

Small Talk in Our Digital Everyday Life: The Contours of a Phatic Culture

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the present trend in media use that emphasises the social connection over the content of the speech. Small communicative processes and indexical gestures are numerous especially in the digital area and they are symptomatic for the category of phatic communication. The article explains the concept of “phatic”, from Malinowski and Jakobson to the contemporary approaches that propose terms such as “phatic technologies” and “phatic systems”. Also, revisiting Heidegger’s arguments on the concept of “idle talk”, we grasp several key aspects of understanding phatic communication. The characteristics and possible negative consequences of a raising phatic media culture are discussed, underlining its complexity and the modalities in which it can re-shape our behaviours and our valuable cultural tools (dialogue, conversation or narratives).

Keywords: small talk, phatic communion, phatic communication, unimportant language, phatic culture

1. Introduction: everyday life, technology, and small talk

Technology is routinely embedded in our everyday life in more advanced ways than before; the mobile communication made an important step towards a latent “permanent” presence in the network. The contemporary human uses the new means of communications not only as tools but also as significant ways to define and present themselves. In this vein, maintaining the digital ties becomes an important task to manage and a new vocabulary of online conviviality has been developed. The technological convergence (Jenkins 2006) determined also a

social convergence that nowadays acts as a norm, even if many people manifest a discomfort about this situation. The mixture between public and private and a continuous demanding of presence altered the traditional social conveniences. As Boyd emphasised, “social convergence requires people to handle disparate audiences simultaneously without a social script. While social convergence allows information to be spread more efficiently, this is not always what people desire. As with other forms of convergence, control is lost with social convergence.” (2008, 18) Moreover, there is a hidden pressure of the network to be always online, always present and available. The communication technologies provide continuous mediated interactions, blurring also the boundaries between presence and absence. As Licoppe stated, we are living into a “connected presence”, described by “the proliferation of interactions to maintain a link which is constantly threatened by distance and absence” (2004, 153), but could also represent a veritable “technology of power” (2004, 153). Anyhow, this connected presence can be so fatiguing, so that simulated presence would replace the former in multifarious modalities of being “present” when you are, in fact, absent. In this respect, new media can also provide the context for the “connected” absence and delaying engagement. “The emotional architecture” of social media (Wahl-Jorgensen 2018) contributed to the “glue” that determined people to be attached to online activities. The algorithms used in the construction of these platforms facilitate, in many situations, pro-social emotions, affective expressions and call-to-actions behaviours. Also, the emotional register of connected presence “exploits non-dialogic means of communication” (Licoppe and Smoreda 2005, 330), that give rise to small communicative gesture whose functions are the recognition, the maintenance of relationships, the demand for attention or the expression of the self in the network. The distinction between communication and expression, made by Goffman in 1969, is still relevant today. If communication is related to utterances rich in content, expression is represented by gestures, noises, signs that do not say something about things, but can be meaningful for the person who produced them. The large amount of posts (such as “How are you?”, “Good

morning”, “It’s snowing”) and online gestures (such as the like, the poke) flood the Internet constantly. Their large use raised numerous questions about their significance and about the general orientation towards sociability. Idle talks, unimportant messages, small communicative processes became central in our everyday social fabric and many people use new media merely for these objectives, as indexical signs that attest their existence in the network and the interest for the others. These phatic messages challenge the role of the dialogue and of the substantive content in our media environment, the consequence being that “in phatic media culture, content is not king, but ‘keeping in touch’ is. More important than anything said, it is the *connection* to the other that becomes significant, and the *exchange* of words becomes superfluous” (Miller 2008, 395).

In this respect, I will discuss the significance of phatic communication and I will also re-visit Heidegger to catch a glimpse of “idle talk” and its importance in our daily lives. For the purpose of my paper, small talk and idle talk are used interchangeably.

2. From phatic communion to phatic technologies

The anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (1923) introduced the concept of “phatic communion” as a type of speech oriented towards union and not towards ideas or in-depth information exchanges. The phatic discourse is irrelevant at the content level, but of maximal importance for the construction of a human communion. Although it can be perceived as a trivial kind of speech, “it serves to establish bonds of personal union between people brought together by the need of companionship and does not serve any purpose of communicating ideas.” (Malinowski 1935, 316) The quality of information is mundane and it is not communicated to convey meaning or as an intellectual reflection, because “the language does not function here as a means of transmission of thought” (Malinowski 1935, 315). Albeit it is content-free, phatic communion has three important functions: a social function (establishing, developing and maintaining social ties), a communicative function (indicating that the communication channel is open), and a recognition function (validating

potential interlocutors). Radovanovic and Ragnedda observed that Philip Riley has supplemented these functions with three more: “to provide indexical information for social categorization (that is to signal different aspects of social identity); to negotiate the relationship, in particular relative status, roles and affectivity (which clearly could be seen operating if we look at the various forms of greetings and address that some individuals use according to his or her social or affective relationship with the interlocutor); to reinforce social structure” (2012, 11). Even if phatic communication does not intend to transfer substantive information for the interlocutor, it concerns the very act of communication by keeping open the path of communication and by strengthening the existing connections. Justine Coupland, a well-known specialist in the field, noted that “the legacy of Malinowski’s treatment is therefore a systematically ambivalent view of small talk, talk which is aimless, prefatory, obvious, uninteresting, sometimes suspect and even irrelevant, but part of the processes of fulfilling our intrinsically human needs for social cohesiveness and mutual recognition” (2014, 4). Moreover, Coupland and her collaborators worked hard in the quest of reassessing the individual, social and cultural implications of small talk and in removing the sign of equality between small talk and unimportant talk. There are many situations in which small talk means more than a simple chat or gossip. For persons who lived in unsafe economic or politic conditions (such as emigrants or refugees), to send and receive just a few lines signify a lot more than just the words transmitted.

Another pillar of the concept of “phatic” is Roman Jakobson’s theory that attributed a function to each of six factors of communication: context (the referential function), message (the poetic function), sender (the emotive function), receiver (the conative function), channel (the phatic function), and code (the metalinguistic function). Using Malinowski’s term, Jakobson defines phatic messages as “primarily serving to establish, to prolong, or to discontinue communication, to check whether the channel works (‘Hello, do you hear me?’), to attract the attention of the interlocutor or to confirm his continued attention (‘Are you listening?’ or in Shakespearean

diction, ‘Lend me your ears!’ – and on the other end of the wire ‘Um-hum!’)” (Jakobson 1960, 355) Phatic communication is abundant in ritualized formulas and is the first verbal function that an infant gained (and also the only feature that humans share with talking birds).

The question is: do some technologies voluntarily emphasise the phatic function and develop platforms to respond to this personal and social needs of the people, putting aside the other functions of communication? Even if phatic technologies are not very recent (the telephony inserted levels of phatic use), the rise of the social software as the Internet developed conducted to another degree of phaticity. A technology can be named phatic if “its primary purpose or use is to establish, develop and maintain human relationships. The users of the technology have personal interactive goals” (Wang, Tucker, and Rihll 2011, 46). The phatic technologies are designed to sustain social interaction and they are not at all interested in the usefulness of this interaction, because they are measured “by the degree to which they contribute to a feeling of ongoing connectedness” (Vetere, Howard, and Gibbs 2005).

Moreover, using Giddens’ ideas of abstract system, Wang and Tucker (2016) expanded them in a new sociological concept – “phatic system” – which “disembed and re-embed personal and emotional relationships across time/space” (Wang and Tucker 2016, 141). A phatic system has two components, one representing personal identity and the other engaging in relationships. Conceived as closely related to modernity, phatic technologies are able to sustain intimacy and to reduce alienation. Supplementary, they can even resolve some issues actually created by modernist structures: “such technologies are a novel attempt at solving an unprecedented problem: producing a sense of presence and belonging in an uncertain world of constant movement and change” (Miller 2011, 205). Phatic messages have an important role of reassuring that interaction is “alive and well”, because “machine must be ‘humming’ if we are not to think it has broken down” (Wang, Tucker, and Rihll 2011, 48). The immense social fabric has to be maintained not by sophisticated content and deep reflections, but by the possibility of keeping in contact with others, with the

latent potentiality to develop these signals in a more comprehensive conversation or story.

3. A small return to Heidegger: Dasein and “idle talk” (“Gerede”)

Phatic communication has been reduced at small talks, ritualistic conventions, indexical gestures, casual conversations (the epitome being the discussions about weather), forms of gossip and chat. In short, phatic communication could be equated with banality and unimportant language. But, as Coupland asked, “who is to judge the banality or significance of a talk?” (2014, 4). In a very postmodern spirit, the dichotomy small talk – big talk could be deconstructed; the metanarrative of important conversations could be dissipated in a myriad of *petites histoires* or, why not, casual conversations. Of course, the criteria selected are decisive: the small talks are important for the sender and, in this respect, they can be considered as “big” conversations and not such as peripheral ways of discussions. Jan Blommaert and Piia Varis observed a paradox: “people often produce ‘unimportant’ language, when seen from the viewpoint of denotational and informational content, but still attach tremendous importance to such unimportant forms of communication” (2015, 5). The banal interaction is otherwise significant, functional and meaningful, pointing at the self and at her or his relationships.

For a more accurate understanding, as Miller (2017) suggested, the appeal to Heidegger could be enlightening. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger affirms that “The expression ‘idle talk’ [‘Gerede’] is not to be used here in a ‘disparaging’ signification. Terminologically, it signifies a positive phenomenon which constitutes the kind of Being of everyday Dasein’s understanding and interpreting” (1962, 211). As Haugeland noted, that does not mean that “idle talk is just fine and dandy, but rather that his purpose in discussing it is not simply to denounce some commonplace human failing (like laziness or dissembling)” (2005, 428). For Brandom, the examination of small talk belongs to an argument with four steps: “1. There can be no Dasein without *Rede* (discourse). 2. There can be no *Rede* without *Gerede* (idle talk). 3. There can

be no *Gerede* without *Sprache* (language). 4. There can be no *Sprache* without *Aussage* (assertion). This argument will then be situated within a larger frame, which argues more generally that 5. There can be no Dasein without *Verfallen* (falling)” (2002, 331).

As we can see in Brandom’s and especially in Haugeland’s treatment of Heidegger’s fragments from *Being and Time*, an essential ambiguity seems to be present in the very nucleus of the matter. On the one hand, it seems like idle talk produces a sort of negative impact on the Dasein. The being-in-the-world becomes separated from *articulated understanding* and closed. Trying to translate Heidegger, Haugeland (2005, 425) proposes the following phrase: (idle talk, *Gerede*) “covers up intraworldly entities”. This entails the fact that the “natural” openness of the being-in-the-world is actually replaced by this form of covering, which becomes exactly the opposite of what regular talk should be. Robert Brandom also finds suitable evidence of this position in *Being and Time* (1962, 212): “Idle talk is constituted by such gossiping and passing the word along – a process by which its initial lack of grounds to stand on [*Bodenständigkeit*] becomes aggravated to complete groundlessness [*Bodenlosigkeit*]”.

It seems that at least two problems arise here. One, underlined by Brandom, consists of the fact that idle talk seldom takes the form of “thoughtless passing on of what is said-in-the-talk” (Brandom 2002, 337). It is surely an activity that misses the point of talking, which is actual communication and making things known. The second problem concerns the lack of ground for what is said. We should understand, perhaps, *gossip* as rather unproved assertions than anything else. The difficulty brought about by idle talk is the fact that its content spreads in (vicious) circles, being based merely on the authority of the speaker (“A is B because X says it is so”). Brandom (2002, 337) believes that “although Heidegger is far from recommending this structure of authority, he thinks that it provides the pervasive background against which alone it is possible to understand the possibility of more authentic justificatory structures”.

On the other hand, as Heidegger himself states at the beginning of section 35, we should not see idle talk in a derogatory manner. First and foremost, it encapsulates our everyday talk. There can be no talk without idle talk should be understood as the fact that we distillate deeper layers of meaning after we have previously passed by the phase of the implicit content. Second, as Haugeland put it, genuine understanding and communication are based on a prerequisite provided by idle talk. So, even if idle talk could close things off for the Dasein, it also represents the key to creating meaningful conversations. Even if it proves shallow and ambiguous, idle talk “serves as a fundamental reservoir of conceptual resources and distinctions” (Haugeland 2005, 425). It represents, in fact, a cultural mechanism for preserving and propagating cognitive schemata, information or practical advice. The negative aspect of *Gerede* is nothing else, Haugeland feels, than the imprint of the pressure of preservation.

I would like to add that this *enabling function* that Haugeland points to continuously is also responsible for the phatic element. In order to open itself to “some adequate degree of understanding” (Haugeland 2005, 427) which is not yet available in idle talk, the Dasein must establish first suitable contact. The possibilities of the *Gerede* ensure exactly the latter. As Miller (2017, 262) thinks, Heidegger’s depiction of idle talk is close to the concept of phatic communication because the process itself of “passing the word along” (Heidegger 1962, 214) proves to be more important than the content of the talk.

4. Towards a phatic media culture?

Online media is an ideal arena for phatic processes, the digital communication having an important indexical component. Even “the foundational metaphor for the paradigmatic online action is a deictic gesture: a hyperlink points to another web page” (Schandorf 2012, 325). The tweets, hashtags, direct posts, avatars or Facebook gestures are deictic, pointing to different things: the message, the receiver, the sender, the channel itself. By their pervasiveness, digital phatic interactions are often embedded within the daily routine and could be peripheral but also focal (Vetere, Howard, and Gibbs

2005). Even if we produce “smart” talk it is also indexical: “Smart talk’ on Facebook is indexical rather than symbolic, pointing at the often bizarre incidents of the everyday being acknowledged so as to make an extraordinary observation out of the ordinary and idiosyncratic – without relying on direct feed-back from individual others, but rather on the flux of the networked communication” (Jensen and Scott Sørensen 2013, 60). When phatic messages meet virality, their transmission becomes spectacular in terms of dissemination (the memes, GIFs or emoji being used frequently). Anyhow, we have to point out that this kind of communication requires phatic skills and above the functions already mentioned, phatic messages could avoid conflicts and could maintain the right social balance in our relationships (Radovanovic and Ragnedda 2012). Also, the inclusiveness offered by the trivial and accessible nature of such posts is well perceived by the users (Hopkins 2014).

In the online environment, the body itself is phatic and this trait is easily visible in the practice of *selfie* as a deictically indexical form. It creates a “kinesthetic sociability” (Frosh 2015), being inscribed “in the kinetic and responsive social energy among users of movement-based digital technologies” (Frosh 2015, 1623). The gestural register and the corporeal energy complement the mediated communication and become a vehicle for sociability with distant others. In this respect, it represents another form of phatic message that verifies the functionality of the channel by demanding a response. As for the entire range of phatic forms, selfies are posted with the inner expectance of the response, because “response is crucial. [...] Failure to acknowledge the nod of a passing acquaintance or her casual ‘How are you?’ is easily perceived as an expression of nonrecognition and social exclusion” (Frosh 2015, 1623).

The complex combination between new technology of information and the social software can lead to a new culture, understood as a “set of values and beliefs generated by repetitive patterns of behaviour, reinforced by both formal social systems and informal social organisations” (Wang, Tucker, and Haines 2012, 86). Cyberculture is emerging from the use of new media for multifarious purposes, including a variety of “ways of life” in the wired global society. Miller (2008)

sees Facebook and Twitter in the forefront of the phatic media development, but he expressed some concerns related to the potential nihilistic consequences of phatic culture. The multiple functions of phatic messages discussed by researchers and users seem insufficient to respond completely to the main interrogation: are phatic media real useful? Miller recognized the connected presence offered by phatic communication, but he is wondering why this specific mode of communication is encouraged by new media enterprises. He continued his research in the field of social media activism, where he observed negative aspects, too: “the rise of a phatic culture in social media activism has atrophied the potential for digital communication technologies to help foster social change by creating a conversational environment based on limited forms of expressive solidarity as opposed to an engaged, content-driven, dialogic public sphere” (Miller 2017, 251). His conclusions challenge the mainstream research that considers the Internet as a big catalyst for civic and political activism (Occupy movement or Arab Spring protests). For Miller, the distinction between “social talk” (based on connection and expression) and “political conversation” (based on goal orientation, problem-solving, and dialogue) remains crucial for the correct positioning of the analysis. Social media politics produce, in many times, just another form of idle talk without real effect or engagement. The “clicktivism” is only an example of the phatic media culture and of the mechanism of self-expression in the online. As McLuhan stated, “the user is content” (McLuhan, Nevitt 1972, 145) in social media and the very thing “consumed” in the network is the images and representations of other people and the social connections with them. Indeed, “the medium is the message”, and the medium is now consumed in itself. In Baudrillard’s terms, the communication has got its excess, the channel is the one that is communicated and used, and the architecture of the network – transposed in the social architecture of acquaintances – is important to be accessed and integrated.

Indeed, online phatic communication can create affective links, a sense of belonging and togetherness, a social meaning, but as Heidegger interpreted it, it supposes every time a serious

closing-off (Heidegger 1962, 213) and a “non-committal just-surmising-with-someone-else” (Heidegger 1962, 218). The relationships with ambiguity and curiosity transform idle talk into a lack of action, because the users do not dwell on a topic sufficient time to be fully internalized and the restless curiosity for the next subject is too big for us to take the right time to better interpret what it is going on: “Curiosity, for which nothing is closed off, and idle talk, for which there is nothing that is not understood, provide themselves (that is, the Dasein which is in this manner [dem so seienden Dasein]) with the guarantee of a ‘life’ which, supposedly, is genuinely ‘lively’” (Heidegger 1962, 217). The cultural and media logic that stimulates the public to remain in the area of phatic communication seems to be one that precludes the audience from real dialog, emaciating the abilities of having a conversation, of debating, of following and understanding large discourses. The possibility to produce changes is lower when the public is “fed” with phatic messages in a large amount so that the study of phaticity today is one of the most important area of research.

5. Final remarks

The paper tried to present the articulations of phatic communication in our contemporary techno-sphere, with some emphasises on the concept and on the potential development into a culture. The small talk – as an epitome of phatic communication – was the reason for our brief inquiry in its philosophical interpretation made by Heidegger in *Being and Time* and updated for the actual technologies. Thus, Heidegger’s ideas proved to be actual and provocative because the “idle talk” does not represent for the Dasein just a mode of being and a discoursing one, but also is pointing out to the power structure embedded in these modes: “the dominance of the public way in which things have been interpreted has already been decisive even for the possibilities of having a mood – that is, for the basic way in which Dasein lets the world ‘matter’ to it” (Heidegger 1962, 213). Also, because the “idle talk discourages any new inquiry and any disputation, and in a peculiar way suppresses them and holds them back” (Heidegger

1962, 213), Heidegger emphasises the “natural” distance that exists between idle talk that is uprooted existentially and other modes of discourse.

The phatic communication proved to be a fickle concept – while it is very well theorised in various research fields, in practice it seldom leads to paradoxes. If sometimes it is just superfluous and meaningless, in other contexts it proves to be full of significance. If in many cases it is just the opposite of the dialogue and conversation, in other ones it provides the clues for curdling an entire story. While it is the antonym of the narrative, it also can construct the personal storytelling for someone.

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