SHOULD TEACHERS FOCUS ON PHATIC UTTERANCES IN THE ESL CLASS?

A PRAGMATIC REFLECTION

MANUEL PADILLA CRUZ

University of Seville

Many teachers neglect phatic utterances in the ESL class and only explain the conversational phases where they typically occur, their conversational structure or possible intercultural differences. This may be due to a common and extended belief in the obviousness or mereness of such utterances. Therefore, they do not address at all the consequences that the usage of phatic utterances in English may have for social interaction in the UK and USA. Hence, the aim of this paper will be to justify from a pragmatic perspective why teachers should dedicate more time to such utterances in order to develop students' sociopragmatic competence.

Keywords: phatic utterances, politeness systems, cultural metarepresentations, sociopragmatic competence, sociopragmatic failure.

1. INTRODUCTION

In many cases, teachers do not dedicate much time in their class to phatic utterances. What they normally explain is that such utterances are characteristic of the opening and closing phases of conversations, where they take the form of a wide array of ritual speech acts that include greetings, welcomes, farewells, etc. (Edmondson and House 1981). Also, they usually mention that their occurrence may give rise to phatic sequences (Pavlidou 1994), whose structure is that of a succession of adjacency pairs (e.g. Schegloff 1972; Schegloff and Sacks 1973). Some teachers may even deal with the differences in the usage of such utterances between the L1 and the L2 in order to avoid pragmalinguistic failures (Thomas
due to the inadequate transfer of L1 routines into the L2. Finally, as regards the content of phatic utterances, teachers only tell their students that any topic whatsoever may be valid, as long as it is obvious, trivial or unimportant.

However, the usage of the different kinds of phatic utterances in the UK and USA is constrained by very specific sociological factors that determine the interlocutors’ social relationship. For this reason, such utterances achieve a crucial importance in interaction and can transmit information about social relationships. Therefore, the aim of this paper will be to argue that teachers should dedicate more time to phatic utterances in the ESL class because of the consequences that their usage may have for social interaction. Starting with a brief discussion about why teachers normally neglect such utterances, I will review some works which underline their importance for social interaction. Then, I will explain how phatic utterances can transmit information about social relationships, and conclude by drawing some implications for the ESL class.

2. Teachers’ common ideas about phatic utterances

The fact that many teachers indicate to their students that the topic of phatic utterances must necessarily refer to anything obvious or trivial stems from a traditional line of thought that has emphasised the lack of importance of their propositional content. Different authors (e.g. Abercrombie 1956, 1998; Turner 1973; Hudson 1980) have portrayed such utterances as defective, for they do not transmit referential information that can significantly improve the interlocutors’ world knowledge. This also seems to be the underlying assumption of the Relevance-Theoretic (Sperber and Wilson 1995) approach to phatic communication developed by Žegarac (1998) and Žegarac and Clark (1999). These authors suggest that
phatic utterances do not achieve an optimal level of relevance because their processing does not result in cognitive effects – strengthening, contradiction of old information or derivation of new information – which offset the cognitive effort that the hearer has to invest to interpret them. This is so because the assumptions that they make manifest are already manifest in the interlocutors’ cognitive environment. Therefore, their relevance lies in the fact that the speaker addresses the hearer and is willing to establish or maintain interactive contact.

These views of phatic utterances may justify why teachers do not devote much time to them and explain the different types of phatic utterances, how students can select their topic, whether there is any restriction on this depending on the interlocutors’ social relationship, or the consequences that this may have for social interaction. These issues have great sociopragmatic significance in the UK and USA, and have been analysed by some pragmatics, so I turn to their works in the following section.

3. TYPES AND USAGE OF PHATIC UTTERANCES

Most works on phatic communion distinguish between phatic utterances referring to the external context of a conversation (1, 2) – neutral phatic utterances (Laver 1975, 1981), indirect approaches (Ventola 1979) or remarks (Edmondson and House 1981) – and phatic utterances alluding to the participants in the conversation (3, 4) – direct approaches (Ventola 1979), discloses (Edmondson and House 1981) or personal phatic utterances (Laver 1975, 1981), which in turn can allude to the speaker (self-oriented) or to the hearer (other-oriented):

(1) Terrible night last night!

(2) Lovely day for a picnic.

(3) My legs weren’t made for these streets!
In his seminal work, Laver (1975, 1981) put forward that phatic utterances are extremely important for social interaction in the UK and USA because they transmit indexical information about the interlocutors’ social roles, which helps them establish a working consensus. After analysing their usage, he concluded that it obeys very specific patterns depending on the interlocutors’ social relationship. Hence, when interlocutors have a solidarity relationship – a solidarity politeness system (Scollon and Scollon 1983, 1995) – they can use both neutral and personal phatic utterances. On the contrary, if they have a non-solidarity relationship with no status difference – a deference politeness system (Scollon and Scollon 1983, 1995) – the safest option is to use a neutral utterance. Finally, if they have a non-solidarity relationship with status difference – a hierarchical politeness system (Scollon and Scollon 1983, 1995)² – they have two possibilities: firstly, the speaker can use a self-oriented utterance if the hearer’s status is higher than his, or, secondly, the speaker can use an other-oriented utterance if her own status is higher than the hearer’s.

Laver (1975, 1981) concluded that the usage of phatic utterances by interlocutors sharing a solidarity or deference politeness system seems oriented towards the reciprocal offering of solidarity. On the other hand, the behaviour of interlocutors in a hierarchical politeness system appears to reinforce status differences, since the convention operating in the UK and USA allows the superior to invade the psychological space of the inferior, but not the other way around. As has been seen, his contribution was to relate the selection of a particular type of phatic utterance to the specific relationship that interlocutors may have. Therefore, it can be argued that its usage may convey information about the interlocutors’ politeness system (Padilla Cruz 2004a). I discuss this issue in the next section.
4. Transmitting Information about Politeness Systems

Following Laver’s (1975, 1981) work, I have argued elsewhere (Padilla Cruz 2004a, 2004b, 2004c) that phatic utterances may achieve an optimal level of relevance because interlocutors can transmit and recover information about the politeness system existing between them. For phatic utterances to achieve an optimal level of relevance in this way, interlocutors must have stored and must access a cultural or sociopragmatic knowledge about the different politeness systems in which the interaction can take place and the behaviour that is expected in each of them. Such knowledge would be part of their cultural metarepresentations (Sperber 1996), and will interact with other assumptions mutually manifest to interlocutors in their cognitive environment. Hence, those metarepresentations feed their inferential processes and yield specific inferences (Unger 2001) about their social relationships and the linguistic behaviour expected from them in particular communicative situations.

In order to illustrate this, consider the case of a student who is going to interact with one of her professors at the University. The professor has expert power (French and Raven 1959) over her because of his knowledge and expertise in the subject he teaches. That power may be psychologically perceived by the student (Falbo and Peplau 1980), who may also realise that they are socially distant because they have not met privately before and do not know each other well, in spite of their frequent contact in class. By combining assumptions about these facts, the student can conclude that the politeness system in which they are going to interact is hierarchical:

(5) a. I’m a university student. (manifest assumption)

b. I’m going to talk to a professor of Linguistics. (manifest assumption)

c. Professors may have more power than students due to their knowledge. (cultural
d. I have not met this professor before. *(manifest assumption)*

e. People who have not met before may be socially distant because they do not know each other. *(cultural assumption)*

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

g. I’m going to establish/maintain a hierarchical relationship with Professor X. *(inference)*

The student can then combine the conclusion drawn with her cultural metarepresentations alluding to the type of phatic utterance that she is expected to resort to in that system:

(6) a. There is a hierarchical relation between Professor X and myself.

   b. In a hierarchical relationship, people normally speak about themselves if their interlocutor has more power than them. *(cultural assumption)*

   c. I should use an utterance about myself. *(Inference)*

Then, by using the type of phatic utterance specified by her cultural knowledge (7), the speaker may communicate more *strongly* or *weakly* to the professor a set of assumptions about her perception of a particular politeness system (8):

(7) I found today’s class very interesting.

(8) a. I tell you my opinion about your class because I perceive that you have more power than me.

   b. I tell you my opinion about your class because I perceive that we do not know each other.

Finally, the professor may use those assumptions as *implicated premises* and combine them with other assumptions manifest to himself in order to recover information about the
social relationship existing between them:

(9) a. My interlocutor has said that she found today’s class very interesting. (*manifest assumption*)

b. My interlocutor is a student. (*manifest assumption*)

c. I’m a professor. (*manifest assumption*)

d. We have not met before. (*manifest assumption*)

e. We do not know each other very well. (*manifest assumption*)

f. Two people who do not know each other may be socially distant. (*cultural assumption*)

g. Professors may be regarded as powerful because of their position and knowledge. (*cultural assumption*)

h. This student has begun a conversation by telling me her personal opinion about my class. (*manifest assumption*)

i. By means of this, she may be communicating that she does not want to touch upon personal topics. (*inference*)

j. Avoiding personal topics is one way to show concern for the other person’s status. (*cultural assumption*)

k. One does not normally speak about personal topics unless he knows his interlocutor very well. (*cultural assumption*)

l. This student may be intending to communicate her desire to establish a hierarchical relationship with me. (*inference*)

To sum up, with a phatic utterance the speaker can transmit information about the politeness system she perceives or wants to establish by making manifest, more or less strongly, assumptions about that system. In turn, the hearer may use those assumptions for processing the utterance, combine them with his cultural metarepresentations and achieve an
optimal level of relevance by obtaining cognitive effects about their social relationship.

5. **Implications for the ESL Teacher**

As has been observed, the usage of phatic utterances in the UK and USA is governed by cultural metarepresentations that enter the inferential processes intervening in comprehension and prescribe the type of such utterances that is considered correct or adequate in each politeness system. Politeness systems constitute the basis of interlocutors’ *conversational contract* (Fraser and Nolen 1981; Fraser 1990), i.e. that set of rights and obligations individuals are expected to conform to in particular communicative situations for their linguistic behaviour to be evaluated by others as polite or impolite. Therefore, students’ selection of a phatic utterance that differs from the type prescribed by the cultural metarepresentations of the target sociocultural group may have negative consequences for the perception of their linguistic behaviour and personality by the individuals of that target group, as there may arise *sociopragmatic failures* (Thomas 1983: 84).

Although teachers must equip students with the pragmatic knowledge that allows them to achieve their communicative goals and define their social relationships as they like (Thomas 1983; Bou Franch and Garcés Conejos 2003), in the case of phatic utterances they should also include in the ESL class reflections about the sociopragmatic factors influencing their usage in the target culture, as well as remarks about the cognitive factors that condition their interpretation. Since inadequate usage may result in undesired sociopragmatic failures, teachers should avoid disregarding or neglecting such utterances in the ESL class. On the contrary, they should focus on them because of the consequences that they may have for social interaction and for the interpretation of students’ linguistic behaviour. Thus, they will
make students aware of how they can transmit information about their social relationships and prevent them from being misunderstood or judged as impolite.

NOTES

1. A fact or assumption is manifest if an individual can mentally represent it, and the set of assumptions manifest to an individual constitutes her cognitive environment (Sperber and Wilson 1995: 39).

2. Scollon and Scollon (1983, 1995) define their three politeness systems on the basis of the values assigned by interlocutors to the sociological variables power (P) and distance (D), so that their corresponding formulae are: [-P, -D], [-P, +D], [+P, +/-D].

3. In strong communication the speaker gives additional evidence of her informative intention and increases the manifestness of some assumptions (Sperber and Wilson 1995: 195).

4. According to Sperber and Wilson (1995: 194), implicated premises are those assumptions that the speaker expects and intends the hearer to recover and use in his inferential processes.

REFERENCES


Personality and Social Psychology 38: 618-628.


