Small talk in the Digital Age: Making Sense of Phatic Posts

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents some practical implications of a theoretical web desktop analysis and addresses microposts in the Social Web contextual sense and their role contributing diverse information to the Web as part of informal and semi-formal communication and social activities on Social Networking Sites (SNS). We reflect upon and present the most pervasive and relevant socio-communication function of an online presence on microposts and social networks: the phatic communication function. Although some theorists such as Malinowski say these microposts have no practical information value, we argue that they have semantic and social value for the interlocutors, determined by socio-technological and cultural factors such as online presence and social awareness. We investigate and offer new implications for emerging social and communication dynamics formed around microposts, what we call here "phatic posts". We suggest that apparently trivial uses and features of SNS actually play an important role in setting the social and informational context of the rest of the conversation - a "phatic" function - and thus that these phatic posts are key to the success of SNS.

General Terms

Internet, Communication, Theory

Keywords

social network sites, microposts, phatic posts, phatic communication, online communication, social dynamics

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper is a theoretical and implication study of the communicative and social function of microposts on social network sites (SNS). We do not present statistical or applications-driven data or suggest some pattern, but we do offer qualitative implications, theories, and better understanding of the current social paradigm. This paper is implications-driven research and presents the relevance of microposts and phatic posts as derivatives of phatic communication, a term coined by Malinowski to describe the phenomenon of small talk. Phatic communication is "a type of speech in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words" and its purpose is to

establish and maintain the social bonds of the interlocutors (Malinowski 1923: 151). We describe the socio-technological and communication dynamics that influence the formation of micro phatic posts. Living in an accelerating, interconnected world of information where the demand for instant updates and news is present here and now, different forms of communication dynamics are formed, referring to the socio-technological communication processes online.

Different SNS provide an expressive medium to share with others our feelings, needs, current status, or simple statements. Those simple and short statements can carry light information or low information such as: "I'm eating a dark chocolate", or "listening to new album by Air", or just "life is beautiful". It can also provoke a communication: "anyone there?", "does anyone know...?", etc. On the other side there are applications driven by small micro posts (built by social networks) that enable the creation of phatic expressions in the form of microblogs, Facebook updates, signal indications of "like", "poke", Instant messenger signals in the form of emoticons and wide variety of smileys, etc.

The aim of this paper is to argue the social consequences about the new way of communication on the SNS. In particular we are evolving from the concept of phatic communion coming from the anthropologist Malinowski and from phatic function coming from the linguist Jakobson. These two concepts can relate with networked sociality, the non dialogic and non-informational discussion on the social networks. Although some theorists such as Malinowski say that phatic messages do not have a practical information value, we are arguing in this paper that they do have semantic and social value for the interlocutors, determined by socio-technological and cultural factors. We are using in this paper a new coined term for such micro-posts that imply in their content or form a phatic communication function: a term phatic-posts. This phenomenon can be characterized as "new-word", which is employed here to describe the fact that it is both new and a word. New-words are clearly evident in all human culture. The paper consists of three main parts. First we will discuss the origin of phatic communication and phatic culture and the way they are presented on social networks. Second, we will discuss motivations for creating and consuming phatic posts and their importance for everyday communication and socializing. Finally we consider "small - talk language" on SNS, its dynamics, functions, and relevance to microposts.

Microposts are a dominant form in both virtual habitats (social networks, virtual communities) and their mobile extensions and they are of socio-technological value. Social signaling and online presence are both communication determinants for creating microposts. We will conclude with a few examples, based on web desktop sphere analysis (Hine, 2005), personal web observations and qualitative analysis of microposts and the semantics of phatic communication. In some social, linguistics,

and semantic theories, phatic may indicate communication being mundane, information-less, without any value. We show in this paper that do contain information messages, signals, values of staying up-to-date with micro and macro world of events and news, flirt, chat, public expressions of everyday life and emotions among the participants.

2. MALINOWSKI AND JAKOBSON: THE ORIGIN OF "PHATIC POSTS"

Bronislaw Malinowski, an anthropologist who carried out a lot of research in ethnographical fields, introduces in his book "Coral Gardens and Their Magic'' two fundamental concepts for the study of language: context of situation and context of culture (1935: 73). He introduced three major ideas into his semantic theory: the first is related to the context of linguistic data; the second idea concerns the range of meaning and finally the third is that the context of situation may allow one to disambiguate sentences that are semantically unclear. All these three new ideas are important here. In particular it is interesting to underline the first and the last one. In the first one Malinowski clearly said that the real linguistic fact is the full countenance within its context of situation and in the last one that it is the context of situation that permits one to understand ambiguous sentences.

In this paper we are arguing that the origin of modern, social web micro posts (tweets, Facebook status updates, likes, pokes, geo-check-ins on Foursquare, Flickr comments, etc.) – which we call here "*phatic posts*" - have their origins in the human need for phatic communication, i.e. communication for social upkeep. The quality of the information being communicated has no practical value and is rather mundane and comes from Malinowski's concept of phatic communion. In particular phatic communion has three phatic functions: a social function to establish and maintain social connections; a communicative function to demonstrate that the channel of communication is open and present oneself as a potential communication partner; a validation and recognition function to indicate recognition of one's interlocutor as a potential communicative partner. To these three main functions, Philip Riley has added another three functions: 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 (Riley 2007: 131-32).

Another important concept useful to better understand phatic culture (Miller 2008) and its social implication in everyday life is the term "phatic function" coined by Roman Jakobson. As is well known, Jakobson included the metalinguistic (verifying the code), as one of five general functions of language, along with: Emotive (expressing the sender's state); Conative (inciting the receiver's response); Phatic (tries to maintain contact with the receiver); Referential (relating to a context); and Poetic (existing as a construct for its own sake). Clearly depending upon the meaning of a particular speech act, one of these functions will come to prevail while the others remain subordinate. In particular in our discussion we are arguing about the phatic function of online communication in the context of this theoretical framework and we are going to discuss why the phatic function that tries to maintain contact with the receiver is important on SNS for maintaining and strengthening existing relationships. This is more evident in the case of Facebook where its primary purpose is to re-establish relationships lost in time, such as those between former classmates or older friends.

3. MOTIVATIONS FOR CREATING AND CONSUMING PHATIC POSTS

At this point we are explaining why phatic communication practices are useful. Beside the demands of constant online connected presence in an increasingly networked world, we are exploring motivations why phatic communication is being supported, encouraged, and practiced by social media services. The importance of phatic communication has already been recognized by software engineers defining protocols for use in messaging. Notably, the SIP (Session Initiation Protocol) and SIMPLE (Session Initiation Protocol for Instant Messaging and Presence Leveraging Extensions) protocols draw extensively on the idea of "presence" as a signal to networks of users that communication is possible and of the disposition of other users to communicate. In some senses, phatic posts up-level the same principle.

However, we are focusing on the phatic function. It is crucial because what really counts in human interaction is to stay in touch and let others know that "I'm here too". To do this participants just write "nonsense", expressing their thoughts freely and making witty comments. This apparently "nonsense writing", has an intimate purpose, not so much in what has been written, but keeping in contact and reinforcing relationship. For example, Twitter, beside micro-blogging, implies social networking, interacting, text messaging, learning, enabling communication both through the internet and mobile devices. These communications are designed to be read as soon as they are sent; essentially they are updates creating the notion and feeling of intimacy by being constantly connected online, in real time with others, globally. These practices have resulted in forming 'phatic media' (Miller 2008) in which communication without content has taken precedence. Indeed, these phatic messages tend to reinforce existing relationships and facilitate further relation without giving information or adding to the messages.

For many users, the point of Twitter is the maintenance of connected presence, very similar to saying "what's up?" in an analogue space as you pass someone on the street when you have no intention of finding out what is actually going on. The phatic function is communication practice that simply indicates the possibility that communication may occur.

Furthermore, one of the contemporary digital media scholars, Mizuko Ito, described the appearance of phatic communication processes among Japanese teens in "low-content text message" groups, whose purpose is simply to stay in contact with others. These mundane communication exchanges represent the kind of communication that arises among people who are overwhelmed with other forms of communication. For example, in Japanese culture, phatic function is called *aizuchi*. Aizuchi tweets are real time, continuous, two-sided communication where, if one drops out of the communication thread, the dynamics of the aizuchi is lost. Aizuchi also involves very short expressions of approval or disapproval and expressions and connotations of someone's online presence. Aizuchi has a social function: to keep connectedness with others. The stage of connectedness is always characterized by a very high degree of alertness. We have conducted a set of interviews[1], including an interview with

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[1] Radovanovic, D, Qualitative research, set of semi-structured interviews (N -31) from 2010 to 2012.

Takashi Ota, Japanese software developer and Wikimedian, in order to clarify aizuchi. One can assume aizuchi as a sign of the confirmation of presence: "I'm listening", "it's your turn", "I won't interrupt you" or "you're expected to keep talking". This is a typical effect when interlocutors use aizuchi during direct conversation or phone calls, but it may be applied to online conversations as well. When being used online, aizuchi "makes you think as if your counterpart is talking in front of you. It makes you feel we are connected".

All those examples, again, show how the phatic function is fundamental in SNS because the aim is to maintain and reinforce relationship: This is why Twitter and Facebook are the virtual realms of constant connections, sharing and relationships between people, interactive playgrounds where the phatic function is really important, if not fundamental. Online awareness streams that indicate online presence *are* incredibly good at providing phatic communication. Phatic function being the language we use for the purpose of being social, not so much for sharing information or ideas, though these two are not excluded: it is in the virtual communication 'what's up?' or 'how're you doing?"

Our ancestors used to check in at different places, using chalk, pieces of wood and stones to signal their presence or potential danger to their community, in order to establish social contact in everyday life. Computer-mediated and mobile-mediated environments today provide the channel of communication to be open and to present oneself as a potential communication partner. Pokes, likes, signals, phatic posts and other small, micro-symbols indicate the recognition of one's interlocutor (presence and validation) as a potential communicative partner. Once the connection is established, there are a variety of communicative processes happening on the walls of SNS profiles with the important consequence of keeping social and communication dynamics alive.

4. THE DYNAMICS OF PHATIC POSTS

Facebook exists to make the world "more and more connected", and by that it encourages, among other dynamics, the phatic function of interaction and communication through sociable applications, games, and add-ons. For example: the basic two phatic expression functions are the "Like" button and "Poke". Here a couple of examples coming from qualitative research on a social network. David, (engineer, 50) talking about the Poke function said: *"I have a few people I have been exchanging "pokes" with for ever - in most cases I have no recollection who started it! They simply mean "I was online and thought of you"."* Another example comes from Corky (programmer, 39): *"I respond to pokes, but I very rarely initiate them. I saw a post once that said "'Like' buttons mean "I like your post, but I am far too lazy or not interested enough to make an actual comment, or in a hurry" - I think poking is similar. I am thinking of you, or I noticed your profile photo in my feed or whatever, and I poked you to let you know you crossed my mind, but I'm far too lazy, or uninterested or busy to take the time to write a message."*

Communicative dynamics established with the web 2.0 paradigm shift and the development of microblogging culture and the usage of social media and SNS using mobile communication, encouraged users to practice in everyday life what we call here: *a phatic display of connected presence.* This phatic display of a connected presence is expressed through microposts, comments, short messages, leet-speak, tweets, status updates, Facebook social add-ons, and embedded applications. All these forms have elements of communicative discourse enabling users to get socially engaged through brief, non-formal messages that have

meaning and within their context denote something: interaction, connected presence and fostering and maintaining connections. Human relationships depend more and more on new technologies, such as computers, mobile phones and, most relevantly here, on their social network identities. These enable us to interact with others and human relationships in new interconnected virtual habitats become increasingly dependant on these objects. This "dependency" creates a new sociability pattern of being constantly online and present and of relationships becoming a fluid ever-changing continuum. These new technologies enable the exchange of communication practices that we call here 'phatic expressions': phatic posts that enable creating, fostering and sustaining relationships and social interaction through non formal conversations, online presence and intimacy. Some researchers like Licoppe and Smoreda (2005) indicated that non formal and non-dialogic means of interaction had helped the emergence of small communicative processes and gestures whose purpose at the first glance may appear to lack meaningful information, but in its substance those gestures and communication expressions foster sociability and maintain social connections. As we showed earlier in the paper, these are communicative processes Malinowski described as phatic communion. Phatic expressions in communication practices are very meaningful because they indicate and imply social recognition, online intimacy and sociability in online communities. Phatic posts potentially denote a lot more substance and weight to them than the content itself suggests.

Coming back to the phatic function postulated by Jakobson we can add a new function particularly present, on the social networks: conflict avoiding. On Facebook the two most popular forms of phatic communication on which we want to focus - besides status updates - are the concept of like and poke. This last form seems very interesting because Facebook has a "Like" button and not an "I don't like" button. This is because it seems to be much easier to maintain balance in a community if one establishes relationships of mutual conformistic harmony with other people and it could create a conflictual relationship, reducing interaction (someone could be unfriended) and reducing the total number of the users. Iacchetti, Altafini and Iacono (2011: 1) have based their theory on the "Balance Theory" a motivational theory of attitude change, proposed by Fritz Heider, (1958) whose work was related to the Gestalt school. This theory tends to study the origin and the structure of tensions and conflicts in a network of individuals whose mutual relationships are characterized in terms of friendship and hostility. Furthermore this theory, using a mathematical model, shows how on a social network the users tend to be more conformist and that clearly shows how stressful situations from a social perspective tend to be avoided. In fact they show how a "balanced relation" is more valuable than an unbalanced relation that tends to generate frustration. Therefore, by using phatic function, such as keeping in touch or performing light conversations, we are avoiding contrast and conflict, and the social and communication tensions are weakening, excluding whose who would disturb the structure of the social network. In this way phatic communicative practices are useful, because they allow the members of the SNS to be involved in the discussion, sometimes without having anything to say, just by clicking on "Like" to say "I agree with you". The Facebook feature "poke" offers the same situation. Facebook defines poke as a social utility that connects you with the people around you. Radovanovic (2008) indicated that in social networking terms, poke is contextual, and the context of poke is dependent upon the current level of familiarity between the 'poker' and the 'pokee'. It usually denotes an expression such as: "Hey, what's up?" or "Look at

me!", saying "Hi" to someone you already know well: "Hey, I'm here, online!" followed usually by a message or email. There are numerous possible meanings and interpretations behind the poke and in the context of social networking technologies they can include: a) showing romantic interest for the other; b) a high visibility, low pressure way of getting attention; c) a lightweight interaction.

Following a feature that is typical of participative web applications, trending topics on Twitter provide an insight into the different types of communication dynamics and practices. Through web observation of trending topic tweets we identified four types of phatic posts:

a) the first type of phatic posts implies short nodding, approval or disapproval using expressions like: yes, right, uhm, hm, lol, <3, smileys here when they are used as a message or a (hash)tag, and many other signs and expressions from leet-speak and everyday communications similar to aizuchi in Japanese.

b) the second type of phatic posts implies information about mundane everyday life in order to start up the conversation. Some may call it a pointless conversation form without any value. But looking below those pointless phatic posts one would realize that they contain an information value that actually carries a specific message. For example, a person who is just eating an ice-cream informs their audience of the type of food they are eating. If that person is a micro-celebrity it brings even bigger value to this information-micropost.

c) the third type of phatic posts indicates a secret language or an internal language especially between teens. Teens and young adults use a lot of phatic when communicating among themselves. They use it to protect their privacy and publicly express themselves through these short messages and posts – of which only they know the meaning – so that way they keep adults from their world. danah boyd (2010) wrote on this – decoding the youth and their "secret" language.

d) finally the fourth type of phatic posts is to indicate online connected presence. Also we can see that the phatic process has the function of displaying the other person's online presence, i.e. expressing that one is still "there". This is very indicative to young people, (Radovanovic 2010), who post from their mobile phones status updates in the evening after school, and look for their peers online. This is the function of online presence – to know that someone is out there. Phatic communication and online connection to the other becomes significant and phatic dialogue enables relationship maintenance as well as connected presence in social networks. This way the relevance of the phatic function of microposts is emerging as a form of online intimacy and of social connections in social networks.

5. CONCLUSION

The concepts of phatic communion coming from Malinowski and the phatic function theorized by Jakobson, are both concepts of real importance in this moment, giving us a fundamental theoretical framework on which to move to better understanding, and revealing implications for development and applications in the future. The phatic function comprises: a) social function; b) communicative function and c) validation and recognition function; d) to provide indexical information for social categorization; e) to negotiate the relationship, in particular relative status, roles and affectivity; f) to reinforce social structure. Furthermore, in relation with the social networks, we have added another function: conflict-avoidance. This one helps the social network to keep a balance and harmony, and diminishes the damage caused by conflicts. By using and stimulating new

application of phatic communication and small-talk, tensions are weakened and the social network in which it is applied could be positively influenced. We thus believe the role of phatic posts deserves further scrutiny. It is clearly important to the success of SNS, and has analogues in the underlying protocols used by communication technology. We expect there will be re-usable patterns that system designers can use to ensure channels for phatic communication are available. There is clearly much opportunity for further investigations and research, since we anticipate that the role of phatic communications is inherent in all human social communication and expect to find it implicated in any online communications system.

6. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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