

PHATIC COMMUNICATION IN ONLINE ENGLISH CLASS DISCUSSIONS THROUGH FACEBOOK COMMENTS

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Abstract

Phatic communication refers to small talks that aim to form ties of personal union between people or the speakers. Especially in this digital age, phatic communication is somehow still used. This research aims to uncover the kinds and functions of phatic communication used by Indonesian students who have been doing online classes through Facebook, responding to their classmates' material presentations, and having discussions in the comment column. This current study employs the qualitative method with the document analysis technique. The data of this recent study is the phatic communication used by students during the online course through Facebook, and the data was examined through document analysis techniques from the students' Facebook comments activity in the form of words, phrases, clauses, and sentences related to phatic expressions. Moreover, the data was analyzed through the following steps: 1) labeling the related data; 2) classifying the data into its types and functions; 3) interpreting the data findings; and 4) drawing conclusions. The study's main finding is the appearance of phatic expressions, for instance, greeting, thankfulness, compliment, apology, encouragement, and wishing to each other. As the typical conversation is made online through social media platforms such as Facebook, we suggest that some language or conversation styles like abbreviations, non-standard spelling, and *emojis* have also appeared.

Keywords: Phatic communication, phatic communion, phatic expression, discourse analysis

INTRODUCTION

Phatic communication expresses vital information about the desires and wants of the interlocutors. It creates and keeps a friendly and enjoyable environment between interlocutors. Malinowski (1936) suggested that "*Phatic communion serves to establish bonds of personal union between people brought together by the mere need of companionship and does not serve any purpose of communicating ideas.*" In other words, he argued that

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phatic communication does not convey information but rather to show some politeness or to keep the conversation going. Politeness and phatic communication, which is commonly known as small talk are closely related as they are concerned with various social relationships (Fadhil, 2022). Phaticity is an attribute of signs that is intended to create or maintain a relationship (Zuckerman, 2022). Thus, phatic communication is essential in preventing communication barriers (Widiana et al., 2020). To preserve companionship among people, communication needs to be maintained either when meeting in person and through digital tools. Nowadays, phatic communication does not only appear in a conversation during a physical meeting. It can also occur in a formal or informal setting, and the participants' relationship can be close or remote (Thamrin & Gani, 2020). With technology integration into daily lives, a conversation could happen in writing through media such as phone texting or social media comments, where people now invest most of their social lives. A significant amount of status updates including comments can be classified as 'small talk.' Thus, this research aims to uncover the kinds and functions of phatic communication used by Indonesian students who have been doing online classes through Facebook in which all conversation is done in English.

Phatic communications were found to create, preserve, get closer and friendlier, and break an uncomfortable silence. Their intentions include greeting, addressing, apologizing, welcoming, rejecting, agreeing, and complimenting (Elfiondri et al., 2019). The importance and function of phatic communication in colloquial utterances are to show solidarity and friendship, build a good relationship, and provide convenience (Mawadda, 2021). In addition, four functions of phatic utterances suggested by Purnamasari et al. (2015) are for breaking the silence, making small talk, keeping the conversation going, and voicing solidarity. As phatic communication is considered politeness in a conversation, someone who talks in daily conversation without involving phatic communication can be assumed to be an impolite person who doesn't know how to socialize with others properly within the community. Therefore, the current study is conducted since it is also interesting to find out whether phatic communication also appears in online written communication. This research is trying to fill the gap between the previous studies, which focused more on face-to-face interaction to observe phatic expressions. Instead, this study is describing the socio-technological aspects of dynamic communication in this digital era that could affect the formation of phatic communication, which can be seen as the novelty of this study. The result of this study will also contribute to the related scientific study regarding someone's attitude toward using written online phatic expressions, whether it is changed or improved. This current research is projected to answer some questions related to the kinds of English phatic expression used by

the students in the discussion, the functions and intentions of phatic communication used by the students, and how an online platform could affect the production of phatic communication among students.

Phatic communion is also known as phatic speech, phatic communication, phatic language, social tokens, small talk, and chit-chat. The term “*phatic communion*” was initiated by the anthropologist Malinowski (1923), and it then showed up in “*The Meaning of Meaning*” by C.K. Ogden and I.A. Richards. He described phatic communication as “*A type of speech in which a mere exchange of words creates ties of the union*” that the function is merely sociability and usually formulated in greeting. Furthermore, Coupland et al. (1992) suggested that phatic communication is similarly formed as in small talk. Thus, stating compliments and giving directions can function as phatic communication. Even though phatic communication is considered small talk, it cannot be described as meaningless since the messages in phatic implicate recognition, intimacy, and sociability (Ashidiq & Hum, 2022). The principal aim of phatic communication is a brief conversation between the communicators on subjects that are not straightforwardly related to the primary information about the goal of the conversation to maintain the communication (Nizomiddinovna, 2021).

Regarding the structure, phatic form is divided from which the smallest unit to the larger one. A minor form of phatic communication is **Phatic Particles and Words** that appear at the beginning, middle, or end of a sentence. They have different functions in the conversation. For instance, “*hey*”, “*oops*”, “*ouch*”, “*gee*”, “*oh*”, “*ooh*”, “*ugh*”, “*eh*”, “*yo!*”, “*wow*” “*brr*”, “*sh*”, “*yippie*”, “*hmm*”, “*my*”, “*yup*”, “*ha*”, “*huh*”, and “*nope*” are among the phatic particles that are usually used in an informal situation. Meanwhile, a larger form of phatic communication is **Phatic Phrases** that can initiate salutations and conclude relationships between the speaker and the interlocutor. (a) Greetings. For example, “*Good morning!*”, “*Hi, how are you?*”, “*It’s a pleasure to meet you*”, “*Goodbye*”; (b) Thankfulness. These phatic expressions are such as “*Thanks*”, “*Thank you*”, and so on; (c) Condolences. i.e. “*I’m sorry for your lost*”; (d) To attract attention, “*Excuse me!*”; (e) To show surprise, “*Oh my gosh!*”; (f) When the speaker gets a personal offer, “*If God’s willing*”; (g) To show gratitude / feeling grateful, “*Praise the Lord*”; (h) Can’t think of what to say next in phatic communication can be expressed with, “*you know*” or “*What is it?*” (Halomoan, 2022). Phatic communication aims to assist the speaker in encountering a smooth conversation and maintaining existing relationships.

The function of phatic function is different according to its appearance in the following phases (Ashidiq & Hum, 2022): (a) **Opening Phase**, in which to initiate a conversation in the first meeting by making small talk. It relaxes the situation by easing the

tension between the speaker and the listener, helps neutralize silence's potential hostility, and preserve their social interaction continuously i.e "Hi, how are you?" and "It's a nice holiday, isn't it?" (b) **Medial Phase**, in which to keep the conversation going with the use of some markers to shift the conversation topic, for example, "*well*". Consider the following example:

A: "*Congratulations on your graduation.*"

B: "*I appreciate you coming to my graduation.*"

A: "*Well... Your graduation gown is lovely.*"

(c) **Closing Phase**, to conclude or end the conversation and by using phatic communication can avoid offending the conversation partner. For instance, "*I'd like to talk to you, but I'm afraid I have to leave now.*" In conclusion, the function of phatic communication plays a significant function in a conversation. They aim to strengthen unity bonds among those who interact with one another through small talk. Jumanto (2014) also suggested that the function of phatic communication serves in various context of conversations such as to break the silence, begin a conversation, make small talk, make gossips, keep the conversation going, express solidarity, empathy, friendship, respect, and politeness, also to create harmony and comfort.

METHODOLOGY

The researcher employed qualitative method with the document analysis technique in this study. The qualitative method is considered suitable since it enables this research to provide a better understanding and an in-depth finding on how phatic communication is used and what functions are grounded in accordance with the use of social media platforms such as Facebook. Through existing and developing notions, qualitative study is determined by the yearning to describe social behavior and thought (Yin, 2016). It meets the requirement that this study's data were interpreted into a thorough description in such language research. The data for this current study is the phatic communication used by students. By using purposive sampling to get the research participants, the researchers chose 18 master's students from one of the Islamic State Universities in Jakarta. Having said that, by the time the research is conducted, most of these students have just known each other for the reason that they are new college friends and they haven't met each other before because they are joining the class online due to the pandemic. The researchers presumed that their bonding and relationship are less strong. Hence, that could raise the attitude of politeness in their new relationship as college mates. Furthermore, since this study is not measuring any kinds of skills, the instrument that is used here is a type of non-test instrument, which is text documentation, where the researchers took note of all related data that will be needed in the study. The

researchers have been doing direct observation of the students while they are attending the CLT (communicative language teaching) course and the LTA (language testing and assessment) course online. The two courses were conducted through Facebook during the second semester of the students' encounters with the program in the first half of 2022.

The course required the students to take turns making a video presentation regarding their research about language testing and assessment and then uploading the video to the Facebook group page of the course. Meanwhile, their classmates responded by asking questions or giving additional information in the comment section. Any comments that contain phatic expressions from the students on the Facebook page where the two courses are conducted are considered the data for this current study. The researchers obtained the data by collecting and noting all comments associated with phatic expressions. After that, all of the sentences that contain phatic expressions are sorted based on the function of phatic communication. The data of the research was then examined through document analysis techniques from the students' Facebook comments activity in the form of words, phrases, clauses, and sentences related to phatic expressions to respond to their classmates' material presentation, where the researchers conducted the following steps in analyzing the data: 1) labeling data containing phatic communication; 2) classifying data into phatic expressions, types of phatic expressions, and phatic expression functions; 3) theory-based interpretation of data findings; and 4) drawing conclusions.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section displays the data of this study, which is all phatic communication used by the students during the online courses. The data was taken from the students' Facebook comments activity while responding to their classmates' posted material presentations during two courses that were conducted through Facebook. In each course, three meetings were done through the use of Facebook, so the data was compiled from six meetings in the two courses. Then the phatic expressions that had been compiled were sorted and classified in the form of words, phrases, and sentences.

Types of Phatic Expression and Phatic Function

Even though they address similar meanings, phatic expressions can be communicated differently. Regarding the context of the lesson in the related course as the research setting, it is found that students produce phatic expressions to respond to their classmates' video

presentations of the related materials. Without prior notice, phatic expressions were also found in the subsequent encounter when the presenters responded to questions or additional information they received from the video presentations they had made and uploaded previously. Based on the research findings with a total of 124 chat messages categorized as phatic communication, it has been evident that students were communicating a lot of phatic expressions for greeting, thanking, complimenting, apologizing, encouraging, and wishing each other. The phatic expressions that have been found serve some functions, as follows:

1. Greetings

Students initiated the comments in responding to the video presentation of their classmates with greeting expressions. Some common phrases such as ***“Hi,” “Hello,”*** and sometimes followed by the addressed name, ***“Hi, there,” or “Hello guys,”*** have been used the most. However, similar expressions with non-standard English spelling are also found; even so, those expressions have the same function as greeting someone. For instance, ***“Hy,” “Hii,” “Haii,” “Helloww,” “Hallo,” and “Haloo.”*** In addition, a few students also used Islamic greetings such as ***“Assalamualaiku”*** and replied with ***“Walaikumusslam”*** by the other students.

2. Thankfulness

Almost in all of the students' comments, this becomes the most used phatic expression by the students. They express their thankfulness for several situations, such as: (a) doing the presentation to explain the targeted materials; (b) posing questions; (c) answering questions; (d) giving suggestions; (e) giving additional information; (f) correcting; (g) giving encouragement. In addition, the kinds of thankfulness expressions that they use are ***“thanks,” “thank you,” “thank you very much,” “thanks for..,” “many thanks for...,” “thank you for...,” “I really appreciate your kind words,”*** or sometimes using abbreviation such as, ***“tq so much for...,”*** and ***“thank u.”***

3. Compliment

Among 18 students joining the courses, they were always eager to give compliment to different presenters in all six meeting conducted online through Facebook. Several compliment expressions are usually stated following their thankfulness. For instance, ***“thanks for the great explanation,” “thanks for your nice explanation”, “thanks for your great presentation”, “thanks for such a wonderful presentation”, “thank you for the fantastic presentation”, “it was such a great presentation”, “it’s a great explanation from yours”, “(it’s a) very good presentation”, “thanks for the amazing presentation”, “it’s a very amazing***

presentation supported with a short tutorial there”, *“thank you for the excellent presentation”*, *“thank you for your nice explanation”*, *“it’s (an) interesting title”*, *“very interesting presentation”*, *“... presentation, it significantly goes to the roots. It is amazing”*. Other compliments related to the presentation are also expressed as in, *“thanks for your nice voice and presentation”*, and *“I love your PPT (PowerPoint presentation)”*. In addition, some presenters also give compliments to the audience of their video presentation regarding the suggestion that they received, such as, *“it’s very nice suggestion”*, *“it’s really thoughtful suggestion”*, *“thank you for the good suggestion”*.

4. Apology

Students also sometimes expressed their apology to maintain the relationship among themselves; such expressions are: *“we are sorry (that) we ...”*, *“I (am) really sorry for ...”*, *“sorry about (it)”*, *I am sorry for the late response”*.

5. Encouragement

“Go ahead” indicates that a student was encouraging their classmate to continue their study that has been presented in the related course.

6. Wishing someone good luck

The expression of wishing each other might be a way for the students to preserve their ties. They tend to say something like, “Good luck”, “I hope it will run smoothly”, or “Alright, hopefully, it will contribute to the significance of your study”.

The function of phatic communication that appears in conversation through social media, primarily written communication, is similar to oral conversation. The greeting has been very noticeable in the use of phatic communication. It usually appears to start a conversation and break the silence (Jumanto, 2014). Students expressed their greetings to initiate their comments before they continued with the main message in their responses to the video presentations, either a question or additional information. When used as a preface in daily interactions, it can open one’s heart and draw one closer to the hearer. The preface can be addressed to people who are known, want to be known, and are unknown in one community with the same language norm based on its placement in the social context. Making small talk with people, you don’t know or want to know aims to open up or start social relationships between them. This matter is referred to as the approach of social relations between speakers. The purpose of niceties activity for people who are already known, on the other hand, is solely to maintain the relationship that has been ever constructed. Greetings aimed to harmonize ties to keep and foster social relationships among

speakers (Pratita et al., 2018). In addition to the phatic function, compliments is also regarded as types of phatic communication that is aimed to establish a pleasant environment for communication (Nizomiddinovna, 2021). Phatic communication is employed to keep an excellent manner or show politeness. By then, a good relationship is maintained. Thus, the significant finding of this study is highlighted in the appearance of phatic expressions that are supported to be used even on communication platforms on the internet, such as social media networks, including Facebook which its main intention is to make people connected to each other remotely. That principle goes alongwith the function of phatic communication, which makes it still practical even in this digital era. Nowadays, the demands of online activity among people cannot be neglected since it has a huge amount of users all around the world. These social media technologies permit the transmission of ways to communicate known as 'phatic expressions': phatic posts that allow for the creation, nurturing, and maintenance of relationships and social interaction by way of non-formal conversations, online presence, and closeness (Radovanovic & Ragnedda, 2005). The cultural and media reasoning that encourages the public to stay in the context of phatic communication appears to be one that excludes the audience from genuine conversation, emaciating the audience's abilities to converse, debate, and follow and comprehend large talks (Gradinaru, 2018). In fact, online phatic communication can foster affective bonds, an awareness of connection and solidarity, and a sense of social significance.

The Effect of Social Media Platforms towards the Students' Phatic Communication

As the typical conversation on social media contains casualness, that circumstance also affects the language used by the students as social media users in their discussion on social media. The finding shows that students used some language or conversation styles in this context, such as (a) *Abbreviation*. Regarding the use of phatic expression by the students, an abbreviation is mainly found when the students were expressing their thankfulness, i.e. “tq”, which means ‘thank you’; (b) *Non-standard Spelling*. Students are also found using non-standard spelling in some of their phatic expressions as in ways of greeting, for instance, “hellooww”, “hy”, etc.; (c) *The use of emojis*. Different emojis, which are also considered part of the phatic expression, also have been used by the students in their comments. The emojis appear many times, including when they are greeting, thanking, complimenting, encouraging, or wishing good luck. Those emojis are such as: 🤗, 🙏, 😊, ❤️, 👍, 🧡, 😄, 🍀, and ✨. Phatic communication used in social media, primarily in written communication, has been transformed into what so-called language of social media, which features some distinctions such as the use of non-standard English spelling, abbreviations, and emojis. Non-

standard English spelling has been commonly found in students' online communication. It usually happens due to the influence of their native language features. Because some phatic types are attributes of non-standard oral versions, most phatic kinds are found in non-standard sentences that incorporate many regional components or local accents (Washila & Triwinarti, 2019). Furthermore, because of social media, the use of shortenings has skyrocketed, introducing a new spelling style into the English language, and they are used mainly by the younger generations (Abbasova, 2019). Shortenings such as abbreviations and emoticons have surpassed the language used in social media. Social media provides quicker and shorter communication using emojis and abbreviations. Abbreviations and acronyms are prominent traits of online communicative language. It is suggested that abbreviations and acronyms emerge for various reasons, including the nature of the online conversation, which is presumed to be brief and quick, and have limited space (Hassan and Hashim, 2009). According to Derks, Bos, and Von Grumbkow (2008), certain emoticons may help lessen some negative remarks or messages. Emojis are used in social media messages as a compliment to a message, to represent creativity by featuring the symbols of emojis to express their thoughts and feelings, to solidify the message, to portray a specific tone of voice, to transmit certain emotions, and to act as a politeness strategy (Stapa & Shaari, 2012).

Social media platforms like Facebook require and encourage users to take specific actions to transmit or indicate certain messages between people without straightforward utterances, such as 'likes,' comments, replies, shares, re-blogs, emoji use, and so on. These phatic posts are employed with a social function of conversational maintenance, mainly to express social connection, user relationships, and coparticipant acknowledgment (Radovanovic & Ragnedda, 2005). Emotional communication through smartphones is highlighted as an essential component of widespread paralinguistic and phatic communication that defines the exchange of memes, GIFs, "likes," and image- and video-based content (Yus, 2021). Facebook is primarily beneficial to keep existing offline relationships alive (Ellison et al., 2007; 2011) and for interpersonal communication among friends and family, with less emphasis on sharing information from conventional sources (Bastard et al., 2017). People on Facebook are motivated by connecting approaches to strengthen their relationships. It has also been claimed that the language employed on this social network is dominated by small talk and phatic communication (Miller, 2008). They mostly make posts merely to show their existence. Accordingly, the other users reply with comments on that particular post, which also preserves the relationship. Internet-based communication media allow for greater interaction and relationship formation.

Nevertheless, the speaker's expression throughout non-face-to-face communication cannot be seen, making it impossible to determine the actual or real expression of the speech through the comments that appear. Thus, phishing communication on Facebook has become dominant in such communication (Ambarwati et al., 2019). Other social media platforms, especially WhatsApp's various communication modalities (text and voice messages, photos, and videos), promote the phatic speech act to serve three purposes: to maintain harmony, maintain a friendship, and express sympathy (Taipale & Farinosi, 2018). It implies that online phatic expressions will continue to exist as a component of a social encounter, as social media also helps maintain existing relationships between people.

Phatic communication has somehow contributed to the development of English among the students. According to the current study, when utilized alongside social interaction, phatic communication develops a comfortable and secure class relationship, which is expected to result in more active participation and increased involvement in class (Tang et al., 2020). Since phatic communication is useful to preserve the participants relationships, it can be a good way to build a beneficial stimulus for their English development. It suggested an encouraging online classroom environment in which both the teacher and pupils were eager to engage and collaborate in the course (Cole et al., 2019; Frishy et al., 2014). In an online environment, students' English development is also influenced by some elements. Phatic communication has been shifted into the form of online communication with the rise of technology. Modern individuals, including young people, are affected by technological communication in terms of conversation behavior and communication culture. Students learn new words from the Internet and incorporate them into the language they use. Online communication also reinforces the general linguistic tendency to shorten words (text abbreviations). Simultaneously, the Internet language is a significant driver of student slang construction as well as the establishment of linguistic awareness, linguistic literacy, and linguistic competence among the students (Abramova et al., 2020). As stated in the previous part of this study, many previous studies have suggested that phatic communication does have a social function in the English language. Nevertheless, phatic communication has also been seen as useful in terms of enthusiasm for their English development.

CONCLUSION

The study's main finding is the appearance of phatic expressions, which are still used on internet communication platforms such as social media networks, particularly Facebook.

Some phatic expressions found in responding to students' presentations are, for instance, greeting, thankfulness, compliment, apology, encouragement, and wishing each other well. In conveying all of those expressions, students use different ways of forming sentences but with a similar purpose. As the typical conversation is made online through social media platforms such as Facebook, here are some language or conversation styles that the students used in this context, like abbreviations, non-standard spelling, and emojis. It implies that online phatic expressions will continue to exist as a component of a social encounter, as social media also serves to maintain existing interpersonal relationships.

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