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PHATIC FUNCTION IN ACADEMIC DISCOURSE

The paper puts forward the hypothesis that in academic discourse the phatic function not only provides the discourse continuity but also possesses a discourse-organizing feature. It helps lectures be continued and structured with the help of certain lecture specific tokens, which we have called phatic tokens. This assumption is substantiated with the example of questions in lectures as a genre recurrent element, which, together with other tokens, not only provides for the continuity but also structures lectures at the discourse level.

Key words: *phatic function, subsidiary and main discourse, questions, discourse structure, discourse continuity, academic discourse*

There have been a number of studies on the phatic function of language that have mainly considered phaticity as a means for ‘*saving communication in marginal phases*’ /Laver, 1975: 218/. Its basic role has been characterized as that of making the speech ‘*sound polite, avoiding silence, diffusing hostility, acknowledging the presence of another person and enjoying each other’s presence*’ /Malinowski, 1923: 314-315/. But what we argue here is that this interpretation of the phatic function is narrow and incomplete because it is more than just a simple means to be socially active /Malinowski, 1923; Jakobson, 1960/ and ‘*semantically empty*’ /Coupland, Coupland, Robinson, 1992: 210/. In our understanding, the realization of the phatic function is wider than that. The former studies on the function seem to have analyzed it only at the level of the subsidiary discourse /Montgomery, 1977/. Yet, as the analysis of our material has shown, here as well the phatic function is broader in its application than simply a function that has no semantic markedness. Moreover, phaticity has not been investigated at the level of the main discourse where its role is to structure the discourse through the tokens that provide the continuity of the subsidiary discourse. The present paper focuses on the use of questions in lectures. It is shown that being defined as phatic tokens, that is genre specific and recurrent elements, questions provide the continuity of lectures at the level of the subsidiary discourse and structure the discourse at the level of the main discourse.

As for the model of discourse structure of lectures, we proceed from the one proposed by Montgomery /1977/. Montgomery differentiates between two planes of discourse, and each of them has its constituent elements. The first plane is the subsidiary one that is dependent on the main plane by expanding, evaluating or commenting on it /Montgomery, 1977/. It has two functions out of which we will focus on glossing which is incorporated in restating, qualifying, and commenting /ibid.: 100/.

The second is the main plane where *'the lecturer says what he's going to talk about, says it, and then sums up what he's said'* /Montgomery, 1977: 111/. It consists of speech acts which are called episodes that have two members: focusing members that open and end the episode, and informing members that occur between the beginning and end of the episode. Based on the results we obtained it should be noted that the role and function of phaticity has not been properly observed on the main plane of discourse. The analysis of our factual material has revealed that it is phaticity that helps to structure and organize the main discourse.

A question arises: 'Why do we need to study lectures at the discourse level in terms of structure?' The answer is that because discourse structure impacts discourse perception /Camiciottoli, 2007; Brown & Manogue, 2001/. By this we indicate that as soon there is 'structure on the content covered' /Westwood, 1996: 68/ the information perception becomes easier /Wu, 2013/. As Michael Faraday has stated in 'Advice to a lecturer':

.... a lecturer should endeavor... to obtain... the power of clothing his thoughts and ideas in language smooth and harmonious and at the same time simple and easy. His periods should be complete and expressive, conveying clearly the whole of the idea. /Murray, 1999, quoted in Malavska, 2016: 70/

But, in our view, the notion of structure at the discourse level is not something that exists itself and has to be taken for granted but is acquired due to the phatic function. Therefore, we have proposed the idea that it is the phatic function that adheres structure to the discourse through the phatic tokens which are the genre specific and recurrent elements /Malinowski, 1923; Senft, 2009; Jakobson, 1960; Laver, 1974/. Moreover, we do not share the view that they are only functional units but think that they are functionally more active but never 'semantically empty' /Coupland, Coupland and Robinson, 1992: 210/. In our view, the meaning of the token becomes secondary because of the conventionally patterned nature of the genre /Bhatia, 2004; Paltridge, 2006/ but it is never absent as, if it were so, there would be no difference which token is used and when.

Interrogative sentences or questions, as lecture recurrent elements, are a key to understand how discourse structure is acquired through phatic tokens. For the purposes of the present study, questions have been analyzed in the corpus of 6 lectures on Natural Sciences that have been uploaded as a part of OpenCourseWare policy run by world-known universities /MIT, Oxford, Yale, etc/. All the lectures have been delivered by 6 different lecturers. In this manner we have attempted to

avoid the issue related to the stylistic preference of the language use so that the speech style of the lecturer does not impact the final results. The lecturers are native speakers of English.

For the start the analysis has been conducted on the subsidiary plane. As a lecture recurrent and genre specific element on this plane questions have been researched by many scholars who have come up with various functional interpretations of interrogative sentences /Schleef, 2009; Camiciottoli, 2007; Dafouz-Milne & García, 2013, et al./. We not only agree with the most of the functional interpretations presented but also have revealed several more. Moreover, we have also noticed that questions have the feature of multifunctioning in the same context which has been discussed by Chang only for the ‘*common question types*’ /Chang, 2012: 110, quoted in Dafouz-Milne, García, 2013: 136/. It has also been shown that these functions, which operate simultaneously, are of equal status: none of them is ‘*inferior*’ or ‘*superior*’ over the others /Jacobson, 1960/ as a phatic token. For example,

(1)72:24 There may be no contribution for a large number of momenta, 72:27 or maybe insignificantly small. 72:29 But it is indeed doing precisely that 72:31 It is associating an amplitude and a phase for every plane 72:34 wave, with every different value of momentum. 72:37 And you can compute, before panicking, 72:44 precisely what that amplitude and phase 72:45 is by using the inverse Fourier transform. **Right?+++¹** 72:49 So there's no magic here. 72:50 You just calculate. 72:51 You can use your calculator, literally-- I hate that word 72:57 /Adams, 2013/.

The analysis of the functional realization of *Right?* as a phatic token in this particular context indicates that it has multiple functions. The first function (relatively ordered) of this question is to verify the preceding idea in order to eliminate any possible doubts about the information truthfulness (it is made doubtless that the application of ‘*the inverse Fourier transform*’ is the answer to how to ‘*compute*’ the ‘*amplitude and phase*’) by functioning as a ‘*booster*’ that strengthens the truthfulness of the statement and makes the latter more persuasive /Hyland, 1998/. Secondly, with the help of the question the lecturer focuses the audience’s attention on the matter highlighting that its awareness is crucial. This functional property has also been mentioned by Schleef /2009/. We share his position that with *Right?* the professor does not have the intention to elicit a response but wants to stress the importance of that piece of information and the necessity to be aware of it. We assume that this function is applied to help students understand what information to concentrate on more in order to succeed in exams and mid-terms (here the professor has focused the students’ attention on ‘*the inverse Fourier transform*’ as a means to ‘*compute the amplitude and phase*’ by indicating that the computation with the transform is essential to know). Thirdly, the question is a means in the lecturer’s hand not to sound overbearing and authoritative, to diminish the sense of pressure on the learner. Psychologically it is

hard for students to be in the role of a learner and of the one who is constantly taught, hence the delivery manner must be less dominating. For that the lecturer makes up the atmosphere that he lacks the information, and the response of the audience is the only way to fill in the information gap. This behavior makes the audience appreciate their role as learners who may also know what the lecturer needs as an answer to his question. In reality, the performance of creating the conditions to feedback is a simulation to get rid of the impression that lecturers are the only ‘tenors’ /Halliday, 1978: 143/ who are knowledgeable. The function of the question generates ‘common group membership’ /Hyland, 1998/ by functioning as a Modal question tag /Schleef, 2009/ but with a difference that this very question does not offer the turn (there is no pause, gestures, facial expressions and/or the context to signal that). Fourthly, as far as the lecture is delivered by the lecturer, there is a need to create the atmosphere that the students are not ignored in the teaching process and are ‘interacted’ /Goffman, 1981, quoted in Malavska, 2016: 67; Dafouz-Milne & García, 2013/. The appropriate atmosphere is made up with the application of *Right?* in an interrogative form which has the power of attracting a person’s attention subconsciously /Hoffeld, 2016/. In reality this is simply an imitation to involvement through the interrogative form of the statement which may also happen in the case of self-answered questions that ‘serve to induce the student into thinking that what is taking place is an interactive sharing of ideas and information’ /Bamford, 2005, quoted in Dafouz-Milne and García, 2013: 140/. Of course, firstly, in our case, ‘*induce to think*’ is interpreted as creating the illusion because we take lecturers as pedagogues who know how to work with the audience with the right method to teach and not ‘induce’, and secondly, this is not a self-answered question but an anaphor that is dependent on the preceding and, sometimes, following statement (in case of signaling what to expect next the question functions as a cataphor). All the functions decoded are equal with no sense of ‘dominance’ or ‘inferiority’ /Jacobson, 1960/ which has been mentioned by Jacobson in his study on phatic phrases.

Let’s take another example:

(2) ...And it makes sense, because the columns of A have length m 9:40 and the columns of C have length m. 9:43 And every column of C is some combination 9:48 of the columns of A. 9:49 And it's these numbers in here that 9:51 tell me what combination it is. 9:53 **Do you see that?---** 3 sec 9:57 That in that answer, C, I'm seeing stuff that's 10:01 combinations of these columns. 10:04 Now, suppose I look at it -- that's two ways now. 10:09The third way is look at it by rows. 10:12 /Strang, 2005/.

As we see the only function the question fulfils in this context is to elicit feedback or ‘elicit response’ /Camiciottoli, 2007/. After the question there is the pause of 3 seconds and the maintenance of the eye contact that signal that the lecturer is expecting their response, either positive or negative.

Another example is when the question is used to make a humorous effect:

(3) ...*The femur is the thigh*. What bones are in the leg? So you've always called this lower appendage, the whole thing a leg. It's really a thigh and a leg So what are the bones down here? whoops. Can you see him?--- 2sec Where is he? --- 2 sec **Where's our, our help?**+++ No, I was just bragging about you that. You are really good. So I want you to live up to what I've been saying. Well, I went to other websites to look at other professors and the person up there was so far behind everything the professor was talking about... /Diamond, 2005/.

Here, the lecturer uses the question to create a humorous atmosphere by talking about what is not present in the auditorium: she wants the help but in reality she does not have an assistant similar to the lecturers from the videos she has watched. Therefore, the controversy brings about the laughter.

Keeping the functions of the questions presented above our aim is to understand what role the questions play in the subsidiary discourse. Thus, it becomes clear from the analysis of the above mentioned examples, and many more, that questions aim at providing the continuity of discourse by taking the interaction from the beginning to the middle and then to its end as one of the most productive means to promote perception. In this sense, our interpretation of the phatic function to some extent overlaps with its traditional interpretation. We agree with its role of 'saving communication' but not only 'in marginal phases' /Laver, 1975: 218/. In our view, the phatic function aims at taking the interaction to its logical end by eliminating any possible barriers during the interaction in order to promote perception. And this idea is quite logical because lectures as a genre in academic discourse are characterized with genre specific elements that are recurrent and make the genre conventionally patterned and predictable to the members /Bhatia, 2004, Paltridge, 2006/. Hence, we conclude that those elements are also the ones that promote the perception of the genre the best. Consequently, if they serve for promoting the perception, they also function for taking the communication to its logical end. With this reasonable perception of questions as a phatic token, we structurally consider them as restatements /Montgomery, 1977/ in the subsidiary discourse that have the role of providing its continuity. The idea is reconfirmed with the aforementioned examples when the questions have verified the truthfulness of the preceding idea in order to make the statement certain, have created the illusion of involvement to hold the audience's attention, have created a humorous atmosphere to release tension or tiredness or have initiated the interaction to create the sense of 'group membership' /Schleef, 2009; Hyland, 1998/, this way contributing to the continuity of the discourse till its end.

After getting a more or less comprehensive picture of how questions function in the subsidiary discourse we go on to analyze them in the main one. In contrast to the former plane, where the phatic function has conventionally been characterized as a function that has no semantic markedness and is purely social /Malinowski,

1923; Senft, 2009; Jakobson, 1960; Laver, 1975/, on this plane we see that its comprehension changes abruptly and extends its perceptual boundaries. Through the analysis of questions as phatic tokens it has been stated that the phatic function has the role of providing the continuity of the subsidiary discourse taking it to its end. But how does it function at the level of the main discourse?

The thing is that whatever provides continuity at the level of the subsidiary discourse, automatically structures the main discourse. This seems to be quite reasonable because 'structure consists of constitutive elements, which combine to form larger elements, parts coming together to form wholes' /Reynolds, 1997: 684/. To explain the idea it should be stated that when being a token of a restatement in the subsidiary discourse, they become a structural part of an episode /Montgomery, 1977/. In each episode they may come up as a different structural unit such as an 'informing' token or a token of 'prospective' or 'retrospective focusing' /Montgomery, 1977: 111/.

Let's study the case when the question is a part of informing:

(4) So all right, now 48:00 what's the main intuition behind this extra layer, especially for NLP?+++ 48:03 Well, that will allow us to learn non-linear 48:06 interactions between these different input words. 48:08 Whereas before, we could only say well if it appears in this location, 48:12 always increase the probability that the next word is a location. 48:17 Now we can learn things and patterns like, if in is in the second position, increase 48:23 the probability of this being the location only if museum is also the first vector. 48:28 So we can learn interactions between these different inputs. 48:31 And now we'll eventually make our model more accurate. 48:43 Great question. 48:44 **So do I have a second W there?**+++ 48:45 So the second layer here the scores are unnormalized, so it'll just be U and 48:50 because we just have a single U, this will just be a single column vector and we'll 48:54 transpose that to get our inner product to get a single number out for the score... /Manning, Socher, 2017/.

In the example it is shown that the question is an informing token for this episode and is what the lecturer is talking about in the body of the episode after beginning and before finishing it. While, when we look at it at the level of the subsidiary discourse we take it as a restatement because it expands the preceding utterance by fostering the continuity of the subsidiary discourse.

In the next example the question functions as a rhetorical question in the prospective focusing:

(5) So, 27:54 **what do we have or what's available to 27:57 improve the fidelity in DNA replication?**+++ 28:01 The polymerase or one of the associated 28:06 proteins actually checks which base got 28:10 stuck in and it matches. It looks to see 28:13 what base it should have stuck in from 28:15 reading the original strand and it sees 28:17 what base actually got stuck in. And 28:20 guess what, it does- the wrong base got 28:23 stuck in..

It stops, takes that base out and 28:25 replaces it with the correct base. So 28:28 there's a proofreading function and that 28:30 improves the fidelity of replication by 28:33 several log orders of magnitude more... /Matsudaira, 2006/.

As we see questions have the feature of connecting the former episode with the current one by functioning as a 'generalized statement of the subsequent discourse topic' /Montgomery, 1977: 113/.

The question is a structural part of retrospective focusing and signals the end of the episode in the current example:

(6) ... So again, the situation is, you have 44:22 a sequence of random variables. 44:24 Their moment-generating function exists. 44:27 And in each point t , it converges 44:31 to the value of the moment-generating function 44:33 of some other random variable x . 44:38 And what should happen? OK? 44:41 In light of this theorem, it should be the case 44:43 that the distribution of this sequence 44:47 gets closer and closer to the distribution 44:49 of this random variable x . **OK?** +++ 44:53 And to make it formal, to make that information formal, what 45:00 we can conclude is, for all x , the probability 45:09 X_i is less than or equal to x tends to the probability 45:15

(7) that at x ... /Lee, 2013/.

With the examples of the questions it has been indicated that the phatic function adheres structure to a lecture at the level of main discourse through the genre specific and recurrent elements that we have called phatic tokens. They may function as tokens of informing and focusing.

To sum up, it should be stated that the role of phatic function in academic discourse is possible to understand only through the investigation of this function on the two planes of discourse: subsidiary and main. The role of phaticity on the first plane is to provide the continuity of discourse by eliminating the possible barriers that may prevent the discourse progress. From this perspective, the analysis of the material has revealed that questions function appropriately to stimulate the continuity of the discourse: they verify the truthfulness of the idea, focus attention, initiate feedback, etc. by removing the possible barriers that may obtrude the discourse development and its perception. As for the main discourse, it is structured with the help of phatic tokens that not only are a part and parcel of each episode but also connect them with one another. In this respect, questions act as opening and closing statements by signaling not only the beginning but also the end of any speech act incorporated in the episode. They may appear between the opening and closing statements, in the body of the episode as tokens that provide for the continuity of the opening statement to the closing one. Hence, we conclude that the role of the phatic function in the overall discourse is to ensure discourse continuity and to structure the discourse.

Notes

1. The symbol ‘+++’ stands for the absence of pause, while ‘---’ for its presence which is accompanied with the time duration.

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Ա. ՉՈՒԲԱՐՅԱՆ, Ն. ՀԱԿՈՔՅԱՆ – Խոսքարկման գործառույթը գիտական խոսքում. – Հոդվածում դիտարկվում է լեզվի խոսքարկման գործառույթի առանձնահատկությունները գիտական դիսկուրսի ժանրերից մեկում՝ դասախոսություններում: Տարբեր դասախոսություններից քաղված հարցական նախադասությունների օրինակով ցույց է տրվում, որ, հանդես գալով որպես խոսքարկային գործառույթ իրականացնող տարրեր, վերջիններս մի կողմից ապահովում են դիսկուրսի շարունակականությունը, իսկ մյուս կողմից մասնակցում են սվյալ դիսկուրսի կառուցման ու կազմավորման գործընթացին:

Բանալի բառեր. խոսքարկման գործառույթ, երկրորդային և գլխավոր դիսկուրս, հարցական նախադասություն, դիսկուրսի կառուցվածք, դիսկուրսի շարունակականություն

А. ЧУБАРИАН, Н. АКОПЯН – Фатическая функция в академическом дискурсе. – В статье рассматривается роль фатической функции языка в одном из жанров академического дискурса. На примере вопросительных предложений, которые используются в лекциях, показано, что в академическом дискурсе так называемые фатические элементы не только обеспечивают непрерывность дискурса, но и структурируют данный тип дискурса.

Ключевые слова: фатическая функция, вторичный и основной дискурс, вопросительные предложения, структура дискурса, непрерывность дискурса