Framing Interactions and Defining Relationships: Phatic Talk in Chinese Telephone Conversations

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This article discusses forms and functions of phatic talk occurring in the opening phase of Chinese telephone conversations between female participants, utilizing naturalistic data. Context- and addressee-sensitive phatic talk in Chinese defines relations, frames interactions, and indexes multiple contextual factors. It will also be demonstrated how phatic strategies may interact with discourse sequence, ratifying and restructuring the organization of conversation to display speakers' local concerns in particular discourse contexts.

1. Introduction

Phatic talk, also called small talk, is a common feature of our daily communication and interaction. The area of phaticity, however, has been underexamined although it is often appealed to as a discourse type (Coupland, Coupland, & Robinson 1992). Malinowsky (1922) first introduced the concept of "phatic communion"; it included formulas of greeting and parting, defined as "language used in free, aimless, social intercourse" (142). Brown and Levinson (1987) observe that for small talk, "the subject of talk is not as important as the fact of carrying on a conversation that is amply loaded with such markers

of emotional agreement" (109). Laver (1981) focuses on the positive, relational value of phatic communion, and discusses how social relationships are negotiated and controlled through such means. Laver argues that a speaker's choice of small talk can signal his/her perception of the interactional context including formality, acquaintance, and social relationship with the addressee, a position that I will support and substantiate with the Chinese data.

In this article, I present linguistic and sociolinguistic descriptions of the forms and functions of phatic talk between female friends, acquaintances, and family members in Chinese telephone conversations, particularly focusing on the opening section of the telephone conversation interaction. I propose that phatic talk serves important discourse functions in the Chinese context: it defines relations, frames interactions, and indexes multiple contextual factors.

The data discussed in this article consist of 90 telephone conversations recorded by twelve native speakers of Chinese in Shanghai, mainland China, and the United States. It is part of a larger corpus of telephone conversations collected for a comparative study of telephone conversations in Chinese and in English. All the calls were recorded at individual households with callers' prior consent. Consent from intended recipients of the calls was obtained after recording was completed with the intention of keeping conversations as natural as possible. In cases of non-consent, the recording was erased immediately by the caller and the conversation did not become part of the data. Follow-up interviews were conducted with all participants.

2. Forms of Phatic Talk

Three broad categories of phrases for phatic communion used for initial phase of conversation are identified by Laver (1981): neutral, self-oriented, and other-oriented. While the latter two focus on either the speaker or the addressee, the neutral category refers to comments regarding the weather or other conditions common to both parties. Analysis of phatic talk indicates that many of the forms are clearly "other-oriented." However, some expressions seem to ill fit Laver's model; they seem to warrant a category of its own. Stressing the need to accurately represent the communicative patterns observed, Saville-Troike (1987) addresses the importance of taxonomies and potential problems with preconceived categories and analytical concepts. In

light of the Chinese data, it is necessary to expand on Laver's (1981) taxonomy to include a category named "relation-oriented" in addition to his original three categories. Since neutral and self-oriented categories are not observed in the data, Chinese phatic talk is primarily either other-oriented or relation-oriented. Specifically, phatic talk evidenced can be divided into five sub groups[1]: (1) addressee's state, (2) addressee's here-and-now activity, (3) contact between caller and callee, (4) voice recognition, and (5) disturbance check. While the first two sub groups belong to the "other-oriented" category, group three and four are oriented towards the relation dimension. The categorization of the last sub group "disturbance check" is more complex since it cannot be placed merely in one category; therefore, this sub group is more appropriate to be classified as connected to both categories.

There are some general features of phatic expressions[2] in Chinese. First of all, Chinese phatic talk can be encoded in a number of different ways with a variety of linguistic forms focusing on either addressee's state or the relational aspect of the participants, as mentioned earlier, unlike phatic talk in English, which is formalized through a limited number of inquiries with similar meanings centering on the addressee's state of being. Secondly, in the Chinese case, phatic talk may also be embodied in the form of a statement, although phatic exchanges predominantly start with a phatic inquiry. An example of a phatic statement is "long time no see." Thirdly, there are a number of phatic inquiries that do carry referential meaning and, therefore, many of these inquiries are not desemanticised. In fact, most of the inquiries belonging to the here-and-now activity category call for specific answers. Lastly, since phatic inquiries in Chinese may carry referential meaning and are encoded in a wide range of linguistic forms, different categories are not necessarily exclusive of one another. A comment regarding the contact between the two parties may be followed by another inquiry about the callee's general well-being. Therefore, it is possible that more than one phatic exchange

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[1] Pavlidou (1994) discusses seven subcategories of phatic talk. The categories 1, 3, 5 here are based on and similar to Pavlidou's classifications of addressee's state, lack of contact, and caller's intrusion.
[2] Forms as well as functions of phatic talk under discussion in this article are limited to the data examined in this study. Therefore, I do not intend to make generalizations concerning all possible phatic forms or functions that may occur in Chinese telephone conversations or in other interactional contexts.

may occur in a given telephone conversation. Next, I will discuss each group in more detail.

2.1. Addressee's state

The subcategory of addressee's state refers to inquiries that are concerned with the addressee's well-being through either general inquiries such as 你好吗？ "How are you?" or through inquiries in connection with particular time-related routines or activities such as 你回来啦？ "So you are back, right?" Listed below are examples of such inquiries:

a.   General:
     你好吗？   How are you?
b.   Specific:
(你)饭吃过了吗？   Have you eaten yet?
吃过晚饭了啊？   You have had your dinner, right?
你回来啦？   So you are back, right?
你今天休息吗?   Is it your day off today?

你好吗？ "How are you?" is an inquiry that is common and suitable for general acquaintance. However, it may not occur in some interactions between intimate or family relations since it might sound ordinary and thus less than desirable for special relationships. Instead, some other linguistic choices might be preferred in those cases, as I shall elaborate on in my following discussion. Furthermore, this expression may not be as formulaic as one might assume; the use of "you" is appropriate in many cases but not in others. This is because "naming" is critical in the Chinese society (see Blum 1997 for an excellent account on the naming practice in China), depending on the social status, distance, and relationship vis-a-vis the participants. In a family-relation context, a daughter calling her mother, for example, might phrase the inquiry in the form of 妈妈好吗？ "How is mother?" instead of the use of the pronoun 你 "you." But there is also variance in different families and households.[3]

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[3] As a matter of fact, "How are you" in Chinese may also function as the statement of purpose when it is preceded by "long time no see" for calls conducted merely for interpersonal reasons. This brings up the complexity of the identification and designation of the category "phatic" talk vs. otherwise, an issue that is addressed by Coupland, Coupland, and Robinson (1992). Here, I just want to reiterate the position

For phatic exchanges that are time specific, (你)饭吃过了吗？ "Have you eaten yet?" is a common conversation opener for many Chinese people and is used in face-to-face encounters as well as in telephone conversations, bearing some similarities with the English "How are you" inquiry. Nevertheless, whereas "How are you" is almost an all-time-suitable inquiry, there is time as well as register constraint as to when "Have you eaten yet" can be used. It is only around mealtime that interlocutors exchange such an inquiry. Furthermore, it is not to be used in formal contexts or between participants who are not acquainted with each other. It also must be mentioned that the inquiry "Have you eaten yet" usually does not involve any pragmatic intention to invite the addressee for a meal unless such an inquiry is addressed to a guest by the host/hostess in his/her house, or if the speaker happens to be going out for a meal him/herself. Therefore, in general, whether the reply to such an inquiry is affirmative or negative does not affect the interactional outcome except in the specified contexts mentioned above. For a non-native speaker of Chinese, however, this expression can cause serious misunderstanding, as has been observed by several scholars (e.g., Gunthner 1993). I would further point out that this inquiry is a relatively traditional way of starting conversations as there seem to be individual differences with regard to the use of the inquiry, with the younger generation manifesting its use less frequently. Other time-specific comments such as "So you are back" or "Is it your day off today?" identify the speaker immediately as someone who is fairly familiar with the addressee, an issue I will discuss in more detail in the section on the functions of phatic talk.

2.2. Addressee's here-and-now activity

Inquiries that are focused on the addressee's here-and-now activity include the following:

你在干什么?看电视啊？   What are you doing? Watching TV?
你在看电视啊？   Were you watching TV?

These inquiries occur between conversation partners who are fairly close and maintain frequent contact; therefore, they are well acquainted

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that the same linguistic form may have different discourse functions in different contexts, a point repeatedly observed by many other researchers.

with each other's daily routines. Nevertheless, such inquiries may also occur in interactions between friends who have been out of touch for sometime yet their previous frequent contact and close relationship still enable them to assume knowledge of each other's routine activities.[4]

2.3. Contact between caller and callee

Callers or callees sometimes express interest in their contact with each other through comments about the lack of contact or previous unsuccessful contact in their initial exchanges, conveying their desire to maintain the social and affect bond to their conversation partners. Such messages contribute to solidarity and relationship building, focusing on a similar but not identical theme "consolidation" as proposed by Laver (1981) in his taxonomy of phatic communion for conversation closings in English. "Consolidation" encompasses emphasis of enjoyable quality of the encounter and promise of a continuation of the relationship. What is salient about the Chinese data is that the theme regarding the contact between both parties is addressed in the initial phase of conversations as well. Comments in this category include the following:

好久不见了.	Long time no see.
好久没通电话了.	Long time no talking (calling).
那天打电话给你. 晚上不在家.	I called you the other night but you were not in.
打了好几个电话	I called you several times.
你们家电话真难打哎.	It's difficult to reach you.

The phaticity and positive affective bond entailed in comments on lack of contact between callers and callees as in "long time no see" or its variant forms may not be difficult to recognize and perceive. On the other hand, categorization and interpretation of comments that almost seem to resemble reprimands such as "I called you the other night but you weren't in" is certainly more complex and challenging. Analyzing those comments from an emic perspective, I propose that these seemingly non-phatic or even blame-like comments also encode affect bonding, and therefore, these comments are better perceived as con-

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[4] These initial exchanges about the here-and-now activity of the addressee may also shape the topics as well as the structure of the conversations that ensue, but I am unable to discuss this issue in the present article due to limited length.

stituting part of the phatic interaction in addition to conveying specific propositional meaning.

Specifically, a considerable number of calls feature initial comments regarding callers' previous unsuccessful attempts at contacting callees, particularly in the data provided by native speakers of Chinese in the US. These comments are not formulaic expressions; they are addressee- and circumstance-specific, usually making references to a specific date and time of the speaker's last attempted yet unsuccessful contact. I suggest that it is partly the structural position of those comments that enables us to identify the multidimensional affective and pragmatic functions entailed in those utterances. While a statement such as "Long time no see" expresses one's delight in conversing with the addressee, a comment about the caller's previous attempt to get into touch with the addressee, I argue, achieves a similar effect regarding the speaker's attitude towards and enthusiasm for relationship building between the conversational partners. The mere mention of the speaker's previous attempt at contacting the addressee, however unsuccessful, makes her effort on-record, and it attests to her contribution to the maintenance of their bond. It is this aspect of such utterances that ratifies the structural priority of these expressions to precede the main topic of their talk, conveying phatic effect in spite of the fact that some of the expressions almost resemble complaints to speakers of other languages. Furthermore, criteria for defining forms of talk as phatic or otherwise will differ across social groups (Coupland, Coupland, & Robinson 1992) and "functions of phatic communion are clearly highly variable across cultures" (213).

2.4. Voice recognition

Comments on voice recognition manifest a linguistic and sociolinguistic phenomenon that has not been observed in other cultures. These are statements made by callers when their voices have been recognized by callees. The examples illustrate such comments:

你一听就听出来了	You recognized my voice immediately, wow!
哎. 你耳朵挺好.	Oh, you're pretty good at voice recognition.
你听得出来的啊.	So you could recognize my voice.

Comments on voice recognition usually occur when invited guessing takes place. Invited guessing refers to calls in which the

caller asks the callee to speculate on the caller's identity rather than offering caller self-identification (see Sun 1999 for more details). After the callee recognizes the caller, the caller almost always follows up with some comments that acknowledge and praise the callee's successful identification; such comments therefore focus on the relational aspect and solidarity-building.

2.5. Disturbance check

In some telephone conversations, the caller began the conversation by asking if the callee was taking a nap or was already in bed. The following is an example of such an inquiry:

你在睡觉，对吗?　Were you taking a nap?

Disturbance check is a category that is hard to place in either the addressee's state or the relation category since it is in fact related to both. It is more appropriate, therefore, to consider such comments as encompassing both categories. This category may not be perceived as having phatic function from a purely semantic perspective since it entails referential meaning on its own and requires specific replies. However, the entirety of the meanings and functions of an utterance can only be determined with consideration of the discourse context. Furthermore, such an inquiry will only occur when the context suggests such a need. For example, if the intended recipient only comes to answer the call after considerable waiting time, it might provide some type of signal to a sensitive caller. In addition, the reply to the caller's initial inquiry regarding the callee's engaged activity is critical for the caller as well as for the development of the conversation.

3. Functions of Phatic Talk

Laver's (1981) taxonomy for functions of phatic talk in the initial phase of conversation consists of propitiatory, initiatory and exploratory categories. The propitiatory function is to defuse potential hostility of silence while the initiatory function is to get the interaction comfortably under way. The exploratory function, on the other hand, "carries the conversational implicature of negotiating a change in the relationship between the participants, usually towards greater intimacy or greater distancing" (1981:304). Analysis of the Chinese data leads to categorization of five specific functions of phatic talk: foregrounding relationships, affirming and reaffirming affect bond, struc-

turing and ratifying discourse structure, and expressing politeness.

3.1. Foregrounding Relationships

One of the functions of phatic exchanges at the beginning of telephone conversations is to foreground the relationship between the caller and the callee. For example, in the following calls, we find the utterance "so you're back" in Turn 4 of both calls.

(1)　Caller (C): female, 30s, in the US
　　　Callee[5] (A): female, 30s, in the US

　　01　A:　Hello.[6]
　　02　C:　Hello.
　　　　　　康　　悦　　吗?
　　　　　　kang　yue　ma
　　　　　　full name　　　Qtag[7]
　　　　　　Hello. Is this Yue Kang?
　　03　A:　哎.
　　　　　　ei
　　　　　　Yes
　　04　C:　嘿、你 回　来　　　啦?
　　　　　　hei ni hui　lai　　　la
　　　　　　hi you return　　　　Qtag
　　　　　　Hi, so you are back
　　05　A:　回　　来　　了.
　　　　　　hui　lai　le
　　　　　　return　　　　ASP[8]
　　　　　　Yeah
　　06　C:　我　就　来　试 试.
　　　　　　wo　jiu　lai　shi shi
　　　　　　I just come try try
　　　　　　I'm just calling to see if you are back

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[5] Callee stands for the intended recipient of the call. In the transcripts, callee is represented by A (the person who answers the call) while C stands for the caller.
[6] Since the call was recorded in the US, the callee's initial reply to the summons in the first turn was in English.
[7] "Qtag" stands for "question tag."
[8] ASP stands for "aspect particle" in Chinese.

07 你 知 道 我 是 谁 吗
ni   zhi   dao   wo   shi   shui   ma
you know I   am   who Qtag
Do you know who this is?

(2) Caller (C): female, 40s, in China
    Callee (A): female, 30s, in China

01 A: 喂
wei
Hello

02 C: 程 淑 琴
cheng shu   qin
full name
Shuqin Cheng

03 A: 哎
ei
Yes

04 C: 你 回 来 啦?
ni   hui   lai   la
you return Qtag
So you are back

05 A: 嗳.
ae
Yes

06 C: 在 烧 晚 饭 吗?
zai shao wan fan ma
be cook dinner Qtag
Are you cooking dinner?

The word "back" in Turn 4 in both excerpts above refers to two different meanings; while the example in (2) refers to the callee's return from work, example (1) is a reference to the callee's return from an out-of-town trip. In either case, it is a given that the recipient is at home, which is evidenced by the fact that she is answering the phone; therefore, both callers may seem to be merely stating the obvious. Nevertheless, inquiries such as these also foreground the familiarity of the caller with the callee as well as their relationship. Boyle (2000) discusses how individuals can use phaticity strategically to negotiate greater affiliation with others through implicit compliments. In the

case of the conversations examined here, the fact that the callers mention the callees' return indicates their respective knowledge of the callee's routine schedule. Consequently such an utterance immediately presents the caller as someone who is very familiar with the callee rather than an ordinary acquaintance, establishing a close relationship between the participants at the outset of the interaction. While display of personal information at the service encounter in the U.S. indicates a shift of discursive frame from that of formal and impersonal to informal and personal (Ide 1997), reference to callee's return from work or an out-of-town trip in the initial phase of the conversation sets up a relationship frame.

3.2. Affirming and reaffirming affect bond

The affect bond between the two conversational parties is attested in cases of invited guessing (which is usually successful). As discussed earlier, in such cases, callers almost always make comments acknowledging callees' ability in successfully identifying callers with voice sample. Voice recognition comments, therefore, feature significant affective functions. These comments are not merely statements; as a matter of fact, they achieve interactional goals. First, the callee's successful accomplishment in identifying the caller demonstrates her familiarity with the caller, and such a fact is testimony to their strong bond. Furthermore, as the caller acknowledges and expresses her keen awareness of the callee's ability in recognizing her voice, she attributes credit to the callee and her praise itself further contributes to their relation building. In expressing her delight in being recognized, the caller also solidifies positive face building for both parties and reinforces the bond between them.

3.3. A metamessage of purpose of calling

Phrases such as "long time no see" or "long time no talking" produced by the caller at the outset of the conversation may also indicate that the primary purpose of calling is to get in touch with the callee rather than to discuss specific agenda, in addition to expressing delight in conversing with the addressee. Although such phrases do not explicitly state that "I am calling to see how you are doing," examination of the data indicates that these phrases, if produced initially in the discourse context by callers, only occur in calls made for mere social reasons. However, this is not the same for recipients. Since callees are not aware of the purpose of calls, at least initially, they may use such

expressions to convey the pleasure of conversing with callers. It is also observed that sometimes another phrase by the caller such as "how are you?" immediately follows the "long time no see" comment to further explicate the purpose of the call, as the following example illustrates.

(3) Caller (C): female, 40s, in China
    Callee (A): female, 40s, in China

01   A: 喂.
        wei
        Hello.
02   C: 杨   敏   珍.
        yang   min   zhen
        full name
        Minzhen Yang.
03: A: 哎
        ei
        Yes.
04   C: 好   久   不 见 了   么.
        hao   jiu   bu jian le   me
        good long   no see ASP   SFP
        Long time no see.
05   A: 啊?
        what
        Pardon?
06   C: 好   久   不   见   了.
        hao   jiu   bu   jian   le
        good   long   no   see   ASP
        Long time no see.
07 A: 嗳.
        ae
        Yes
08   C: 你   好   吗.
        ni   hao   ma
        you   well   Qtag
        How are you doing?

    Whether it is callers or callees who make such comments, these statements convey a message of solidarity and rapport building.

3.4. Structuring and ratifying discourse structure

   Ochs and Schiffelin (1989) state that linguists have underestimated the extent to which grammatical and discourse structure serve affective ends. The present study has provided some initial evidence of the interaction between discourse sequence and affective strategies as demonstrated in the Chinese data examined. In Chinese telephone conversations, the structure of discourse may vary and relationship is one of the most important variables. Specifically, as in Example (1) cited earlier, the initial inquiry "so you're back" de facto alters the discourse structure of the telephone conversation by engaging the callee in the verbal interaction prior to the establishment of the caller's identity. The identification sequence of the caller, if it is necessary to occur, which is the case in Example (1), then <u>follows</u> (see, e.g., Turn 7 of Example 1) rather than precedes phatic inquiries (Turns 4 and 6). Such a structural pattern of phatic inquiry preceding caller-identification is in sharp contrast with the sequence that is discussed in studies of telephone conversations (e.g., Schegloff 1986, 1968).[9]

   It has been claimed that there are universals for sequential order in telephone conversation openings (Hopper 1992; Hopper & Doany 1989), but several studies have presented evidence of cultural variations (e.g., Halmari 1993; Pavlidou, 1994). Although identification is presumed as a precondition for further interaction, the Chinese data suggest that this may not always be the case. As I have demonstrated, a "reversed" sequence of phatic talk preceding caller-identification may occur in Chinese discourse. Such restructuring of the discourse sequence is ratified by the relationship of the conversational partners involved, as discussed in the section on foregrounding relationships. In other words, only certain relationships legitimize such a discourse sequence. On the other hand, relationships are recognized, affirmed, and reaffirmed simultaneously through these phatic exchanges in the initial phase of telephone conversations. What is more significant, perhaps, is that the callees manifest no uneasiness or discomfort in replying to phatic inquires prior to being informed of the identity of the callers. This is a salient feature of the Chinese data.

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[9] Schegloff (1986, 1968) identifies four adjacency sequences accomplished by the participants at the beginning of North American telephone conversations: summons/answer, identification, greeting, and how-are-you sequence.

It seems that different cultures may utilize different dimensions of linguistic and discourse strategies. Indeed, the various strategies that are available for communicative goals reach far beyond the level of word choice or sound prominence. Discourse structure may also be utilized to express meaning more effectively in the Chinese context. This observed pattern suggests that, in Chinese, interaction between familiar friends allows for rules that are different from interaction between non-familiar or socially-distant relations.

3.5. Expression of politeness

Initial phatic exchanges may also reflect native speakers' sensitivity to and concern for the addressees' needs, schedules, and whether their calls might cause some inconvenience. When callers initiate inquiries such as "Were you taking a nap?" at the outset of the interaction, they demonstrate through the initiation of the disturbance-check awareness that their calls may have caused some inconvenience to the callees in some way. Such an inquiry is intended to elicit confirmation or disconfirmation of callers' concern. Other contextual clues, such as who actually answers the phone first and how long it takes the callee to come and answer, might also provide additional clues for the caller to gauge whether the call is made at an inconvenient time. In those calls, it is the possibility of constituting some disturbance and the caller's concern for the callee that prioritize such inquiries structurally, rendering such inquiries sequentially a necessary precedence. Whether the callee is indeed disturbed or whether the callee admits to being disturbed is another issue. In any case, the caller's initial inquiry itself conveys the caller's politeness consideration, which will smooth the interaction.

I propose that such an inquiry performs a dual function by doing facework for both the caller and the callee. The inquiry reflects the caller's consideration for the callee; it demonstrates her sensitivity, and this attribute adds to the caller's positive face. On the other hand, such an inquiry also protects the callee from a possible negative politeness face-threatening act disturbance, since the callee is provided with opportunities to inform the caller should inconvenience indeed be incurred. If the callee does acknowledge that it is not an appropriate time, the caller shall respond accordingly in the ensuing interaction by either making the call brief or terminating it as soon as possible. In reality, however, responses to such disturbance-check often tend to be

negative; recipients usually do not admit to being disturbed. Such "denials" help minimize any sense of disturbance callers might feel. Therefore, both sides are considerate and they cooperate in the construction of the positive face for each other and for themselves.

4. Conclusion

Phatic talk in Chinese discourse is both constitutive and reflective. Through linguistic choices, callers and callees project their perceptions of the relationships between themselves and their conversational partners and construct the interaction accordingly. The need to designate a "relation-oriented" category for phatic talk in Chinese is not incidental; it reflects the significant role relation plays in the Chinese society and in discourse interaction. Phaticity may be constructed and negotiated through formulaic expressions as well as through various context-specific utterances. Definitions and functions of phatic talk are cultural specific; how we communicate and negotiate social and referential meaning can be achieved in different ways.

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