

THE DILEMMA OF THE PHATIC FUNCTION

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Like an advancement of research in any field, the development of studies of the functions of language demands particularization of the categories and goals of research because differently orientated works place a student in a dilemma by raising unexpected questions concerning even the credibility of basic original concepts in concrete works. At present, studies of the functions of language might be said to include two major directions, viz.: the approach considering the entity of the functions of language in their intrinsic relations to the system of language (Halliday, 1973, 1976) and the approach treating uses of language in their implicit and explicit realizations in speech acts as functions of language or speech (Bühler, 1934; Jakobson, 1966; Akhmanova, 1970).

Differences in the above-mentioned approaches happen to cause some disagreement concerning major concepts in the field. Though it is true that disagreement in scholarly discussions generally proves to be more productive than agreement, it is also true that a scholarly disagreement should introduce positive propositions and limit the scope of questions by motivation rather than by absolute negation thus confirming a dialectal approach to the problem and related issues.

As regards the phatic function, scholarly work has initiated different, even somewhat contradictory ideas. Since these ideas derive from the works of major authors (Jakobson, 1966; Halliday, 1973), the entity of the phatic function, its realization and relevance to speech acts as well as its relations with other functions require some explication. The present paper is concerned with the entity, realization and acquisition of the phatic function in the light of empirical research in progress.

Scholars who based their research (Ахманова, 1966; Драздаускаене, 1970, and others) on the Bühler—Jakobson concept of the function of language and the respective system of the functions of language never doubted the credibility of the phatic function. Moreover, even those scholars (Crystal and Davy, 1969; Currie, 1973, and others), who treated this function cursorily, found it to testify to far more evidence and interest than it might appear on the surface. In his consideration of major functions of language in their unique relations, Professor Halliday (Halliday, 1973) happened to mention the 'ritual' model or function (which seemed to

identify with the phatic function) and denounced its existence at least in the child's language and experience (Halliday, 1973, p. 16). Professor Jakobson (Jakobson, 1966), in his turn, ten years earlier considered the entity of the phatic function and found it to be "the first verbal function acquired by infants" (Jakobson, 1966, p. 356). Since both scholars based their considerations on empirical data, a question arises whether this contradictory estimate is actually as mutually exclusive as it looks at first sight.

It might be helpful to inquire how the contradictory ideas occurred, why Halliday dismissed this function and whether Halliday's assumption actually meant doubt concerning the credibility of the phatic function or its significance in linguistics. We might also like to know more about the role of this function in the child's language, its entity and affected character. It might also be questioned whether this function is extraneous to linguistic research or only to certain works and, if it is not, what testimony an investigation of the phatic function renders and what perspectives it offers.

To begin any consideration we need to know that the 'ritual' model in Halliday's work identifies with the phatic function. This identification seems to be probable mainly because the description that follows¹ strongly suggests it. The present description of the 'ritual' model involves both theoretical and methodological questions, viz.: the interdependence of this model and the age of the user, its vicious character and negative evaluation of linguistic phenomena.

The first thing that has to be observed in considering the identification of the 'ritual' model with the phatic function is that the ritual element is supposed to derive from the interactional (cf. p. 27, below). In this sense the 'ritual' does identify with the phatic because the phatic function really serves a sole means of interaction (cf. p. 27, below) manifested through routinized phraseology which varies depending on the context of situation, in general, and social relations, in particular.

Second, the fact that the 'ritual' model is said to define and delimit a social group makes the affinity between the 'ritual' model or function in Halliday's concept and the phatic function all the more pronounced. The thing is that, cogni-

¹ "The representational model at least does not conflict with the child's experience. It relates to one significant part of it; rather a small part at first, but nevertheless real. In this it contrasts sharply with another view of language which we have not mentioned because it plays no part in the child's experience at all, but which might be called the 'ritual' model of language internalized by those for whom language is a means of showing how well one was brought up; it downgrades language to the level of table-manners. The ritual element in the use of language is probably derived from the interactional, since language in its ritual function also serves to define and delimit a social group; but it has none of the positive aspects of linguistic interaction, those which impinge on the child, and is thus very partial and one-sided. The view of language as manners is a needless complication in the present context, since this function of language has no counterpart in the child's experience" (Halliday, 1973, p. 16-17).

tive information being inconspicuous or latent in the phatic function, this function is indeed significant in identifying the speaker's status, his interests and intention, general social attitudes (cf.: Currie, 1973, pp. 109 – 110; Drazdauskienė, 1980) and other kinds of meaning often identified as style (cf.: Sankoff, 1972, p. 34). Therefore in regard to the signification of sociolinguistic aspects of meaning, we find sufficient grounds to assume that the 'ritual' model and the phatic function mean the same use.

This takes us to the third point in the above-mentioned description which concerns the ritual model as "a means of showing how well one was brought up" (Halliday, 1973, p. 16). Since the phatic use of language often comprises mere counters indicating the speaker's civil attitude and sometimes more elaborate expression of politeness which does bear a mark of breeding, this indeed is a point in which the 'ritual' model in Halliday's terms and the phatic function of language seem to coincide.

Having discovered so much identity between the phatic function and the 'ritual' model, we can at least be sure that Halliday's use of the term 'ritual' which is current in the works of other linguists (cf.: Condon, 1966, p. 99 ff.; Nash, 1971, p. 31 ff. and other authors) does not mean the language of rites, i.e., the language accompanying a ritual performance with the required actual or symbolic presence of the members of a group on some occasion and with extreme care to details.

Again, Halliday does not seem to consider the term 'ritual' to be a regular term or the use of language he refers to with it being ritual because the term is used in inverted commas and introduced in a probability statement (see p. 24, above). At this point a question arises why the term 'ritual' was adopted by Halliday, if it was actually the phatic function that was meant. Though the answer in our case can be but a supposition, it works in line with the present argument. It seems probable that Halliday may have adopted this term by way of tradition from other English authors (see above), who did consider routinized phatic uses in terms of ritual, and must have used it himself in the sense in which it was used, for instance, by Boulton (1968) and Nash (1971), rather than in the sense it was used by Condon (1966). The fact that Halliday was aware of prescriptive routinized instances of the phatic function in telephone conversation, for example, becomes evident at some point in his own work (Halliday, 1976, p. 9 ff.).

Judging by the fact that Halliday was aware of what is usually referred to as the phatic function today and that he did not focus on this function "because it plays no part in the child's experience at all" and is an unnecessary complication (see p. 24, above), we are in a position to assume that Halliday was conscious of the phatic function and perhaps found it significant, yet extraneous to his own theory and his system of the functions of language. Therefore dismissing the phatic function, not the use of language disguised by the term 'ritual', would have meant an

extremely limited point of view of the author and perhaps something he did not mean to say, whereas dismissing this function in the present interpretation only limited the object of discussion in Halliday's work. Thus we conclude that in dismissing what was extraneous to his work, but perhaps important in linguistics, Halliday demonstrated a true scholarly approach to linguistic phenomena and wisdom in categorization.

One more point in Halliday's description of the 'ritual' model cannot be overlooked, though cursorily related to the present argument, and that is the negative evaluation of linguistic phenomena (see p. 24, above). Describing this model of language, Halliday happened to state that this use of language is often meant to show "how well one was brought up", that it "downgrades language to the level of table-manners" and "has none of the positive aspects of linguistic interaction" (see p. 24, above). These statements make one wonder whether the author found this use of language so disagreeable as not to be worth any attention at all or whether the 'ritual' model was not appealing on the grounds of subjective motives and all the more unacceptable for a linguist's consideration. As it finally becomes evident, Halliday excluded this use of language from the focus of his attention because it was an unnecessary complication in his work. Negative evaluation of linguistic phenomena, however, is not so very scarce, especially in respect to languages less studied than English, considering, for example, literary language and the language of official documents or drawing similar analogies and finding one grander than the other because of supposed greater expressiveness owing to a lower rate of prepatterned models in it.

This point is of general methodological interest in scholarly work and therefore worth mentioning. The question here is whether negative or positive evaluation applies to linguistic uses at all in scholarly work. As long as its systemic qualities do not get affected, language is what it is and should be, irrespective whether a linguist likes it or not. It can hardly be argued that a scholar should be guided by subjective evaluations rather than by objective data concerning linguistic uses as phenomena. That is to say that the scholar is perhaps expected to see how the actual use of language depends on and derives its meaning in social context (cf. Sajavaara, 1980), rather than to account for certain kinds of meaning in evaluative terms. This also applies to the phatic or 'ritual' uses of language in which socio-cultural aspects of meaning dominate over its pragmatic contents.

Furthermore, empirical research of the phatic function in English gives ground to maintain (at least by the foreigner's accounts) that tasteless, vicious, snobbish or excessive use of language in the phatic function is not as common as its use in the phatic function for pleasure (cf.: Malinowski, 1936; Condon, 1966; Drazdauskienė, 1980 and many others). This assumption gets strongly supported by the data derived from the study of greetings and other formulae of politeness which are

the uses implicitly realizing the phatic function. It does not require special exemplification to get convinced that even greetings may be expressive of socially significant attitudes no less than be mere counters in civilized routine. Whatever the degree of pleasure derived from greetings, their affinity with table-manners is only too evident. However, the degree of emotive and social loss conditioned by the deterioration even of standardized routine politeness may be estimated only by those who experienced it, and its greatness can never be exaggerated. It seems to be probable that much of what is found to be unfavourable or unappealing in the use of language in the phatic function is conditioned, as is interpreted, extralinguistically, pertaining to concrete encounters, not to society at large or language itself.

Concerning the phatic function in the child's language, one has to adhere to Halliday's assumption that the phatic function, in Malinowski's sense of the word, is not characteristic of the child's language. In this respect the child's language is very much like the language of technical communication in which sharing is supposed to derive and does derive from the mutually shared knowledge of the object or the field, and no instances of the phatic function, except its implicit realization, occur in it. With children, it is the limited shared interests that play the analogous role.

Children, however, seem to be aware of the phatic function in language because even in communities in which the phatic function is not as typically exercised and manifested as it is among the English, very young children happen to address adults with the question "Why don't you ask us how we are?"; meaning, of course, that they did not hear the regular question they had expected, though they accept this question evidently differently than adults. This instance does not exhaust the argument concerning the phatic function in the child's language.

As has been mentioned above (see p. 25), empirical data appear to support Halliday's supposition that the 'ritual' model (and the phatic function) have affiliations with the interactional model and the interpersonal function (Halliday, 1973, p. 16). Those authors who considered the phatic function in their works (cf.: Firth, 1964, p. 112 ff.; Boulton, 1968; Condon, 1966) unanimously pointed out that friendly disposition and sharing is the essential meaning of the phatic function. Furthermore, several other authors who used this term in a broader sense (Currie, 1973, pp. 109 – 110; Drazdauskienė, 1980a) found that a number of global syntactical units and stereotypical phrases in conversation stimulate sharing and mean interpersonal, though ultimately may express personal judgement, moderate assurance, limited straightforwardness, and courtesy, in general.

The above-mentioned observation is suggestive of a motivation of the currency of clichés and stereotypical units in the phatic function. Since sharing is the basic objective in the phatic function, it is only commonly shared phraseology that makes it directly attainable in communication (cf. the handicapped foreigners who

do not know the standard phraseology of the phatic function). Considering sources of stereotypes and clichés in the phatic function in English, it has to be mentioned that conceptual analyticity in English, in general, and the typical modality, in particular, render them most abundant.

As is known, modality has been treated by Halliday (Halliday, 1976) as the principal component of interpersonality in the lexico-grammatical system of English. Modality has also been found to be most pronounced and important in the phatic function. Could it be shown that the interpersonal function as meaning component reflected in the system of English through the relevant units and the phatic function as a use of language share not only in meaning potential (see p. 23, above), but also in phraseology and, respectively, in the lexico-grammatical system of English, the affinity between the interpersonal and the phatic function would be confirmed. Given that the phatic function does affiliate with the interpersonal, the argument concerning the relevance of the phatic function to the child's language would be ungrounded, because what is reflected in language system cannot be selectively acquired, depending on age, for instance. The child's gradual acquisition of language does not seem to overrule this conclusion.

Given, however, that the phatic function does not affiliate with the interpersonal within the system of English and, even if it does, remains only an instrumental use of language, it would still be probable that the child might acquire this use in the community which practices it like the English do, or else, this phenomenon would challenge the laws of physics and sense perception.

It might be added that it is certainly unlikely for children to pick out only the positive aspects of interpersonality (cf. p. 27, above) leaving out the negative aspects, if both of them are characteristic of the phatic function they encounter. If, however, negative aspects mean affected communication (cf. Condon, 1966, p. 105 ff.), i.e. the use of language consciously exerting a routine phrase or a question to influence or exploit a person, this is, of course, inaccessible to very young children. And even so, as early as the age of five, some children appear to be able to seek insistently an answer to the question "How are you today?" from their disconcerted mothers, with not a bit of delight at their own cleverness. Investigation of the phatic function in this respect seems to confirm the law of regular sense perception, when all conditions are normal.

What Jakobson must have meant stating that the phatic function is the first verbal behaviour acquired by infants was the inarticulate infant communication for his parents' or his own pleasure which, of course, is something similar to the phatic function in Malinowski's terms. This assumption cannot be treated as erroneous even in the light of the preceding argument, if only extending the meaning of the term 'phatic'.

The above-mentioned consideration leads us to the conclusion that the literal contradiction concerning the phatic function in Jakobson's and Halliday's works is no more than the extremes that meet. Focussing on the phatic function, Jakobson extended the original meaning of the term and considered even cases of the implicit realization of this function. Developing his theory of the functions of language on different grounds, Halliday dismissed this function disguised by the term 'ritual', thus securing motivated issues for a consideration of the phatic function in other approaches, different than his own.

Age exercising no influence or selective effect on the system of language and sometimes even on the uses of language (cf. parents who adhere to baby talk for quite a long time and the respective effects), the child normally acquires what he encounters and uses it within the limits of his emotive and mental capacity. It is only those uses of language in the phatic function that are beyond mental and physical capacity of the child that are not reflected in his language.

Irrespective of those aspects of meaning which tend to be estimated as negative (or: affected communication / *artistinis bendravimas*), the phatic function is a common use of language, having not only explicit, but also implicit forms of manifestation devoid of any negative aspects of meaning whatsoever. Though it may be true that "the adult uses of language could be endlessly prolonged" and be "of no real interest" (Halliday, 1976, p. 9), the phatic function is a somewhat exceptional use of language mainly because of the universal meaning of sharing combined in it with the idiomatic meaning of stereotypical uses in terms of sociocultural and crosscultural interaction.

As has been mentioned elsewhere (Drazdauskienė, 1981), investigation of the phatic function renders certain estimates analogous to those presented in Halliday's works (Halliday, 1973, 1976), what testifies to its significance in linguistic investigation. Since there is more evidence supporting the view that the phatic function is only a use of language, not a major category of meaning manifested in the system of language like the interactional function, a study of this function is not likely to develop into as an accomplished theory as that presented by Halliday (cf.: Halliday, 1976). The material of the phatic function, however, especially the currency of set global units in the texts in which this function is dominantly manifested, gives evidence for the development of certain unaccounted questions in the functional theory of language. It gives testimony accounting for the English language as a potential of meaning (vs English as meaning potential, Halliday, 1973) on the basis of historical motivation of the occurrence and functioning of set global units in the phatic function. The material of the phatic function also enables a consideration of the problem of relations of the lexical and the grammatical (Тер-Минасова, 1980)

or collocational patterns and structural relations (Halliday, 1976, p. 80 ff.), what has not yet been explicated in linguistics, rather stated as problematic by the above-mentioned authors.

FATINĖS FUNKCIJOS DILEMA

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Reziumė

Straipsnyje analizuojami ir argumentuojami prieštaringi teiginiai dėl fatinės funkcijos realumo, jos teigiamų ir neigiamų charakteristikų ir vertinimų, šios funkcijos perimamumo antropologiniu požiūriu, charakteringumo vaikų kalbai ir jos mokslinio tyrimo žymiausių šios srities autorių (Jakobson, Halliday, Akhmanova ir kitų) darbuose. Daroma išvada, kad, būdama instrumentiniu kalbos vartojimo atveju, bet ne reikšmės potencialu kalbos sistemoje, fatinė funkcija realizuojama socialinės ir kultūrinės tradicijos ribose ir perimama pagal bendruosius kalbos įsisavinimo dėsnius, o fatinės funkcijos duomenų negali pakakti išsamiam sisteminiam kalbos aprašymui ir atitinkamai teorijai. Numanoma, kad fatinė funkcija yra svarbus tyrinėjimo objektas nustatant potencialių reikšmių sistemą anglų kalboje kaip istoriškai ir kultūriškai susiformavusį reiškinį, išsirutuliojusioje kalboje egzistuojantį *per se*, ir nustatant semantiškai motyvuotus leksinių modelių ir gramatinių struktūrų santykius.

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