!! The weather is so good today !

In this conversation, neutral token is used between two friends. As the dialogues are not directed towards any particular participant so neutral tokens is being used in this conversation.

In another conversation between a teacher and a girl representative of a class, neutral token can be seen.

Teacher: Class will take place tomorrow.

Student: Okay, Thank You.

Self-oriented Tokens

In a conversation between teacher and student is taking place. The student is asking her teacher to write a recommendation letter for her. This conversation uses self- oriented token because it is directed towards the speaker.

Student: Asalamoalikum Sir! I am applying for an international university and I want a recommendation letter for my admission. Can you please write my recommendation letter?

Teacher: Yes, sure. You can come to the department tomorrow.

In another conversation between two friends, one is telling about her father's death to the other.

Friend 1: My father died yesterday. Please make dua for him.

Friend 2: Oh! So sorry for your loss. May Allah grant him higher place in Jannat, Ameen.

Other-oriented Tokens

In a conversation between two friends taking place at the occasion of Eid, one is greeting the other. It is other-oriented token because the conversation is referring to the addressee.

Friend 1: Happy Birthday!! Mubarak ho, May this day bring lots of happiness for you and your family.

Friend 2: KhairMubarak!

In another conversation, a friend uploads her picture from a wedding that she attended recently. The other friend responds to her as

Friend 1: *Uploads her picture*

Friend 2: Masha Allah! You are looking so gorgeous

As previously discussed, phatic tokens used in any conversations would suggest, indicate and specify that what the user wants to convey the message like either he wants to maintain the contact or exit the contact with the receiver. According to the data collected from the conversations between friends and between the teacher and students, it can be seen that other-oriented and neutral tokens are more common than self-oriented tokens. The chart below represents the percentages of tokens used in the conversations from the data. The interlocutors use code switching in phatic communication.

Table 1
Different types of PTs as used by the participants

Types of Tokens	No. of PTs used
Neutral Tokens	30
Self-oriented Tokens	20
Other-oriented Tokens	50

According to the chart, 50% people used other-oriented tokens while 30% people used neutral tokens whereas only 20% people used self-oriented tokens. So, It can be concluded from the data that other oriented tokens are usually common in conversation be it conversation between friends or teachers and students. People avoided using self-oriented tokens in their conversations. Other-oriented tokens are common in close friends. Between teachers and students, other-oriented token is common because usually this token is used by the person who is in higher status than the other socially. Neutral Tokens are common between friends who are not

very close and talk occasionally. Self-oriented tokens could be seen mostly in conversations where people had to inform someone about something. Communication lies at the heart of maintaining relationship. Small talk or phatic communication though seems trivial interactions helps in forming the fabric of our social relationship. Social media has made the world more and more connected as a result it encourages function of phatic tokens as far as the interaction and communication is concerned through sociable applications (Whatsapp, Twitter, Facebook and Instagram).

The study has elaborately discussed the phatic tokens in communication that takes place on social media. People use different types of tokens to interact with each other and the most common among these is other-oriented phatic token. People tend to use this token as a way of solidarity with other people.

The Phatic tokens also serve the communicative function, the social function, recognition and validation function. It is useful for ending or maintaining the relationship or to establish the social structure. Non native speakers of English tend to revert to their mother tongue while using phatic tokens in technology mediated communication.

In addition to that, another important function of phatic communication is conflict avoidance. It is very helpful in keeping harmony and balance in the community or a society and minimizes the damages caused by conflicts applications of phatic communications and tensions that need to be avoided at all cost. Moreover, phatic tokens enable the hearer to understand the cultural meta-representation of phatic communication conveyed by the speaker.

Suggestions

The present has argued the social importance of phatic tokens. These tokens serve the social, communicative, recognition and validation functions and interactants use these trivial but significant interactions to avoid the situation where silence is considered impolite and embarrassing. In Pakistani milieu, pedagogic attention to teaching of intercultural pragmatics is quite imperative in raising the awareness regarding intercultural communication thus enhancing the meta-pragmatic competence of EFL learners to tackle the issues related to intercultural communication and meet the native speaker's expectations.

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