PHATIC UTTERANCES AND THE
COMMUNICATION OF SOCIAL INFORMATION:
A RELEVANCE-THEORETIC APPROACH

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Abstract
In this paper I offer an approach to the way in which interlocutors can transmit and recover information about the politeness systems (Scollon and Scollon 1983, 1995) in which they are interacting by means of phatic utterances. Based on the Relevance-Theoretic notions of strong and weak implicatures (Sperber and Wilson 1986, 1995; Wilson and Sperber 2002) and on previous works on phatic utterances (Padilla Cruz 2004a, 2004b, 2004c), I argue that the speaker can communicate that information either strongly or weakly, and that the hearer can recover it as strong or weak implicatures that he can combine with other contextual assumptions in order to obtain contextual effects because of the expectations of relevance created by those utterances. Finally, I also include some suggestions about further research in intercultural pragmatics.

1. Perspectives on Phatic Utterances

Since Malinowski introduced phatic communion as “[…] a type of speech in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words” (1923: 478), many of the linguists who have dealt with phatic
communion have only repeated this author’s definition of phatic communion. This has been the case of Lyons (1968) or Silva (1980), who have only emphasised that phatic utterances contribute to the creation and maintenance of a feeling of solidarity and well-being between interlocutors. Other authors, such as Hudson (1980), Cheepen (1988) or Schneider (1988) have focused on the narrative features of phatic communion. Others, such as Abercrombie (1956, 1998), Coulmas (1981), Leech (1974) or Turner (1973), have highlighted its defective nature as far as the transmission of referential information is concerned, and have argued that the propositional content of phatic utterances is completely unimportant: they are utterances designed more to accommodate and acknowledge hearers than to carry an authentic message. As Coupland, Coupland and Robinson conclude, these authors share a common viewpoint:

Phatic communion is taken to designate some sort of minimalist communicative practice, though along several possible dimensions. The ‘mereness’ of phatic communion […] by virtue of its low interest value, low informative value, low relevance, perhaps also its low trustworthiness, presupposes an alternative mode of ‘true’ or ‘authentic’ discourse from which phatic talk deviates. (1992: 210)

In fact, this common viewpoint seems to have derived from Malinowski’s (1923) distinction between language used as an instrument of reflection and language used as a mode of action. With this distinction, as Tracy and Naughton correctly point out, the author strengthened the idea that “[…] talk was either giving information (‘communication’), or doing something social (‘phatic communion’)” (2000: 71). This underlying idea has been present in our linguistic tradition in the works of some authors who have distinguished between two main functions of language: representative and expressive (Bühler 1934), referential and emotive (Jakobson 1960), ideational and interpersonal (Halliday 1973), descriptive and social-expressive (Lyons 1977), or transactional and interactional (Brown and Yule 1983). Following Coupland and Yläne McEwen, it can be said that both Malinowski’s (1923) original distinction between language used as an instrument of reflection or as a mode of action and these authors’ linguistic functions “[…] have always
carried the inappropriate implication that relational talk is peripheral and incidental [...]” (2000: 179). Thus, as Coupland criticises, “Real talk is talk that ‘gets the stuff done’, where ‘stuff’ does not include ‘relational stuff’. Within this ideology, sociality is marginalised as a ‘small’ concern, and language for transacting business and other commercial or institutional instrumentalities is foregrounded” (2000: 7-8).

Within the framework of Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson 1986, 1995; Wilson and Sperber 2002), Žegarac (1998) and Žegarac and Clark (1999a) have recently proposed an analysis of phatic utterances in accordance with the main postulates of this pragmatic model. Therefore, in the next section I will summarise the most important ideas of Relevance Theory and introduce Žegarac (1998) and Žegarac and Clark’s (1999a) work.

2. The Relevance-Theoretic Analysis of Phatic Utterances

2.1. A brief outline of Relevance Theory

As its name indicates, Sperber and Wilson’s theory is based on relevance, a feature of utterances that makes a hearer select one particular interpretation of it out of a set of different grammatically possible interpretations (Sperber and Wilson 1986, 1995; Wilson and Sperber 2002). This feature is defined by these authors in terms of two factors:

1. Contextual effects, which can be the strengthening or contradiction of previously held assumptions when these interact with newly presented information, or contextual implications, which are new assumptions that can only be derived from the joint interaction of both old and new information.

2. Processing/cognitive effort, which is the effort of memory needed to construct and select a mental context in which to process utterances.

Therefore, an interpretation of an utterance is optimally relevant if its processing yields many contextual effects and the level of cognitive effort the hearer has to invest in order to obtain them is low. Starting from this
definition of relevance, Sperber and Wilson (1995: 260) also propose two principles that govern utterance interpretation:

a) **Cognitive Principle of Relevance**: human cognition is oriented towards the maximisation of relevance.

b) **Communicative Principle of Relevance**: every act of ostensive communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance.

In turn, Wilson (1999: 136) suggests a *relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure*, which directs hearers to follow the interpretative path that requires the least cognitive effort when testing their different interpretations of a particular utterance and to stop when their expectations of relevance are satisfied, i.e. when they think they have achieved enough contextual effects that offset their cognitive effort.

2.2. *Phatic Utterances within Relevance Theory*

As mentioned above, Žegarac (1998) and Žegarac and Clark (1999a) have approached phatic utterances following Sperber and Wilson’s (1986, 1995, 2002) theoretical postulates and have accordingly claimed that utterances that are interpreted as phatic do not achieve an optimal level of relevance because the assumptions they make manifest to the hearer are already manifest in both interlocutors’ *cognitive environment*¹. The processing of an utterance that is interpreted as phatic results in very few or no contextual effects at all, as in the case of (1) in a cognitive environment where it is mutually manifest to both the speaker and the addressee that the bus they are waiting for is delayed, or (2) in a cognitive environment where it is mutually manifest to both interlocutors that it is going to rain because it is really cloudy²:

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¹ According to Sperber and Wilson (1986, 1995), the notion of *manifestness* refers to the possibility that an individual has a mental representation of a particular fact or assumption, and that of *cognitive environment* refers to the whole set of assumptions of which he can have mental representations.

² See Nicolle and Clark (1998) for a Relevance-Theoretic analysis of other issues related to phatic utterances.
The bus seems to be delayed.

It is going to rain.

Therefore, Žegarac (1998) and Žegarac and Clark (1999a) conclude that the relevance of phatic utterances does not reside on their propositional content but on the act of communication itself. In other words, phatic utterances achieve an optimal level of relevance because of the speaker’s communicative intention, i.e. her intention to make manifest that she wants to speak with the hearer.

This analysis of phatic utterances has been criticised severely by Ward and Horn (1999), who think that it reduces a rather complex communicative phenomenon to the mere indication of the speaker’s willingness to keep the interactive contact with the hearer. In my opinion, Žegarac (1998) and Žegarac and Clark’s (1999a) conception of phatic utterances might stem from a belief in the existence of a type of discourse which is purely informative and makes manifest assumptions that the hearer can relate to others he has previously stored in his cognitive mechanism. This type of discourse would yield many contextual effects, whereas phatic utterances would result in very few or no contextual effects at all, so they would not be informative discourse.

However, the use of any utterance in conversation is determined by contextual factors of an undoubtedly social nature, such as the interlocutors’ relative power (P), their social distance (D) or the rank of imposition (I) of the act they want to perform, as Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) showed in their seminal work on politeness. In addition to these factors, other authors (e.g. Brown and Fraser 1979, Brown and Gilman 1989, Coupland, Grainger and Coupland 1988, Garcés Conejos 1995, Gómez Morón 1997, Ide 1989, Kopytko 1995, Spencer-Oatey 1993, 1996, 2000) have argued and demonstrated that the affect (A) interlocutors feel towards each other also influences their communicative behaviour. Therefore, I think that it is rather reasonable to state that phatic utterances may make manifest assumptions about these factors, and that those assumptions may interact with others the hearer entertains.

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3 See Žegarac and Clark (1999b) for a reply.
4 See Gómez Morón (1998) or Holmes (2000) for a very interesting reflection on different discourse types and the difficulty when differentiating pure categories of discourse.
thus resulting in contextual effects. What must be solved now is how the speaker can communicate those assumptions and how the hearer can recover and use them in his cognitive processes.

As has been seen in this section, Žegarac (1998) and Žegarac and Clark’s (1999a) analysis involves a backwards movement towards previous characterisations of phatic utterances. But it also ignores other contributions about the social importance of these utterances. For that reason, I will review research that addresses that issue in the next section.

3. The social importance of phatic utterances

Reacting against some of the studies mentioned in the first section of this work, Laver (1974/1975, 1981) was probably the first author to defend that phatic utterances are extremely important linguistic devices for social interaction because they convey indexical information about the interlocutors’ social roles. Apart from suggesting that these utterances create a working consensus about some aspects of the interlocutors’ social identity, and that they have three main functions at the opening phase of a conversation – propitiatory, exploratory and initiatory – this author distinguished two basic types of phatic utterances: those with neutral reference (3, 4), i.e. utterances about the spatio-temporal setting of a conversation, and those with personal reference (5, 6), i.e. utterances about either the speaker or the hearer:

(3) Nice day for a picnic.
(4) Terrible week this week.
(5) Beautiful blouse!
(6) My arms aren’t made for those parcels. (Adapted from Laver, 1974/1975)

Moreover, Laver (1974/1975, 1981) analysed the use of these utterances by both British English and American English speakers and established certain patterns of usage. Thus, according to this author, both neutral and personal phatic utterances are used when interlocutors have a solidarity relationship. If their relationship is not a solidarity one, the
safest option is to use a neutral phatic utterance, and if there are status differences between them, the individual of lower status who addresses another of higher status may use *self-oriented* but not *other-oriented* phatic utterances, and the individual of higher status who addresses another of lower status may use other-oriented and avoid self-oriented phatic utterances.

Following Laver’s (1974/1975, 1981) work and Scollon and Scollon’s (1983, 1995) *politeness systems*, I have proposed elsewhere (Padilla Cruz 2004a, 2004b, 2004c) that phatic utterances can achieve an optimal level of relevance because of the information they can convey about the politeness system in which interlocutors carry out social interaction. In my opinion, the three possible social relationships between interlocutors noted by Laver (1974/1975, 1981) correspond to the three politeness systems described by Scollon and Scollon (1983, 1995)\(^5\), which are determined by the value achieved by the contextual variables \(P\) and \(D\) introduced by Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987):

a) *Solidarity politeness system* \([-P, -D]\), which is characterised by no difference between the interlocutors in terms of their relative power and social closeness.

b) *Deference politeness system* \([-P, +D]\), in which there is no power difference between interlocutors but their social distance is high, so that they regard each other as equals but treat each other at a distance.

c) *Hierarchical politeness system* \([+P, +/-D]\), which establishes an asymmetrical relationship between interlocutors because one of them has more power than the other.

Furthermore, following Sperber’s (1996) work on culture – which this author envisages as a set of representations and metarepresentations about different aspects of the reality in which individuals live – I have suggested that interlocutors have a cultural or sociopragmatic knowledge of politeness systems and of the behaviour that is expected in them in certain communicative situations (Padilla Cruz 2004a, 2004b, 2004c). This knowledge must constitute an important part of the context in which they process some linguistic stimuli, such as phatic utterances. Besides,

\(^5\) See Padilla Cruz (2004a, forthcoming) for a revision and reformulation of Scollon and Scollon’s (1983, 1995) original politeness systems in which I also include the variable \(A\).
following Unger’s (2001) Relevance-Theoretic analysis of genre – according to which genre is specific information that feeds human inferential processes and contributes to the realisation of particular inferences – I have also proposed that that cultural or sociopragmatic knowledge about the interlocutors’ different politeness systems and the usage of phatic utterances may also interact with other mutually manifest assumptions so that interlocutors can carry out certain inferences that make phatic utterances optimally relevant (Padilla Cruz 2004a, 2004b, 2004c).

Accordingly, let us imagine the following situation: a speaker who happens to be a student is going to interact with one of her teachers. In that situation it will be manifest to her that the teacher will have expert power over her (French and Raven 1959) due to her knowledge or experience in the field she teaches; that power is psychological (Falbo and Peplau 1980, Garcés Conejos 1995). Besides, it will also be manifest that there is a certain degree of social distance, for, although they may have had quite a rather frequent contact in class, they have not met privately before and, as a consequence, do not know each other well, do not know whether they share common viewpoints, etc. The student could combine those assumptions with other cultural metarepresentations about the type of social relationship that they may establish and conclude that they are going to interact in a hierarchical politeness system:

(7) a. I’m a student of Pragmatics. (Manifest assumption)
    b. I’m going to talk to Deirdre Wilson. (Manifest assumption)
    c. She is a well-known researcher in Pragmatics. (Encyclopaedic assumption)
    d. Researchers in a field may have more power than beginners because of their expertise. (Cultural assumption)
    e. I’m going to talk to a person who has more power than me. (Inference)
    f. I have not met her before. (Encyclopaedic assumption)
    g. People who have not met before may be socially distant because they do not know each other. (Cultural assumption)

6 See Spencer-Oatey (1993, 1996) for a revision of the components of D.
h. I'm going to talk to a person who is socially distant. (Inference)

i. People who are socially distant and unequal in terms of power may have a hierarchical relationship. (Cultural assumption)

j. I’m going to establish or maintain a hierarchical politeness system with Deirdre Wilson. (Inference)

In addition to this, the student can combine the conclusions she draws with other cultural metarepresentations referring to the type of phatic utterances that she may resort to depending on the politeness system she perceives, as shown below:

(8) a. There is a hierarchical politeness system between my hearer and me because she has more power than me. (Inference)

b. In a hierarchical politeness system, if my hearer has more power than me, I will have to use a self-oriented phatic token to begin a conversation. (Cultural assumption)

c. I may use a self-oriented phatic token to begin this conversation. (Inference)

With these examples I have only illustrated that a speaker perceives the existence of a politeness systems – in this case, a hierarchical system – as the result of an inferential process in which she combines assumptions about $P$ and $D$ that are manifest in her cognitive environment with her cultural metarepresentations about social interaction. This perception influences her linguistic behaviour, since she will select a particular type of phatic utterance in accordance with her cultural metarepresentations, which contain information about the type of phatic utterance she should use. Needless to say, the fact that I have used and presented in these examples a sequence of assumptions should not imply that the speaker retrieves and combines those very assumptions in the same way. In fact, as Sperber and Wilson (1997) explain, individuals may have access to rather diverse assumptions simultaneously, widen their interpretative context in different directions, include other assumptions and obtain additional assumptions as a consequence of the inferences they carry out.
As mentioned above, the selection of the form and content of utterances is determined by the speaker’s assessment of the contextual variables P, D, I and A intervening in interaction. Therefore it is logical to postulate that by means of a particular utterance the speaker may communicate information about her assessment of those variables. This information will be used by the hearer in order to specify the politeness system the speaker wishes to create, maintain or modify with him. So it is now necessary to account for the way in which the speaker can communicate that information and how the hearer can recover it.

4. Transmitting social information by means of phatic utterances

In their model Sperber and Wilson (1986, 1995) portray communication as a process in which the hearer has to decode the semantic content of an utterance, which constitutes its logical form; then he has to enrich that logical form with contextual information by means of inference until he recovers the explicatures of that utterance, and finally he has to access the level of what the speaker communicates by recovering its implicatures. Implicatures are those implicit assumptions or contextual implications of an utterance that a speaker tries to make manifest to the hearer in an evident way so that he recovers an interpretation of that utterance that is optimally relevant. According to Sperber and Wilson (1995: 194), there are two types of implicatures: implicated premises and implicated conclusions.

When processing an utterance, the hearer has to recover its implicated premises using the information he has stored in his mind. The hearer will identify some assumptions as the implicatures of a particular utterance because those are the most easily accessible ones and they lead him to an interpretation of that utterance that is consistent with the principle of relevance. On the other hand, the hearer has to deduce the conclusions implicated by an utterance from its explicatures and the context. He will regard some assumptions as implicated conclusions of that utterance if he believes that the speaker might have intended him to

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7 See also Récanati (1991) and Bach (1994) for similar descriptions of communication.
derive all or some of them, so that his interpretation of that utterance is optimally relevant.

Nevertheless, Sperber and Wilson (1995: 199) underline that the implicatures of an utterance are not implicit contents that can always be identified and determined by the hearer in a precise way. In other words, the authors consider that there is no clear distinction between those assumptions that the speaker really intends to communicate implicitly and those assumptions that the hearer may recover at his own risk. This leads them to differentiate between strong and weak implicatures. The former are those assumptions the speaker intends and expects the hearer to use as implicated premises or conclusions in order to obtain an interpretation of an utterance that is optimally relevant. In order to do so, the speaker will try to increase their degree of manifestness, although the hearer may not necessarily use them in his mental computations. On the contrary, weak implicatures are those implicit assumptions that the hearer may recover and use on his own responsibility because it is not manifest to him that the speaker has intended him to use them in his inferential computations. Therefore, Sperber and Wilson (1995: 200) conclude that the hearer may run the risk of recovering and using some implicit contents in certain communicative situations that are not among the assumptions constituting the speaker’s informative intention. The weaker the implicatures he recovers, the more indeterminate the speaker’s informative intention.

Consequently, following this distinction, I would like to suggest that with phatic utterances the speaker can make more strongly or weakly manifest to the hearer a set of assumptions about their power and social distance. In turn, the hearer may use those assumptions as implicated premises or conclusions in order to infer information about the politeness system the speaker intends to establish, maintain or modify with him. Those assumptions must be part of the speaker’s informative intention, because otherwise she will not have communicated them, and must interact with the hearer’s cultural metarepresentations and other assumptions manifest to him, so that the processing of phatic utterances results in contextual effects that contribute to their relevance.

Thus, in the same communicative situation as in the example of the previous section, with an utterance such as (9) the student can make
manifest in a strong or weak way to the hearer assumptions such as those in (10):

(9) I find Relevance Theory very interesting.
(10) a. I use a self-oriented phatic utterance because I perceive that you have more power than me.
    b. I use a self-oriented phatic utterance because I perceive that we do not know each other very well.

The more manifest those assumptions are, the more certain the speaker will be that the professor will recover the information she intends to communicate to her about the politeness system she wants to establish, maintain or modify. On the contrary, if those assumptions are weakly communicated, the speaker’s informative intention will be more indeterminate and, therefore, it would be rather likely that the professor does not recover that information. In spite of this, the professor may also resort to different contextual sources in order to determine the speaker’s informative intention in a more precise way – encyclopaedic or factual information, assumptions made manifest by the physical setting in which the conversation takes place, non-verbal behaviour, biographical knowledge about the interlocutor, mutual knowledge, previous utterances in the conversation, and other linguistic clues (Yus Ramos 2000, 2000-2001). The more contextual sources he resorts to, the lesser the probability that he misunderstands the speaker.

Sperber and Wilson (1986, 1995) sustain that a speaker aiming at an optimal level of relevance can leave implicit as many contents as she foresees the hearer will be able to recover in return to a reasonable level of cognitive effort. In the case of phatic utterances, I think that the speaker may communicate in an implicit way assumptions about both interlocutors’ social distance and power if she presupposes that the hearer’s cultural knowledge about the way in which social interaction is carried out in their sociocultural group and the contextual sources he uses will help him obtain the contextual effects she expects.

Up to here I have tried to offer an explanation about the way in which the speaker communicates social information by means of phatic utterances. But it is also necessary to account for the way in which the
hearer recovers it in order to have a more complete picture, an issue to which I turn now.

5. Recovering social information from phatic utterances

The Communicative Principle of Relevance states that every act of ostensive communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance, i.e. it guarantees that the hearer will obtain some contextual effects that offset the cognitive effort he has to invest to process utterances. As any ostensive act, a phatic utterance modifies the hearer’s cognitive environment and draws his attention towards some assumptions. Its processing will obviously require a certain level of cognitive effort that will have to be offset with enough contextual effects. According to the Communicative Principle of Relevance, the speaker will achieve an optimal level of relevance only if she selects those utterances that result in enough contextual effects. Since human cognition is oriented towards the maximisation of relevance, the speaker will not be interested in using utterances that make manifest assumptions that are already manifest in the cognitive environment of both interlocutors. For this reason, and since every utterance communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance, the hearer may have rather firm expectations that the speaker will be aiming at achieving an optimal level of relevance with phatic utterances by communicating to him information about the politeness system in which they are interacting.

The expectations of relevance generated by an utterance are about that very utterance. According to Wilson (1999: 136), the simplest procedure the hearer has to follow in order to test the presumption of optimal relevance communicated by a phatic utterance is to access its most easily accessible interpretation and verify if it achieves a level of relevance that satisfies his expectations of relevance. When doing so, he will follow the interpretative path that requires the least cognitive effort. When the hearer reaches an interpretation that satisfies his expectations of relevance, he will stop his processing because he will have recovered the interpretation of the utterance that seems relevant to him. Needless to
say, that might not be the interpretation of that utterance the speaker intended to communicate to him.

In my opinion, the hearer’s expectations of relevance when processing a phatic utterance can be very specific and be focussed on the type of utterance – neutral or personal (Laver 1974/1975, 1981) – and its content. As explained above, the speaker can have access to contextual information about the different social relationships between interlocutors, as well as about the types and content of the phatic utterances she can resort to in order to establish, maintain or modify those relationships. Information similar to that will also be available for the hearer, who will consequently adjust his expectations of relevance about phatic utterances. Due to the action of the Communicative Principle of Relevance, the assumptions provided by the hearer’s cultural knowledge will interact with the assumptions made weakly or strongly manifest by the phatic utterance he processes. Depending on his expectations of relevance, the hearer will combine both kinds of assumptions and obtain contextual effects, thus achieving an interpretation of that utterance that is consistent with the Principle of Relevance. Some of those assumptions the hearer uses will have been communicated by the speaker in a strong way, whereas others will have been communicated weakly. The stronger those assumptions are communicated, the likelier the hearer recovers the speaker’s informative intention and, therefore, the likelier he draws the correct inferences about the politeness system the speaker wishes to establish, maintain or modify with him.

Thus, with a phatic utterance such as (9) above, which does not appear to yield many contextual effects, the hearer may expand his interpretative context because of his expectations of relevance. In that contextual expansion he will access assumptions about both interlocutors’ power and social distance, cultural assumptions about social relations depending on the values of those variables (11) and will come to a conclusion about the speaker’s intention to establish a hierarchical politeness system with him (12). This makes the interpretation of a phatic utterance such as (9) consistent with the Principle of Relevance:

(11)
a. My interlocutor has said that she finds RT rather interesting.

b. It is already manifest to me and to her that she finds RT rather
interesting.
c. My interlocutor may not just want to tell me that she finds RT rather interesting.
d. My interlocutor is a student working in her MA dissertation on RT.
e. It is manifest to her that I know this.
f. I’m an expert on RT, therefore I may have more power than her because of my expertise in the field.
g. This student does not know me and I do not know her, either.
h. It is mutually manifest to her that she does not know me and that I do not know her, either.
i. Two people who do not know each other may be socially distant.
j. My interlocutor may feel that there is a hierarchical relationship between us.
k. My interlocutor has began the conversation by means of a self-oriented phatic token.
l. By means of such an utterance she may be communicating that she does not want to touch very personal topics.
m. Communicating a desire to avoid personal topics is one way to pay respect to someone of a higher status.

(12) My interlocutor may be intending to communicate her desire to establish a hierarchical politeness system with me.

Although the hearer can expand his context in many different directions adding a potentially infinite number of assumptions, his expectations of relevance will limit that expansion. In this way, a phatic utterance may achieve an optimal level of relevance. However, for the hearer to recover the information about the politeness system the speaker intended to establish, maintain or modify with him, the speaker must have the informative intention to make manifest to the hearer assumptions about that very system and, moreover, she must communicate them to him overtly. Otherwise, the hearer will not interpret correctly the phatic utterance in question.
6. Some implications for research in intercultural pragmatics

Although Žegarac (1998) and Žegarac and Clark (1999a) have proposed that phatic utterances appear to be irrelevant because their propositional content makes manifest to the hearer assumptions that are already manifest in his cognitive environment, I have argued in this paper that these utterances may achieve an optimal level of relevance because of the assumptions the speaker can communicate implicitly. The hearer may use them as strong or weak implicatures in order to relate them with other assumptions and, as a consequence, obtain contextual effects about the politeness system in which both of them are interacting. Nonetheless, in many cases those assumptions will be rather weak and the hearer will have to run the risk of using them and obtaining an interpretation that the speaker might have not intended to communicate.

Furthermore, for phatic utterances to achieve an optimal level of relevance, it is necessary that interlocutors access their cultural knowledge about the different patterns of usage of phatic utterances depending on the interlocutors’ politeness systems, since that knowledge contributes to the strengthening, contradiction or yielding of contextual implications about the politeness system that interlocutors share when it interacts with the assumptions the speaker communicates strongly or weakly. The tacit certainty that phatic utterances create expectations of relevance will lead the hearer to expand his interpretative context adding those assumptions.

However, the approach to the communication of social information by means of phatic utterances I have presented in this paper also posits some questions and points towards some directions for further research in intercultural pragmatics. Following Laver’s (1974/1975, 1981) work on the usage of these utterances in the UK and USA, it would be rather convenient to carry out empirical studies that analyse the tendencies of different interlocutors belonging to different sociocultural groups when using phatic utterances. In those studies researchers should not only focus on the factors that interlocutors perceive as exerting a determining influence on their linguistic behaviour, such as the contextual variables P, D or A, but also widen the scope of their analysis considering additional parameters such as interlocutors’ age, gender, educational level,
geographical origin, etc. Besides, interlocutors participating in those studies could be interviewed about their own intuitions regarding the particular factors that determine their linguistic behaviour, as well as their own intuitions about the effects they think they achieve when resorting to one kind or another of phatic utterances. Those studies could help researchers have access to the cultural metarepresentations underlying their linguistic behaviour and, moreover, be the starting point for the realisation of other cross-cultural studies about the similarities and differences in the patterns of usage of phatic utterances in rather diverse groups of speakers. Obviously, those studies would enrich our understanding of social interaction in different cultures and provide language teachers with valuable insights into verbal interaction that could contribute to the avoidance of undesired pragmatic failures (Thomas 1983). 

References


8 On this issue, see Padilla Cruz (2001a, 2001b, 2001c, 2002).


----- Forthcoming. Politeness systems revisited.