“How are you?”: Negotiating phatic communion

JUSTINE COUPLAND AND NIKOLAS COUPLAND

Centre for Applied English Language Studies
University of Wales College of Cardiff
Cardiff CF1 3XE, UK

JEFFREY D. ROBINSON

Communication Arts and Sciences
University of Southern California
Los Angeles, CA 90089

ABSTRACT

Since its introduction by Malinowski in the 1920s, “phatic communion” has often been appealed to as a concept in sociolinguistics, semantics, stylistics, and communication, typically taken to designate a conventionalized and desemanticized discourse mode or “type.” But a negotiation perspective, following the conversation analysis tradition of research on greetings and troubles telling, fits the discursive realities better. Phaticity is a multidimensional potential for talk in many social settings, where speakers’ relational goals supercede their commitment to factuality and instrumentality. We then analyze phatic processes in elderly people’s responses to a scripted how are you? opening in interviews about their medical experiences. Discourse analyses of phatic communion can raise important issues for gerontological and medical research. (Phatic communion, small talk, greetings, elderly talk, medical talk, preference structure)

The term phatic communion originated in the writings of the British functionalist school of linguistics – an important precursor to modern sociolinguistics, closely affiliated to anthropology and cultural concerns. The first usage of the term is usually attributed to Malinowski (1923). Although phatic communion is a concept that has surfaced quite regularly in semantics, sociolinguistics, and communication research, there have been very few systematic attempts to draw on or elaborate on the concept in sociolinguistics or discourse studies, the main exception being Laver’s series of papers in the 1970s and 1980s (see later discussion). Consequently, phatic communion remains an often appealed to but underanalyzed term in an implicit taxonomy of discourse “types.” Our main objectives in this article are to enter into a

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debate about what phatic communion appropriately and usefully designates in face-to-face interaction and particularly to explore how sequences of talk may come to be designated as phatic or otherwise in one specific discourse context: in interviews with elderly people about their health experiences.

The first part of the article is a review of where and how the notion of phatic communion surfaces in literatures on social ritual, sociolinguistics, stylistics, facework, conversation analysis, and communication generally. In the empirical section, we focus on the opening exchanges of interviews with elderly people about their experiences of health care, and specifically on their responses to a scripted initial question: how are you? Within these responses, we identify the range of strategies speakers use for achieving degrees of "phaticity" as they negotiate individual courses between medical and formulaic talk. Finally, we suggest how investigations of phatic communion might have a relevance to the medical and gerontological concerns that we are addressing in our current research.

A HISTORICAL REVIEW

Malinowski

In the widely cited 1923 supplement, Malinowski described phatic communion as "language used in free, aimless, social intercourse" (Malinowski 1972:142; this is a reprint, to which page numbers in this section refer). In his famous dictum, phatic communion is "a type of speech in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words," when people "aimlessly gossip" (151), "the function of speech in mere sociabilities" (150). On the assumption that the need for the mere presence of others is "one of the bedrock aspects of man's [sic] nature in society," speech can be seen as "the intimate correlate of this tendency" (150). Therefore, communion among humans will often be marked in speech - "phatically." These are the terms in which initial formulas of greeting and parting (one of Malinowski's examples is nice day today) and the "flow of language" that follows such utterances are to be interpreted: "purposeless expressions of preference or aversions, accounts of irrelevant happenings, comments on what is perfectly obvious" (ibid.).

In this initial delimitation, we find the origins of the interpretation of phatic communion as a form of "small talk," discourse operating in a limited domain and dislocated from practical action and what Malinowski thought of as "purposive activities" (which include hunting, tilling soil, and war in "primitive" societies). Malinowski nevertheless recognized phatic talk to be a form of action, serving "to establish bonds of personal union between people brought together by the mere need of companionship" (151). Even though it may "not serve any purpose of communicating ideas," phatic communion is functional in defusing the threat of taciturnity (150).

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There are no illustrative examples of any detail in the original treatment, though Malinowski noted there is a preference for affirmation and consent in phatic talk, perhaps mixed with an incidental disagreement that creates the "bonds of antipathy" (150). Another possibility is when speakers offer personal accounts of their views and life histories, to which (said Malinowski) hearers listen under some restraint and with slightly veiled impatience, waiting for their own turn to speak. "But though the hearing given to such utterances is as a rule not as intense as the speaker's own share, it is quite essential for his [sic] pleasure" (150-51). For Malinowski, phatic communion is therefore "talking small" in the further sense that it is communicatively suspect or at least dissimulative. Malinowski certainly felt there was a fundamental indirectness in phatic exchanges:

Are words in phatic communion used primarily to convey meaning, the meaning which is symbolically theirs? Certainly not! . . . A mere phrase of politeness . . . fulfils a function to which the meaning of its words is almost completely irrelevant. Inquiries about health [our emphasis, since the expression relates directly to the data we consider later], comments on the weather, affirmations of some supremely obvious state of things – all such are exchanged, not in order to inform, not in this case to connect people to action, certainly not in order to express any thought. (151)

The legacy of Malinowski's treatment is therefore a somewhat ambivalent view of phatic communion – talk that is aimless, prefatory, obvious, uninteresting, sometimes suspect, and even irrelevant, but part of the process of fulfilling our intrinsically human needs for social cohesiveness and mutual recognition.

A consensus view

In the many later uses of the term phatic communion, it is the negative valuation that predominates, particularly when talk is analyzed to be referentially deficient and communicatively insignificant. Abercrombie suggested that, "The actual sense of the words used in phatic communion matters little" (1956:3). Wolfson (1981) discussed how foreign students in the United States complain about "phoney" invitations to social events offered insincerely as part of phatic small talk. Cheepen (1988) revived Malinowski's distinction between language as a mode of action and phatic communion. She renamed phatic communion "chat" (14ff), though she took the category to include narrative as a key element (which Malinowski in fact considered a separate category). Hudson (1980) glossed phatic communion as "the kind of chit-chat that people engage in simply in order to show that they recognize each other's presence" (109).

Thomas, Bull, and Roger (1982) listed phatic as one of their 12 "activity categories" in communication. They defined the category as "speech that ini-
tiates conversation, but [that is] . . . conventional and ritualised, such as ‘hello’, ‘how are you?’, etc.” (148). Leech (1974) stressed the uncontroversial nature of phatic talk and considered it “dull and pedestrian” (62). Turner (1973) saw it as semantically “empty.” In his view, we should “give the name ‘phatic language’ to all language which is designed more to accommodate and acknowledge a hearer than to carry a message” (212). (See also Cheepen 1988:16ff., for a useful review of this literature and Schneider 1987.) There are, of course, extensive further literatures on small talk (Beinstein 1975; Schneider 1988), situational formulas (Matisoff 1979; Tannen & Öztok 1981), greetings (Firth 1972; Sacks 1975), politeness (Ferguson 1981; Brown & Levinson 1978, 1987), and related concepts that all owe a considerable debt to theorizing about phatic communion.

One further area of research that connects well with the Malinowski perspective in contemporary sociolinguistic studies has been the analysis of gossip, usually in connection with gender issues. Mills (1989) showed how even by the mid-16th century, “a gossip” had come to refer to “a person, mostly a woman, of light and trifling character, especially one who delights in idle talk, a newsmonger, a tatter” (108). Gossiping is variously treated as a pernicious stereotyped attribution of women (Spender 1980), “an aspect of [actual] female language use” (Jones 1990:242), an agency for moral reproduction (Gluckman 1963), or an indispensable feminist weapon (Osman 1984). We cannot enter this debate here and merely point out that the attributes often taken to define gossip overlap very directly with those of phatic talk (and Malinowski himself used the term gossip in illustrating phatic communion – see earlier quotation), not least in terms of topic restriction and triviality, nonfactuality, and relational closeness.

Taken as a whole, these later treatments tend to underplay Malinowski’s insistence on the human embeddedness of phatic communion – indeed his motivation for using the term *communication* rather than *speech*. But beyond this, the assumptions underlying many of these contemporary approaches raise their own difficulties. Phatic communion is taken to designate some sort of minimalist communicative practice, though along several possible dimensions. The “mereness” of phatic communion (which is clear enough in Malinowski too) by virtue of its low interest value, low information value, low relevance, perhaps also its low trustworthiness, presupposes an alternative mode of “true” or “authentic” discourse from which phatic talk deviates. Functionally, it is conceived as talk that will be enacted “for its own sake” or “to avoid other problems” (cf. Robinson 1972). But this approach implicitly validates what has been called the machine metaphor for human communication (Scollon 1985): communication is a generative mechanism and the machine must be “humming” if we are not to believe it has broken down. But is it really appropriate to see phatic communion as less than perfect operation of the machine or as communicative tick-over?

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What might “proper,” “full,” or “accelerated” communicative interaction involve? Taking the converses of the (consensual) defining attributes of phatic talk, we would have to identify talk that involved: (1) factual information exchange, (2) instrumental goals, (3) serious key, and (4) unwavering commitment to openness, truth, and disclosiveness. These characteristics are not dissimilar from those referred to in Grice’s well-known maxims of cooperative talk. But there are many reasons to doubt (and Grice himself was far from claiming) that we can identify such a mode of talk in action let alone treat it as a communication ideal (see Brown & Rogers 1991, for a parallel discussion). The most important reason is that it is demonstrably the case that even our most instrumental, transactional encounters are perversively organized around multiple interactional goals that go well beyond the transmission and reception of factual information (see Tracy 1991; Tracy & Coupland 1991). Goals of talk that relate to building, modifying, or dissolving personal relationships, and, on the other hand, those that have to do with the definition and redefinition of own and others’ identities as interacting beings, are no less intrinsic to the enterprise of talking.

This suggests that it is quite wrong to isolate a discourse mode that embodies relational closeness as some partial or minor act of communication. As Malinowski had it, phatic communion may on the contrary be what is communicatively a most human process. Phaticity may be best seen as a constellation of interactional goals that are potentially relevant to all contexts of human interchange. Yet in the majority tradition of analysis, there are interesting allegiances to capitalist and patriarchal ethics. “True” communication is assumed to be geared to productive and efficient achievement through the business of exchanging serious information. This is the critical standpoint from which some feminist writers embrace rather than resist the notion of female gossip.

Laver

In what is the richest post-Malinowski treatment of phatic communion, Laver (1974, 1975, 1981) shifted analytic attention back onto the positive, relational value of phatic communion, particularly in the sequential organization of opening and closing phases of interactions. An important part of his contribution is to taxonomize what his data show to be the maximal structure of “stages” (nonverbal and verbal) in each opening and closing phase. But it is Laver’s interpretation of the discourse functioning of phatic communion that is most compelling. Laver found opening phases in conversation to fulfill first a propitiatory function in defusing possible attributions of hostility through silence. There is also an exploratory function in the tentative nature of such exchanges. Laver suggested we tend to avoid phatic communion in transactional settings (though see later discussion), which led him to suppose that one function of phatic communion, when it does occur
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here, is indexical and uncertainty-reducing. In Goffman's (1959) terms, it helps participants establish a "working consensus." Third (though this clearly relates to the second), Laver found that phatic talk serves the initiatory function of getting the interaction under way.

In closing sequences, reinstituting phatic communion can mitigate possible sense of rejection and consolidate a relationship. These purposes can often surface as the explicit topics of conversation-closing utterances ("it's been nice talking to you"; "be seeing you soon"). Laver's perspective echoes Jakobson's (1960) taxonomy of six functional categories, in which the phatic function is taken to focus on the channel characteristics of interaction in establishing and maintaining social contact.3 (We refer later to Hymes's important critique of Jakobson's taxonomic approach, as it articulates the need for the negotiative perspective that we endorse, especially in the empirical section at the end of the article.)

The underlying goals of phatic talk are seen as establishing relationships and achieving transition. Because these together are defining characteristics of ritual activities, phatic communion for Laver falls within the scope of this general category. Laver willingly acknowledged the debt his theoretical position owes to Firth's (1972) work on greeting and parting as ritual and patterned routines. But again, ritual sequences, Laver suggested, are far from purposeless and desemanticized. There is the basic consideration that all utterances, phatic or otherwise, mean contrastively by being differentiated from other possible utterances, or from silence, in the context of their use. Hymes (personal communication) also noted that "even if the what of a ritual is predictable . . . there is information in the how. In a perfunctory manner, with feeling, haltingly, masterfully, respectfully, disrespectfully." Laver also argued that the linguistic form of a phatic initiative both constrains the thematic development of the interaction (i.e., it is sequentially meaningful) and confers crucial indexical meanings (i.e., it is socially diagnostic).

Laver then introduced a speculative predictive mechanism, specifying how speakers are able to stake claims about solidarity/intimacy and status relationships through particular encoding choices within phatic talk. This insight would seem to have found its full flourishing in Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) politeness model and in their suggestion that cultural grand rites find their origins in conventional, local demonstrations of person-respecting and relational management.

A NEGOTIATION PERSPECTIVE

There is little to be achieved from setting the traditional, Malinowski-derived "small talk" perspective and Laver's functional, prosocial perspective in opposition to each other. In some respects, Malinowski and Laver addressed (or assumed) independent ranges of interactional situations. Malinowski
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wrote, for example, about native village fireside chats among friends or co-workers; the central event modeled in Laver’s analysis seems to be chance meetings of acquaintances, where the management of progressive physical approximation allows a real-time, staged analysis. Laver was reasonably specific about the contents and exchange sequences that comprise phatic talk in his sense: formulaic greetings, references to factors narrowly specific to the time and place of the utterance (e.g., the weather, the meeting/gathering itself), or factors personal to speaker or listener. Malinowski, too, mentioned greetings exchanges but was generally much less specific.

Neither approach, as it happens, offers much cross-cultural insight, though the functions of phatic communion are clearly highly variable across cultures. Bauman (1983), for example, commented on Quaker communicative ideologies according to which language may be viewed as carnal and inadequate for “true” communication, predisposing the avoidance of routine, face-respecting, honorific, and otherwise phatic resources (see also Davies 1988). Hymes (1972:40) cited communities, such as the Paliyans of south India, where very verbal, communicative persons are regarded as abnormal or even offensive (see also Basso 1970). It is not difficult to envisage situations where the phaticity of utterances is a matter of cultural definition and where criteria for defining forms of talk as phatic or otherwise will differ across social groups. (This is an issue we return to in considering talk across the generations.)

There is also a level of determinism that limits both approaches. For Malinowski and Laver alike, a division of discourse modes into phatic and nonphatic is unproblematical. Each assumes that the quality of phaticity “resides in” language-in-use and that it is detectable in its surface form. Yet the characteristics and functions taken to define phatic communion seem unwrokably broad for detecting this particular “it.” From the multiple goals perspective we referred to earlier, we might see the fringes of interaction as a natural locus for relational goals to be foregrounded – that is, as sequences where a phatic design or “frame” for talk (Goffman 1974) is particularly salient. On the other hand, by this account, phatic communion would cease to be associated uniquely with the fringes of encounters (Laver) or extended chatting (Malinowski, Cheepen) and we should expect to find instances where a relationally designed and perhaps phatic mode of talk surfaces whenever relational goals become salient – even within sequences of transactional, instrumental, or task-oriented talk.

As for the “smallness” or “mereness” semantic that, as we saw, many people have taken to be primary in defining phatic communion, it again seems appropriate to argue that all interaction shows degrees of reticence or withheld commitment to openness, seriousness, and truth. Prototypically phatic discourse will certainly involve a suspension of commitment to a speaker’s own factuality. This is presumably why some of the clearest phatic tokens

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are utterances such as greetings exchanges that carry no referential meaning (e.g., hello, good morning, goodbye). But at the same time, nonphatic usage does not achieve unsullied openness, truth, and relevance either. If in phatic communion there is a preference for positivity that, as Malinowski suggested, might lead to false expressions of interest in and engagement with a speaking partner, we must recognize that this can be true of talk in very many contexts of interaction (Coupland, Giles, & Wiemann 1991).

At this point, it is valuable to follow Hymes's critique of Jakobson's taxonomy of speech functions. Jakobson (1960) had acknowledged the multifunctionality of individual speech events, and even acts, but proposed that "the verbal structure of a message depends on the predominant function" (120). However, Hymes (1968) argued that, "the defining characteristic of some speech events may be a balance, harmonious or conflicting, between more than one function. If so, the interpretation of a speech event is far from a matter of assigning it to one of seven types of function" (120). Although phatic communion "can be taken as a kind of alternating or reciprocal expressive function of speech" (121), Hymes argued that there need be no simple link between the phatic function and the existence of contact or rapport. "Messages to establish, prolong or discontinue communication may neither intend nor evoke a sense of communion; there may be a clear channel and no rapport" (ibid.).

It follows that we should expect to trace strategic variation along a dimension of adjudged relational positivity or accommodation (Giles, Coupland, & Coupland 1991), reflecting talk-participants' local priorities for their own talk and hearers' perceptions of others' priorities. So again, phatic communion cannot be defined as a type of talk, though the term can still locate an intriguing cluster of sociopsychological orientations to talk, along at least two key dimensions. Figure 1 is an attempt to illustrate social situations that may typically, however grossly, be associated with different priorities for talk in terms of expressed or perceived commitment to openness and truth (the vertical dimension) and the degree of foregrounding of relational goals (horizontal dimension). What is of crucial importance here is that no single speech event (let alone speech genre) can be adequately characterized in these terms and that the phaticity of any one utterance is a matter for on-the-ground negotiation by participants as talk proceeds.

What we are discussing here as degrees of commitment is captured very clearly in Fawcett's (1984) systemic linguistic model of communicative purposes, where phatic talk is portrayed as an option in the "oblique" (as opposed to "straight") semantic system (see Figure 2). Fawcett aligned his category of oblique utterances or texts with what Grice (1975) termed "floutings" – of his maxims of quantity, quality, relation, and manner. Oblique usage subsumes "play" and "ritual." Whereas play gives access to a huge range of semantic subsystems (and Fawcett recognized that these are likely
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Degree of expressed/perceived commitment
(to open disclosure, seriousness, factuality, etc.)

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Positive relational goals

foregrounded

backgrounded

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foregrounded

backgrounded

FIGURE 1: Interactional dimensions locating phatic communion.

to represent the norm rather than the exception for communicative interchange), the ritual subsystem gives entry only to phatic and ceremonial purposes.

What is important (for our purposes) in Fawcett's conceptualization of obliqueness is his argument that all oblique actions must be analyzed "at two levels," in that "there are often two ways of reacting to such messages" (1984:41). They may be intended either "ostensibly" or at an "ulterior" level. Fawcett's further notion of "variability in the strength of purpose" (47) is helpful in allowing us to break out of the either/or (straight or oblique, nonphatic or phatic) designation that is firmly implied by the systemic modeling of choices in Figure 2. As Fawcett commented, "it is not that we are not sharing information when we say nice day but it looks as if it may rain soon, but that the informational purpose is rather weak" (47).

From the negotiative perspective that we wish to argue for (first on theoretical grounds and then on the basis of the data analyses to follow), the function of particular sequences of talk as phatic or otherwise should not be preconceived. Relevant analytic questions are whether, how, and when talk is oriented to as phatic or not, contingent upon its local sequential placement in particular contextualized episodes and on the momentary salience of particular interactional goals. Important further possibilities are that participants in talk may orient differently at one moment, among themselves but also individually at different moments, to the phaticity of an utterance. That is, we want to suggest that phatic communion may be negotiated relationally, and
FIGURE 2: Systemic linguistic model of communicative purposes (from Fawcett 1984:42, reprinted by permission from the publishers of the *Australian Review of Applied Linguistics*).
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in real time. A sequence of what we might term phatic exchange may quite feasibly be constructed out of qualitatively different participant roles that may themselves shift in the course of a single utterance.

Beyond this and in line with Fawcett’s arguments, a more strategic analysis is necessary, allowing for the possibility that phatic talk can be engaged in dissimulatively, with an inherent and often valuable ambiguity. We could ask how, if it is so conventional, desemanticized, and uncommitted, phatic communion could ever be relationally successful. The answer might be that the relational utility of phatic communion centers on the conventional and uncommitted being able to masquerade as the genuine and committed. A key characteristic of talking phatically may therefore be not so much that it is inherently suspect but that it manages to disguise the extent to which commitment is being made or withheld. In contrast, the consensus approaches we have reviewed attribute little strategic sophistication to interactants and assume they entertain quite different evaluative standards for phatic versus other modes of talk. They also assume that interactants employ a simple switching mechanism in and out of modes that are built on radically different presuppositions about the semantic value of utterances and speakers’ commitment to them.

“HOW ARE YOU?”

What we call “how are you?” (HAY?) utterances are a class of conversational moves that needs to be delimited as to precise forms and functions but that has clear phatic potential according to the criteria we have been discussing. The moves achieve some minimal threshold of relational engagement and commonly occur in conversational openings, often as prequels to transactional discourse. Berger and Bradac (1982) commented that how are you? is often not intended to produce self-revelation “but rather merely [emphasis added] to signal acknowledgement of the other” (82). They also commented that literalist interpretations of how are you? are the basis of an old joke (ibid.).

A: how are you?
B: I have bursitis; my nose is itching; I worry about my future; and my uncle is wearing a dress these days.

But perhaps the fact that HAY? occurs routinely in at least some service encounters itself suggests that the relational overture can be less committed than it appears.5 We are all aware of how easy it is to embark inappropriately on personal disclosure (and of course not necessarily as facetiously as in the constructed sequence given) when we take a cursory and routinized how are you? opening as a “genuine” effort to elicit an appraisal of health or well-being. Not surprisingly, many earlier treatments cite HAY? utterances as central examples of phatic communion.

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On the other hand, in line with earlier comments about dissimulation and ambiguity, we want to suggest that in very many social encounters HAY? initiations do and indeed must purport to elicit health/well-being appraisals and may in fact function in this way, particularly among friends and nonnew acquaintances but also in other contexts. Although nonverbal and prosodic accompaniments to HAY? may give clues to the degree of commitment embodied in the initiation, HAY? will often fail relationally if its formulaicness is made apparent in its encoding. Therefore, HAY? will inevitably prove to be an excellent place to track the negotiation of phatic communion in real-time discourse events. The starting assumption for the empirical analyses in this section is that responding to HAY? involves complex inferencing by the hearer about the relational and other goals of the speaker who makes the elicitation, and assessments of the appropriateness of intimate self-disclosure from moment to moment – and these in relation to both participants’ appreciation of prevailing situational norms.

HAY? sequences have been an explicit research focus in conversation analysis. Sacks (1975) gave a brief but brilliant account of HAY? as a “greeting substitute” (68) that may replace as well as follow an exchange of greetings in “a minimal proper conversation” (66). HAY? can elicit information about “personal states” (matters of mood, appetite, or sleep) and/or “value states” (typical evaluative terms in response to HAY? would be great, OK, or lousy, which Sacks saw as exemplars of positive, neutral, and negative responses, respectively). These constructs are then used to comment on sequencing constraints in conversations following HAY? Sacks says that an answer from the neutral subset of value states makes no further inquiries appropriate. But a lousy response appropriately and directly launches a “diagnostic sequence” (70) in a why? or what’s the matter? next move, which may itself lead to an accounting move. A positive response (wonderful!) may launch a reciprocal expression of delight or a different why? inquiry.

Sack’s argument then runs that there are regulations governing what information should properly be disclosed to whom and when (e.g., within a family, to a doctor, or to a priest). Therefore, before selecting our responses to HAY? we monitor our response options in light of their probable sequential implications for how talk will proceed thereafter. So, whereas HAY? may be “the most askable of questions,” it is the answerer who has to legislate on the appropriateness of subsequent disclosure. “The system of regulations involves not a potential asker’s determination of whether he could handle any information but, instead, an answerer’s determination of whether a given asker can receive the particular information or handle it now” (73). And it is in these terms that Sacks concluded that our appreciation of conversational mechanics (and, in particular, sequencing constraints after HAY?) can lead us to deny that we are feeling, for example, lousy. As in the title of his chapter, we have an instance of the “everyone must lie” condition.
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Sacks's perspective has been followed up in a series of articles by Jefferson (1980, 1984, 1985) on troubles-telling sequences that we refer to in the interpretation of our own data (see also the discussion of Jefferson's work in the appendix to Coupland, Coupland, & Giles 1991). Schegloff (1986) also considered the sequencing of HAY? as it is embedded in the canonical structure of telephone openings. He argued that HAY? sequences, which are often reciprocal in his data, "have an overt topic-priority relevance: they provide a formal early opportunity [in telephone calls] for the other party to make some current state of being a matter of joint priority concern" (118). Schegloff's commentary on responses to HAY? largely derives from Sacks's earlier observations.

Sacks's chapter has clearly demonstrated the sorts of negotiative work that are involved in responding to HAY? in conversation generally and it is a key foundation for the empirical study we outline. It nonetheless involves a certain idealization of conversational sequences that, as we find, proves difficult to match in actual conversational data. First, it is important to Sacks's argument that the three response-options (positive, neutral, negative) are "mutually exclusive," because each is predictive of later conversational events (1975:70). (Schegloff [1986:130] refined this claim somewhat by considering how prosodic variants of HAY? may influence responses, but he accepted the basic three-way classification.) Second, he has to assume that we know what is the truthful response to HAY? in any one instance if we are to deviate from this truth strategically; he wrote that, "the answers to How are you? are things you know on your own behalf" (72). The data we consider show that establishing phatic/nonphatic modes of talk is indeed a complex, structured process, but one in which speakers feel their way toward or away from the phaticity of their conversational exchanges through anything but pure, categorizable responses. We also raise the possibility that negotiating a response to HAY? is more than a simple act of self-disclosure (true or false) and is in fact a creative act toward establishing "how we are" developmentally.

"HOW ARE YOU?" IN INTERVIEWS ABOUT ELDERLY HEALTH

In health-related contexts, we are likely to find a latent predisposition to give and receive HAY? in predominantly nonphatic terms — that is, as a medically associated, diagnostic elicitation. But even here, and given that medical consultations need to be bounded with initiatory and perhaps particularly pro-pitiatory talk (to defuse anxiety and establish rapport), HAY? will still need to be negotiated, and phatic processes are likely to present themselves for analysis. We assume that even when a HAY? elicitation is adjudged to be a bona fide request for a medically framed assessment of own-health, a respondent (in the patient role) may still find reason to move into his or her
self-disclosure progressively and tentatively, respecting face concerns and politeness norms. That is, there may be a predisposition to initiate nonphatic self-disclosure of health and well-being phatically.

Where elderly respondents are involved, the balance of phatic and nonphatic processes in self-disclosure may also be influenced by group predispositions. In earlier work, we found that elderly speakers did tend to behave more disclosively than younger adults, at least in the group’s propensity to disclose relatively more and more intimate “painful” experiences to first acquaintances, many relating to own-health (Coupland et al. 1991; Coupland, Coupland, Giles, Henwood, & Wiemann 1988). We were therefore particularly interested to examine responses elderly people make to HAY? elicitation in circumstances where health is a salient issue.

The medical and gerontological dimensions of the interview context that we now come to describe will predictably predispose ultimately nonphatic responses even to a phatic conversational opening. So, we anticipated that the data would highlight the negotiative processes that Sacks identified and that we have argued are involved in establishing the phatic/nonphatic quality of talk in social situations.

We thought that a single, scripted version of how are you? would variably trigger phatic (conventional, desemantized, nonparticular, non-health-relevant) or nonphatic (particularized, health-relevant) self-disclosures and that nonphatic responses would in many cases be fashioned incrementally from phatic beginnings. The particular focus of the following analyses is therefore on how participants in the interviews achieve the transition into “full” disclosive health-related talk (where they do this) from a supposedly phatic HAY? initiation. The general relevance of the study is to demonstrate that phaticity needs to be viewed as a quality of interactional organization and situation-construing rather than as a “mode” or “type” of talk per se.

**METHODS AND DATA**

The corpus we draw on is a series of interviews with 40 elderly people (34 women and 6 men) aged 64 to 90. All were volunteers who attended a Day Center (social club) in Cardiff, United Kingdom; the interviews were conducted at these centers. We asked people to be involved in a survey of experiences of health care, making it clear that the interviewers were not themselves health practitioners or health specialists of any sort. In each case, a volunteer was escorted to an interview room by a researcher, shown to a seat, introduced to one of the three trained interviewers, then asked a series of prepared questions on the subject of experiences of health care. The first verbal move made by interviewers was a supposedly phatic elicitation: how are you? said smiling and uniformly without any clear primary stress. Volunteers were allowed a full turn at talk in response and received only nonver-
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bal backchannel support up to the end of the turn. We concentrate here on these responses to the scripted question. (The second question was how is your health generally? with a supplementary question if needed: are you receiving treatment for any health problems at the moment? The third question was do you see your GP [general practitioner/physician] often . . . are you seeing him or her at the moment? The fourth and final question was do you think doctors generally provide good health care for elderly people?)

In the discussion that follows, brief transcribed fragments from the interviews are attributed to speakers identified by fictionalized initials. In other current work, we are concerned with variation in Position 1 (P1) utterances (i.e., the encoded forms of HAY?) in medical settings; in the present study, attention is of course directed exclusively to Position 2 (P2) utterances (responses to HAY?).

RESPONSES TO HAY?

In the health- and age-salient context of the interviews, it is already interesting that a few uncontroversially phatically oriented responses did emerge.

Thanking

BE: alright thank you
CB: oh I'm fine thank you

When thanking occurs, it displays a projected belief by the respondent that the Position 1 utterance shows somewhat unexpected personal concern and hence implies that the P1 utterance was heard outside of a specifically medical frame (within which concern is expectable) and interpreted as part of social ritual. This gives rise to bland positive appraisals plus thanking formulas that are sufficiently routinized to be considered the unmarked response to HAY? elicitations (see Brown & Levinson 1987). Positive appraisals without thankings seem to be more readily interpretable in a medical frame.

BG: oh I I'm fine (1.0) yeah

Unqualified negative responses

At the other extreme, some responses to the HAY? opening in the data (and remember that we are transcribing response beginnings here) are bluntly negative self-appraisals, clearly making explicit reference to somatic or psychological problems.

FM: not very happy (.) and not very well
DE: I'm a long-standing asthmatic
BB: well I've got everything wrong with me (.) my legs yeah everywhere even my fingers
AD: erm (.) I got (.) rheumatoid arth (.) arthritis is in my legs and they're terribly painful

This preparedness to disclose negatively valenced, intimate information to nonfamiliars in first encounters has been considered counternormative (see Berger & Bradac 1982), though it is entirely consistent with our earlier find-
ings from different data sets involving demographically similar elderly populations (see the earlier references). The responses just cited were made starkly, without any qualifying or mitigating considerations or accounts. Their medical specificity and the face threat they entail is good evidence of their nonphatic orientation.

Dimensions of hedging in HAY? responses

The vast majority of the initial responses, however, hover between what can be considered phatic and nonphatic acts of telling. We want to highlight the key processes of qualification or hedging that the data display. We argue that the rich resources for producing hedged responses to HAY? should be seen as traces of phaticity, even in this health- and age-salient setting, in elderly people’s self-appraisals. We do not elaborate on prosodic variation in the responses, though these can, of course, be crucial to their interactional impact and deserve extensive further analysis.

Filled pauses. Respondents often preface the report/self-appraisal with a marker to indicate that what they say is reflective and perhaps difficult to formulate in simple terms (see also Heritage 1984, and Schiffrin 1987:86ff., on oh-prefaced responses). Hence we find many filled pauses (oh; well; erm; etc.) and the utterance postqualifier (a local dialect feature) like:

AB: oh (?) not too bad [there are five initial ohs]
AL: well (?) up and down like you know [there are 11 initial wells]
DM: not too bad like

“Good news, bad news” formats. Looking more to the discourse organization of initial HAY? responses, we find that many adopt good news, bad news formats, counterbalancing more positive and more negative self-appraisals within single utterances or over adjacent utterances.

AP: I’m alright () I do suffer with my nerves though I get injections every month () but I () I’m going on fine

In these cases, there is quite extreme, real-time variation in the positivity/negativity of the appraisal, captured very well in Jefferson’s analyses of how troubles tellers “unpackge” initial “glosses” about their own states in disclosive events (1985). It is interesting that the developmental sequence at the beginnings of these responses is always from a more positive first gloss to a more negative next phase; bad news, good news formats simply do not occur as response openings in the data. In our terms, the extent to which the initial gloss is at odds with subsequent disclosure is some measure of how much the initial response shows suspension (of commitment, veracity, etc.), and hence a degree of phaticity.

HAY? responses are very often organized as mini-narratives of the self. Personal narratives are interesting partly because of the potential they offer for
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representing alternative versions of the self: the self as evaluated protagonist within the narrative at the same time as the self as evaluating narrator (cf. Potter & Wetherell 1986; Shotter 1984). We might speculate that the narrative distancing of the protagonist self from the narrator may offer the teller (and the hearer) some protection from a threatening negative self-appraisal. However, our main point is that tellers are able to hedge negative responses by locating particular experiences of ill health within a narrative of somatic ups and downs (a special case, then of good news, bad news).

AB: oh (.) not too bad (.) awful in the mornings and then I'm alright in the afternoon (laughs)
AW: not too bad (.) I got a cold coming but still (.) that'll come and go won't it
CE: not too bad (.) I had a bad day er Saturday (.) arthritis arthritis in my knee (.) I don't know I only went down the street to get some food for Sunday and (.) I had a job to get back home but it's better today

Indeed, the verticality metaphor itself that Lakoff and Johnson (1980) showed to be ingrained in English – pervasively designating goodness/badness, happiness/sadness, health/infirmity, and so on – is very frequently invoked. Repondents frequently project themselves as skateboarding over the hills and dales of health experiences, improving or declining, perhaps occasionally keeping stable on plateaus of well-being. A typical invocation is:

AL: well (.) up and down like you know

Qualified initial negative (global) appraisals. The not too bad formula is very common (see also previous instances).

AC: not too bad
CJ: well I'm not so bad
AS: well (.) could be better
AM: not too bad not too bad (.) can't grumble I suppose
CM: not too bad love (.) could be better I suppose (.) it's no good grumbling is it? (laughs)
BF: coming on [it transpires she has had a major bladder operation]

The general strategy here is to orient to a negative appraisal or circumstance but deny its full force to varying extents. The noncommittal effect, raising an agenda of troubles but being seen to hold back from espousing troubles as “the way things are,” perhaps explains how the phrase “not too bad” has become conventionalized as a HAY? response, at least in our own cultural contexts. The related and equally conventional can't grumble and mustn't grumble similarly communicate that there might be or are salient grumble-able issues, just as we have seen that Jefferson's gloss in troubles telling may orient the hearer to the presence of unspecified troubles. In an elderly context, can't grumble may imply a mutual expectation that the respondent will predictably have cause to grumble, at her age. Mustn't grumble or no use grumbling or no good grumbling (all of which appear in the data) imply acceptance of the degeneration stereotype (see Coupland & Coupland 1990). These detailed interpretations are somewhat shaky, however, as a result of

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the conventionalizing of politeness formulas. Mustn't grumble may well have merged semantically with can't grumble in that it does not necessarily now assert grumbleable circumstances.

Another way of mitigating the impact of initial negative appraisals is to give information on specific medical circumstances in the form of accounts (cf. Fisher & Groce 1990), and specifically as justifications, for an initial negative appraisal.

AE: well not very well I've just had a bad fall
AA: well I'm (.) not feeling (.) very well at all I've got the arthritis of the spine
AH: not very well love (i.o) I suffer from awful er (.) depression for one thing I'm on (.) on my own (.) all the week except for one one gentleman (.) friend of ours (.) of my husband's (.) late husband and myself calls about two evenings a week for about an hour each time you know (.) oh it r really gets you down especially this weather (.) long dark days (.) you know (.) and I do get desperately depressed

Explicitly relativized appraisals. The implicit assessment of how one is relative to expectable circumstances in later life can be made explicit as another strategy of hedging self-appraisals. Elderly peers, presumed normal decrement, or specific ailments are all invoked as relevant contextual concerns. For example, an evaluation of well-being can be expressed relative to the progression of a specific disease, or an age-span, or some presumed norm, as in the “good for my age” and “as well as can be expected” formats that are often used by elderly people in telling their age (see Coupland et al. 1989).

AF: fine (.) well a (.) few aches and pains like everybody else (.) but still (laughs)
BT: oh quite good really (.) I mean um (.) considering you know I mean er all I get (.) now this morning my finger went right off dead although I had gloves on . . .
EM: erm (.) not too bad (.) no (.) not on top of the world but none of us are are we (.) no (.) but when you come to eighty-three years of age you can't expect ((to be like)) a spring chicken can you
BM: well I'm alright (.) I don't grumble (.) I'm eighty-one
AG: I got a cold (.) in the fashion
BD: not too bad love (.) keeping stable
BJ: well I'm breathing (laughs)

In all of these utterances, there are appeals to extenuating circumstances for the appraisal. Where it is a negative appraisal, it is again mitigated. The last-quoted instance implies an appraisal (probably facetious) relative to a possible expectation that the teller should not even be alive.

Laughter. Laughter itself can often mitigate negativity, and more specifically the negative face threat (in Brown & Levinson's terms) of the disclosure, where phaticity is a more normative response mode.

AR: not very well (i.o) (chuckles) (i.o) I haven't been well now for a long time
BH: (breathes in) quite well (laughs) I hope

In Jefferson's (1984) interpretation, laughter by tellers (usually located after an act of troubles telling) indicates “troubles-resistivity” – that they are
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able to cope with the troubles in question. But in the present data, laughter appears to indicate recognition that the negativity is deeply felt and mutually face-threatening to disclose. If this is a plausible analysis, then laughter needs to be seen as a further resource for hedging; respondents are conveying that they ought to be more troubles-resistant than they are. If laughter achieves a momentary suspension from the impact of troublesome life circumstances, it is by one criterion phatic. In other social contexts (e.g., among young, socially privileged conversationalists), flagrantly flouting the norm of positivity by producing a P2 utterance, such as appalling or terrible, is such an infringement of norms that it is liable to be taken as humorous.

OVERVIEW AND IMPLICATIONS

Responses to HAY? in the data presented all show variability. But within the wide range of possible response options, there is some evidence of interviewees respecting a preference for non- or at least hedged negativity in these responses. Even though our volunteers were made aware that the interviews were established to pursue questions on a medical agenda, and despite their being elderly and often having specific ill-health concerns to divulge, we find that a systematically phatic orientation is integrated into very many of their initial responses. Interviewees find many overlapping strategic means to hold back, at least initially, the full force of their negative health experiences and to mitigate the face threat (to themselves and their hearers) that they entail. These twin processes – of suspension and relational foregrounding – are ones that are central in defining phatic talk, as we argued earlier.

At the same time, any claims about preference organization (in the sense of Sacks’s and other conversation analysts’ use of the term) as it relates to the patterning of responses to HAY? – but also, we think, elsewhere – need to be circumspect. It is clear from the existing conversation analysis literature on preference structure (e.g., Sacks 1987, and the four chapters on this topic in Atkinson & Heritage 1984) that (1) conversation analysis sets its sights (and very explicitly in Sacks 1987:58) on decontextualized conversation and its inherent “mechanisms”; (2) claims are often made about preferred sequences without systematic consideration of contrary instances; and mainly (3) the notion of preference itself needs to be explained further in social and relational terms – that is, why do social actors (when they do) respect or ignore preference rules?

In the context of a putative preference for nonnegativity in response to HAY? and referring to the points just listed:

1. We have evidence in data from geriatric medical consultations that we are now examining that, at certain points in a consultation, participants who may well have shown such a preference early in the encounter do orient to doctors’ HAY?-type questions nonphatically later on. That is,
there is some sort of agreement (by no means uniform or simple to identify) as to when HAY? is intended to elicit the telling of symptoms, problems, and so forth, and when it is therefore appropriate to respond with medical disclosures. So, whatever preference there might be, it is only apparent at certain junctures in an interaction (perhaps typically early on). Preference is established, if at all, contextually.

2. The present article reports some instances where there clearly is no acknowledged preference to be nonnegative (see the section of Unqualified Negative Responses), even in the first turn of the interview. Hence, we would not want to treat a preference for phatic response to HAY? as endemic in the mechanism of (all) conversation. Also, the Sacks (1975) chapter on lying gives us no reason to believe that he himself felt that positive responses to HAY? are always or intrinsically preferred to negative ones. Rather, he gave a relatively contextualized account that recognizes different truth conditions (is a respondent feeling “lousy” or “fine”? and different perceptions of appropriateness (is the questioner someone to whom troubles are properly disclosable?).

3. We agree with Brown and Levinson (1987:38) that what have been claimed as preference-ordered sequences are better explained in terms of facework. So, to the extent that some elderly interviewees resist giving initially negative self-appraisals in response to HAY? it is probably because the unloading of personal medical troubles (e.g.) is face-threatening to both parties. But as we have argued elsewhere in relation to troubles telling (Coupland et al. 1991:127ff.), there are some elderly people for whom other priorities (e.g., felt indignation or bitterness or a desire to disclose cathartically) supercede the need to respect face needs. A medical context would again alter the predictable weighting of face threats in telling personal troubles or ailments.

In any case, we are far from claiming that responses in the interview data are themselves phatic. For the most part, these responses are systematically ambiguous, as respondents generally refuse to commit themselves to single, global self-appraisals. Rather, they tend to opt for multiply qualified statements and hedges and rapidly shifting judgments of their own well-being. This may simply be because, contrary to what Sacks explicitly claimed, “how we are” is itself not amenable to summarizing or even to knowing in any rational terms, in youth let alone in old age. But just as importantly, respondents often seem to need to leave the degree of (in Fawcett’s term) their “obliqueness” unclear, hovering between the conventional and the factual. As we discussed earlier, this very indeterminacy may be the hallmark of phatic communion and the key to its social utility.

A mode of discourse through which we are sanctioned to behave formulaically and yet meaningfully, veridically and yet not absolutely so, will have unique bridging potential – relationally and interactionally. In the interviews
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we examined, most elderly volunteers were able to embark on accounts of their (usually negative) experiences of health and health care while still to an extent respecting the potentially ritualized nature of the initial question they were asked. We have tapped into rather complex discourse processes for negotiating phaticity that we can only presume will be even more elaborate in more neutral social situations.

We think that the more general question of how phatic and transactional priorities are merged in, for example, service encounters and institutional settings is one worth pursuing. Even in relation to HAY? utterances, it will be of interest (in aspects of our current work that we referred to earlier) to see what use medical professionals make of would-be phatic openings in consultations and how forms and contexts of elicitation moves, and what follows them, achieve phatic and nonphatic goals. Again, what sociolinguistic resources do practitioners have for fulfilling relational goals during medical episodes? Ragan (1991) has recently shown how nurse practitioners can use verbal play to this effect during gynecological exams. Quint (1965) found that many nurses tended to make small talk the sole focus of their conversations with patients, steering clear of talk about medical issues and associated problems (see also West & Frankel 1991).

These questions impinge directly on caregiver–patient relationships and the political issue of whether medical and other caring episodes can and should achieve "interpersonal" or "social" as well as professional goals (Fisher 1991). In gerontological studies, for example, it is widely held to be necessary to move from symptom-based treatment to holistic care of older people (Giles, Coupland, & Wiemann 1990). This ideology requires practitioners to blend medical and relational concerns, and implementing it has much to do with sociolinguistic skills and strategies. We would like to think that this is one of the more fruitful potential arenas in which Malinowski's original concept of phatic communion could be put to work in the future.

NOTES

1. Several people have contributed to the development of the perspective we take in this article and to the gathering of the data on which the empirical sections are based. These include Karen Grainger, Karen Atkinson, Karen Henwood, and Howard Giles. Gathering the interview data we draw on later in the article was possible through an Economic and Social Research Council award to Howard Giles and Nikolas Coupland (grant 00220602).

2. Within opening phases, for example, Laver (1974) identified (1) establishing mutual eye contact, (2) exchange of (nonvocal) gestures of greeting or acknowledgment, (3) assuming facial expressions of attention, (4) reaching the appropriate proximity for talk, (5) exchange of conventional contact gestures (shaking hands, kissing, etc.), (6) taking up mutual bodily orientation, and (7) the exchange of stereotyped linguistic symbols.


4. Cultural norms for the management of phatic sequences in fact appear to vary quite dramatically. As one example, we can speculatively identify a marked preference for exuberant,
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positive affect in greetings among middle-class, white (perhaps particularly female) students on North American university campuses and contrast this with a generalized United Kingdom student or nonstudent norm.

5. We should again note that even in Western Anglo contexts, there is clear variation in the normativeness of HAY?. Service encounters (other than the most cursory) on the west coast of the United States appear to require HAY? or one of its variants as a first move by the server, whereas similar encounters in the United Kingdom do not open with HAY? Moreover, the giving of HAY? and its response do have an affect on relational development, however routinized it may appear. For example, having been through a HAY? exchange in a U.S. west coast grocery store seems to predict more extensive interpersonal interacting between servers and their customers on future occasions. There is a danger in strongly relativistic interpretations that assume that different cultural norms are necessarily functionally equivalent.

6. We have reported patterns of age disclosure in this corpus as part of another article (see Coupland, Coupland, & Giles 1989).

REFERENCES

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