Phatic Competence: How L2 Users Understand and Engage in Phatic Communion

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Abstract

Phatic communion, or “small talk,” has long been overlooked in literature on both pragmatics and language learning. This project examines L2 phatic competence by looking at how adult English language learners (ELLs) engage in phatic communion outside the classroom, and how they identify and interpret phatic interactions. Naturalistic data were collected from unstructured conversations in “conversation pubs.” The data were analyzed from an interactional standpoint, with a focus on performativity and a view to what strategies participants employ to engage in phatic communion, and were supplemented with semi-structured interviews and the researcher’s own background knowledge of the participants. Phatic communion came to be defined by the participants themselves, and is enacted in this study through a variety of speaker strategies and indexical cues. This project aims to provide valuable data regarding L2 phatic use and interpretation, with implications for researchers, language educators and professionals.
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1 Introduction

1.1 Rationale for Study

The philosopher Schopenhauer describes the difficulties of human intimacy in his oft-quoted “hedgehog’s dilemma” (e.g., Schopenhauer & Payne, 1974). In this parable, a group of hedgehogs gathers for warmth. However, they quickly find that they prick each other with their quills. They separate, only to be driven together again repeatedly by the cold. Finally, they find that the perfect solution is to stay moderately close together and yet maintain a certain amount of distance. For Schopenhauer, this analogy aptly describes two fundamentally human needs: the need for close intimacy with others, and that of protecting ourselves from rejection. Our need for closely bonded relationships with others is coupled by a desire not to get “pricked,” or rejected. Following this metaphor, then, we maintain a social distance in our relationships with others through “the code of politeness and fine manners” (ibid; 12). This code might be defined as a set of formulaic rituals designed to be friendly without inviting true intimacy. By following this code of politeness, we are welcomed into communities driven by the same cautious desires and kept warm from the allegorical cold. Yet Schopenhauer also warns that those who refuse to follow this code of social distance, through agency or ignorance, are refused membership.

This parable, however bleak, helps to explain the prevalence of ritualistic phrases in human interaction, which compose the seemingly meaningless chitchat we find ourselves engaged in daily. To be more specific, we can interpret the code of politeness and fine manners as being equivalent to phatic communion – literally, communion through speech (Laver, 1975). It may be that phatic communion is a way to seek and maintain relationships with a variety of interlocutors without taking the risk of sharing or requesting intimate information, thus facilitating all other kinds of talk, transactional or relational. If this is true, however, it does not bode well for anyone who does not know how to navigate these norms, which are dependent on both culture and context. What, then, is this code of phatic communion, and how is it perpetuated (or deviated from) in everyday language?

In the field of sociolinguistics, it has been argued that all talk, regardless of language, is social talk (Coupland, 2003). When interlocutors communicate, there are multiple “levels,” or goals within that encounter; even as interlocutors engage in transactional or referential conversation, there is a
social element wherein both participants make statements about themselves and the relationship they seek with each other (Coupland, 2000). Nowhere is this more apparent than in phatic communion, or “small talk.” It is in phatic communion that the social aspect of communication is most transparent, and indeed, it is found at the beginning, end, and even interspersed throughout nearly all spoken encounters.

This is pertinent not only to speakers and listeners communicating in their first (or dominant) language, but also particularly to those communicating in an L2; that is, a second or additional language. Not only do these latter interlocutors need to negotiate the relational and exploratory ambiguities of phatic communion in the same manner as L1 (first- or dominant-language) speakers, but they need to do so within a linguistic and pragmatic context that is generally unfamiliar. Schopenhauer’s “code of politeness and fine manners” is not universal, but instead is reliant on culturally- and socially-dictated conventions in a given language. To those communicating in an L1, these conventions are usually followed (or flouted) instinctively as a result of socialization, and go largely unnoticed. For an L2 speaker, however, they must be learned in addition to the language itself. Phatic communion is reliant on pragmatic factors that lie outside the grammatical and lexical aspects of language learning, and at the same time is prevalent in nearly every spoken encounter.

It is also, however, one of the least examined aspects of communication in the literature on pragmatics and has been largely overlooked in language learning in general. To my knowledge, no published study has examined the use of L2 phatic communion in a social setting in Canada. The current study aims to address issues of usage and comprehension of phatic communion by L2 users in a Canadian context.

1.2 Defining Phatic Communion: An Emic Distinction

As will be reflected in Section 2.1, scholarship on phatic communion has periodically burgeoned and withered for nearly a century. Yet, despite the ever-growing body of literature on phatic communion, and growing awareness of the phatic element in social conversation, the term remains strangely elusive and difficult to define. It is one postulation of this study that, as in other instances of casual conversation, the participants in this project created and operated within their own,
emically-defined phatic communion. Just as interlocutors co-create and co-negotiate meaning in all interactions (Coupland, 2003), so the data in this particular study suggest that the same happens even within the (arguably) narrow confines of phatic communion. A general definition of phatic communion, as well as the negotiation perspective employed in this study, is presented in the literature review alongside scholarship on its function, usage, and orientation.

1.3 Theoretical Orientation

The analysis presented here is framed primarily by interactional sociolinguistics (IS), chosen for its emphasis on the importance of context and conversational inferencing in understanding how interlocutors create and sustain meaning in interactions. Its focus on the importance of the everyday, or "ordinary" interactions, and its use of prosodic and paralinguistic features of conversational discourse, blends elements of ethnographic methods, anthropological concerns, and conversation analysis in such a way as to illuminate the variation in interaction that takes place even in specific, localized settings (Gordon, 2011). A review of interactional sociolinguistics and a further justification for its use in this study are reflected in Section 2.
2 Literature Review

2.1 Phatic Communion

2.1.1 Defining Phatic Communion

Phatic communion, or “small talk,” can be broadly defined as talk whereby the primary function is social or relational, rather than transactional or content-driven (Coupland, 2000). Traditionally looked down upon as talk that is trivial, banal, “dull and pedestrian” (Leech 1974; 62, quoted in Coupland et al, 1992; 210), or akin to petting a dog absentmindedly (Meltzer & Musolf, 2000), it is nevertheless found in nearly all verbal interactions, even if only in the form of a greeting or leave-taking. Prototypical phatic communion - of the "Hi, How are you?" ilk - is found between strangers and acquaintances in stereotyped situations such as waiting rooms or at social gatherings (Maynard & Hudak, 2008; Schneider, 1988; 2012), but also occurs between closely-bonded participants (Marsh, 1989, in Meltzer & Musolf, 2000) and family members (Coupland, 2003). Yet the term itself is strangely difficult to define in concrete terms.

Malinowski, an anthropologist, was the first to use the term phatic communion, from phatos, meaning speech (Meltzer & Musolf, 2000). He uses it to refer to utterances or exchanges performed merely for the sake of it, contrasting it with transactional, goal-oriented talk (“big talk”); phatic communion, to Malinowski, is mundane conversational meandering, composed of “purposeless expressions of preference or aversions, accounts of irrelevant happenings, comments on what is perfectly obvious” (Malinowski, 1923; 150). The term, once coined, then lay dormant (or, once named, was assumed covered) in the literature until Jakobson (1960), who gave phatic communion a place in his hierarchy of speech functions, listed under the ceremonial or order of encounters (Coupland et al, 1992) but does not embellish on the original definition of the term. Since then, phatic communion has come to be colloquially understood as chit-chat, “schmoozing” (Meltzer & Musolf, 2000), “making conversation for the sake of it” (Burton, 1980), or “conversational routine” (Schneider, 2011). More specifically, it is “talk (...) where speakers’ relational goals supersede their commitment to factuality and instrumentality” (Coupland & Coupland, 2000; 3).
None of these definitions or synonyms, however, have managed to encompass a universally understood notion of what is or is not phatic communion in a given context. They rely largely on intuition and focus on the various functions of phatic communion rather than elucidating what is or is not considered phatic (e.g. Cocchi, 1992). In layman’s terms, phatic communion can be understood as a conversational exchange where the fact of interacting is more significant than the words themselves. It is language which is “designed more to accommodate and acknowledge a hearer than to carry a message” (Turner, 1973; 212). Interpretations as to what is or is not phatic are highly subjective, and entirely dependent on context; for example, a “How are you?” (referred to as an HAY question, or HAY sequence) between friends carries a far different meaning, as understood by both the asker and the hearer, than the same question occurring in a medical office between a doctor and a patient (Maynard & Hudak, 2008). For this reason, phatic communion is arguably best conceived and interpreted, not as a type of talk, but as “an intriguing cluster of sociopsychological orientations to talk” (ibid; 214). Just as in phatic communion itself, the term must not refer to words or phrases used, but the intended meaning of the speaker, and the inferencing of the hearer.

Due to its relational nature, phatic communion – used synonymously here with small talk – tends to be ritualistic and predictable in nature, and often linked to “face work” or politeness (e.g. Mirivel & Tracy, 2005; Schneider, 1988). The information exchanged during phatic interactions tends not to be overly informative or referential, but instead geared toward sociability. Tokens exchanged therein are usually indexical or social in meaning, and can include not only greetings and leave-takings, but also compliments, thanking (Boyle, 2000), news-sharing and gossip (Garcia et al, 2011; Mirivel & Tracy, 2005), among others. A helpful description is found in Schneider’s (1988) thesis, where he characterizes phatic exchanges as “positive-politeness strategies with which the speaker indicates that she treats the hearer as a person whose wishes, features, and viewpoints she knows and admires, expresses her approval and personal interest in him, signals in-group membership, seeks agreement or establishes reciprocity and affinity as regards desires, intentions or preferences” (Padilla Cruz, 2013b; 147). This echoes Malinowski’s original definition, where he describes phatic exchanges as leaning heavily toward affirmation and consent (1923).

It is perhaps also a result of the social, non-referential nature of phatic communion that it has been awarded an undesired place at the conversation table. “Small talk” is often used in contrast with “big talk,” suggesting that it is within the transactional, informative or referential functions of talk
that the truly “important” work is done in talk. Indeed, experience and intuition tell us that most people would declare a distaste for small talk, and equate it with awkward conversations in elevators, for example. Yet phatic communion is not only making routine conversation around the water cooler, but it is also what happens when we call our families just to catch up, or share news with an intimate friend. At its most poetic, it is a beholding; it allows interlocutors to acknowledge and appreciate each other in talk in a culturally accepted, non-threatening way.

This study therefore adopts the negotiation perspective advocated by Coupland (1992; 2000; 2003), which eschews the negative value awarded to the term small talk as a result of Malinowski’s original 1923 definition. As Coupland words it, rather than “talk that is aimless, prefatory, obvious, uninteresting, sometimes suspect and even irrelevant, [small talk is] part of the process of fulfilling our intrinsically human needs for social cohesiveness and mutual recognition” (Coupland et al, 1992; p. 11). Though phatic communion is geared more toward accommodation and acknowledgement than information and transaction, this should not relegate it to the margins of meaningful conversation. Laver (1975) focused on phaticity in its initiatory, exploratory, and propitiatory functions and its role as a social diagnostic. While he does point out that nontransactional talk facilitates transitions in and out of transactional talk, his work focuses on phatic communion on contrast to “big” or “real” talk that is content-oriented (Coupland, 2000). I argue one step further that, rather than “helping along” more transactional conversation, phatic communion provides the framework for establishing relational goals of both the speaker and hearer in a way that is highly contextualized and requires constant negotiation by both interlocutors (McCarthy, 2003; Coupland et al, 1992; Coupland, 2000). In other words, phatic communion provides senders and receivers with opportunities for purely relational talk, wherein they engage in the work of establishing relationships, mitigating conflict, and exploring relational boundaries.

2.1.2 Phatic Content

Far from being talk that is “free or aimless” (Malinowski, 1923; quoted in Coupland et al, 1992; 208), like any other speech function phatic communion is governed by rules regarding not only topic appropriateness, but also situational appropriateness (Padilla Cruz, 2013b). These are not always agreed upon; for example, Schneider (1988, 2012) notes the great overlap in topic selection
between participants, while also noticing striking dissimilarities in sequence preference between national varieties of English as well as between participants of different age ranges. Nevertheless, the content is generally of “low information value” (Coupland et al, 1992; 210) in order to allow the social aspect to take precedence.

The literature on the linguistic content, or topic choice, in phatic communion can logically be divided into three categories: opening sequences or greetings, mid-conversation exchanges, and closing sequences, or leave-takings.

Opening sequences are generally agreed upon to be the most formulaic or ritualized of phatic utterances, in that they largely consist of stock phrases such as greetings ("hi," "hello"), followed by "How are you?" or HAY sequences (e.g., Maynard & Hudak, 2008), and general inquiries into the hearer's well-being (Adel, 2011). Greetings can and will vary by speech community. Gumperz (in Eerdmans et al., 2003) cites the example of "Have you eaten yet?" as a stock greeting in many parts of South Asia, and it is this researcher's personal experience that "Where are you going?" is a common greeting in Thailand. What these greetings share, however, is that no detailed, "truthful" or information-laden response is necessary, and a stock response is appropriate, lending credence to claims that phatic communion can be seen as secular ritual.

Phatic exchanges that follow opening sequences, either as prolonged speech activities or as interstitial phatic utterances within a spoken encounter, allow for the most flexibility for the speaker, and thus more subtle implicatures and more interpretive work on the part of the hearer, in topic choice and situational appropriateness. The scholarship on linguistic content of these exchanges is largely intuitive (Cocchi, 2012), for the most part based on surveys or role-plays rather than naturalistic data, though there is a great deal of consensus among researchers. Generally, phatic comments are context- or situation-dependent, and highly predictable and familiar to all participants (Schneider, 1988; Padilla Cruz, 2013a). For example, two acquaintances meeting outdoors may make comments on the weather; colleagues may exchange phatic utterances about their work; or interlocutors at a friend's party may discuss the atmosphere of the party or their mutual acquaintance with the host. Following this reasoning, Padilla Cruz (2007) categorizes phatic utterances as either neutral - referring to the spatio-temporal setting - or personal, that is, about the interlocutors themselves. In short, phatic tokens occurring within the main body of conversation - that is, not occurring during opening or closing sequences - generally "refer either
to factors narrowly specific to the time and place of the utterance or, more widely, to factors in the context of the situation in which the utterances occurs which are personal to the speaker or the listener” (Laver, 1975; 222).

Schneider (1988, 2012) goes a step further, in offering a framework for the topical choices interlocutors have at their disposal (Figure 1). Interestingly, he considers phatic communion to occur only in the margins of conversations (i.e., openings and closings), and differentiates it from the extended dialogues of "small talk," and yet his framework is so comprehensive (if normative and restrictive) as to encompass phatic communion in its much broader definition, occurring at any stage of a conversation, even entire conversations. Schneider proposes that interlocutors, in initiating phatic communion, tend to choose topics related to the immediate situation in which they find themselves. Examples of this may be discussing an athletic team's performance while at a sports game, or Schneider's own example of PARTY, wherein a phatic conversation would contain tokens regarding the atmosphere of the party (“Great party, isn't it?”). He terms these utterances global evaluation comments (2012; 253). He also notes a preference for positive statements, with negative evaluations “[requiring] a certain degree of social audacity” (ibid). This echoes the work of other scholars, where utterances referring to the local context are noted as prevalent in phatic communion (e.g., Adel, 2011; Laver, 1975).

**Figure 1: Schneider's Framework of Appropriate Phatic Topic Choice**

Having engaged in phatic communion regarding the spatio-temporal setting of the conversation, interlocutors may choose to either select more personal topics ("the communication situation") or topics regarding the larger context ("the external situation"). Topics related to the external situation are cited as the least restrictive of the three situations, and are impersonal in nature. They may include food and eating practices (Mirivel & Tracy, 2005), leisure activities or the weather (Adel,
2011), or politics, sports, and art (Schneider, 1988). Topics related to the communication situation, by contrast, are centred on the interlocutors themselves, and topic choices reflect personal preferences or aversions, such as hobbies, or more personal topics such as sex or age (ibid, 1988; 2012). Presumably, this is also the heading that would include personal disclosures (Padilla Cruz, 2013b; Chubak, 2012) or gossip (Gabriela et al., 2011; Meltzer & Musolf, 2000; Mirivel & Tracy, 2005).

Schneider himself notes the variation in topic choices among and between varieties of Standard English, and of course, this model does not take into account the diversity of phatic tokens found in speech communities of other languages and cultures. Nevertheless, it provides a framework helpful for understanding how phatic communion has been historically viewed, and of providing a model for overtly understanding or explaining topics that are easily interpreted as phatic in nature or function.

The last category of phatic exchanges, leave-takings, is the least explored in the literature. Very few scholars have discussed the content of closing sequences, with the exception of Laver (1975). Like opening sequences, closings tend to (but do not always) consist of a handful of stock formulae, although according to Laver, they contain much more indexical information regarding the relationship of the interlocutors: specifically, "the tokens mostly make explicit reference to psychological and social aspects of the relationships between the two participants" (1975; 229). In Goffman’s words (1963), “the goodbye brings the encounter to an unambiguous close, sums up the consequence of the encounter for the relationship, and bolsters the relationship for the anticipated period of no contact” (in Meltzer & Musolf, 2000; 101). Examples of these phatic tokens may include “It was great seeing you”; “See you soon”; or “Let’s do this again soon.”

2.1.3 Phatic Orientation

The content, or the "what do we talk about" element, of phatic communion is much more explicit and consensual in the literature than the "who can say what to whom and in what way;" that is, appropriateness as related to the relationship between interactants, and the orientation of phatic utterances.
The relationship of interactants engaging in phatic communion is a topic of particular debate. Scholars find themselves in two opposing camps. There are those who insist that phatic communion takes place only between strangers or distant acquaintances (e.g., Marsh, 1989; Schneider, 1988). Schneider specifies that phatic functions are present in an inverse proportion to the closeness of the participants, meaning that the closer the interactants are to each other, the fewer phatic tokens will occur (1988; 287). He goes on to break small talk (his synonym for phatic discourse) into two orientations, which he names *politesse* and *friendliness*. The former is used with strangers, and is linked to formality, while the latter is more typical of social encounters (in Padilla Cruz, 2013b). At the other end of the spectrum lie those scholars who believe that it is closely bonded participants, such as good friends or family members, who can engage in phatic communion (e.g., Wardhaugh, 1985). Proponents of this camp reason that relational talk, such as phatic communion, is more present in close relationships because the relationship is more deeply valued than, say, during a service encounter or with a stranger in an elevator. This paper shares the view of Coupland (2000) and Meltzer & Musolf (2000), among others, that phatic communion can and does occur regardless of the relationship between participants, though it can differ in both nature and function. Intuition states that phatic communion between interactants who are closely bonded will be more exploratory in function, whereas small talk between strangers would naturally forefront the initiatory or propitiatory importance of said discourse. Interested readers should refer back to Section 2.1 for a discussion on Laver’s three functions of phatic talk.

More specific are the rules governing usage. Laver (1975) elucidates rules governing social power: a supervisor speaking to an employee, for example, will use other-oriented, or hearer-oriented, phatic talk (remarks geared toward the hearer, e.g., “How are your kids?”), whereas equal-status interlocutors can use either speaker- or hearer-oriented phatic communion – as well as territoriality; where one interlocutor is moving and the other is not, it is the responsibility of the participant who is *moving* to begin the phatic exchange (in Meltzer & Musolf, 2000). Though it has been noted, here and elsewhere, that phatic communion is highly variable between, and even within, communities of practice (e.g., Coupland et al., 1992), it is important for researchers, language educators and learners to note that there are general rules governing use, which can be learned and applied in a given context.
2.1.4 Phatic Failure

And be applied they must: within the field of sociolinguistics, phatic communion can be understood as a norm that is “seen but unnoticed” (Seedhouse, 2004; 10), and for that reason it is both marked and disturbing when its principles are violated. For an L2 user, violating these norms is a common cause of pragmatic failure, particularly acute as phatic communion usually occurs “during the psychologically crucial margins of interaction” (Laver, 1975; 217, quoted in Meltzer & Musolf, 2006; 101). This is important for identity building and the formation of social relationships (Coupland et al., 1992), but arguably even more so for structured environments; the importance of phatic competence has been noted in workplace situations (e.g., Tracy & Naughton, 2000; Holmes, 2000; in Coupland, 2003) and in transactional situations such as the doctor’s office (e.g., Maynard & Hudak, 2008). For L2 users, the great difficulty in understanding utterances as phatic (Kasper, 1984; Padilla Cruz, 2013a) is coupled with the need for constant on-the-ground negotiation of meaning (Coupland, 2003); this puts them at high risk for the potentially damaging consequences of phatic failure. For language educators and policy-makers as well as researchers, it is important to note that phatic failure is not only potentially damaging in everyday social talk, it also can have very real consequences in institutional discourse or high-stakes encounters.

The intricate and intimate nature of phatic communion provides ample opportunities for misinterpretation, particularly for non-native speakers of English. The breakdown of communication in phatic discourse is an example of pragmatic failure, a well-documented phenomenon defined as “the inability to understand what is meant by what is said” (Thomas, 1983, quoted in Padilla Cruz, 2013b; 24). Due in part to the fact that pragmatic and linguistic competence do not develop simultaneously (Sun, 1998), pragmatic failure can occur in two ways.

Pragmalinguistic failure occurs when non-native interlocutors employ linguistic strategies from their L1 in their L2 without sufficient understanding of L2 strategies (Padilla Cruz 2013b; Sun, 1998). Padilla Cruz gives the example of “Where are you from?” as a common phatic token used by Egyptians that may be considered invasive or inappropriate to interlocutors from other cultures. Another example may be the Thai greeting “Have you eaten rice yet?” mentioned earlier. A North American interlocutor may misinterpret this phatic utterance as an invitation. Non-native speakers may be directly transferring speech-act strategies and sequences from their L1 production or interpretation, resulting in confusion or even total misunderstanding.
Sociopragmatic failure is similar, but deals with the speaker’s socio-cultural competence in the L2 (Padilla Cruz, 2013b; Sun, 1998). Interlocutors may be transferring pragmatic conventions from their L1, assuming that social norms governing behavior are universal rather than stemming from individual communities of practice. This type of pragmatic failure can have more face-damaging consequences: “When this occurs, the native interlocutor is not facing an overt, intended violation of (...) norms and principles with the aim of provoking an effect, but a covert, unintended violation that might have a whole range of consequences, as the native can think that the learner fails to live up to his expectations in terms of appropriate adherence to regulative maxims” (Padilla Cruz, 2013b; 26). That is, the identity of the non-native speaker may be misinterpreted rather than the utterance, in turn affecting the social relationship between interlocutors.

Consequences of pragmatic failure have been well documented (e.g., Padilla Cruz, 2013b; Sun, 1998; Kasper, 1984), partly because deviations in grammar and phonology in the speaker’s L2 are much more easily recognized and forgiven by a native-speaking interlocutor than deviations in sociopragmatic behavior. Inappropriately transferred speech-act strategies can result in misconceptions regarding the speaker’s personality, attitude, motives or identity (Sun, 1998). As Padilla Cruz puts it, “The real problem with pragmatic failure is that an interpretation that should not have otherwise achieved an optimal level of relevance actually does so and that the hearer uses it as evidence to make attributions of beliefs and/or intentions to his interlocutor on the basis of his cultural knowledge and/or contextual assumptions” (2013b; 50). This is particularly true of phatic communion, which by nature structures social interaction and provides the fabric of social identity building and cohesiveness (Coupland, 2003; 2000).

Even when processing an utterance that a hearer perceives as phatic, he or she must select and process elements concerning neutral meanings – those concerned with the spatio-temporal setting – and social meanings – those based on knowledge of the interlocutor and the social relationship represented in the utterance – in order to understand the phatic speech-act and its implications (Padilla Cruz, 2013b). The below example (taken from ibid, pg. 47) represents a hearer’s internal procedure on hearing the utterance “Cute tie!”

a. My interlocutor has made a personal comment on my tie.

b. Personal comments are frequently used when interlocutors are on close terms.
c. I have known my interlocutor for years.

d. My interlocutor and I have the same status.

e. My interlocutor may think that we have a solidarity relationship.

Conclusions:

1. My interlocutor is willing to communicate with me.

2. My interlocutor may wish to maintain a solidarity relationship with me.

This complex process reflects the need for great sociopragmatic competence on the part of the hearer, as he or she requires knowledge of cultural meta-representations to determine the meaning of a given phatic token and avoid suffering from epistemic injustice; having their interlocutor perceive them as less than competent in the social exchange (ibid).

2.1.5 Phatic Instruction in L2 Learning Curricula

The consequences of not demonstrating phatic competence exemplify the importance of explicitly addressing small talk in language classrooms. It is, however, markedly absent from nearly all ESL curricula and materials (Kasper, 1984; Padilla Cruz 2013a; Padilla Cruz, 2013b). To date, no literature has explored how, or even if, phatic communion is taught or learned in a target language community. Where issues of small talk are addressed, instruction has rarely explored beyond greetings at the beginner level (Padilla Cruz, 2013b). In fact, the language used in ESL textbooks has explicitly been named as a cause of L2 phatic failure (Padilla Cruz, 2013a), and the procedural knowledge developed in classrooms can be viewed as having adverse effects on phatic competence in real-world environments (Kasper, 1984). There is a clear need for educators to address pragmatic competence, and specifically phatic competence, in the classroom. One aim of this proposed study is to draw attention to this issue and stress the need for phatic development in language classrooms.
2.2 Interactional Sociolinguistics

2.2.1 Theoretical Overview

Interactional Sociolinguistics (IS) was developed in the late 1970's and 1980's as an attempt to examine interaction holistically as it occurs within a given context and is interpreted through the lens of participants' sociocultural background knowledge. The methodology is credited to John J. Gumperz, whose interdisciplinary approach can be defined as "a sociolinguistics analysis of dialogue and of the ethnography of the sociocultural context of the interactants" (Di Luzio, 2003; 3). Gumperz sought to find a way to integrate an analysis of the interpretive strategies and abilities of interactants with the interactional moment, gaining insight into the various ways that individuals negotiate identities, build relationships, exercise power, and negotiate misunderstandings in verbal encounters (e.g., Gumperz, 1982). IS focuses on conversational interactions as a whole, rather than isolated utterances or exchanges; meaning is made in the interactional context, co-created by participants through the lens of their own linguistic, social, and cultural knowledge (Auer, 2011). The goal in IS is to connect the macro level of analysis - for example, power systems, societal structure, cultural practices and values - to the micro level of conversational exchanges.

Drawing on key concepts from ethnographic methods and conversational analysis, among others, IS research begins with communicative practices occurring within a given speech community and examines the context of the interaction alongside the "fine details of verbal communication" (Gumperz, 2003; 8) to shed light on how participants negotiate, or fail to negotiate, meaning.

2.2.2 Interactional Achievement

A key component of IS ontology is a view of conversation as action, or what Schegloff (1984) calls "interactional achievement." Participants in verbal encounters co-create meaning, make claims about identity, accomplish interactive goals, and produce social action; they "do" talk. In other words, “whatever else we do in speaking to each other, we make claims about ourselves as a person, we make claims about the person of our listeners, we claim how those persons are related to each other at the outset of the encounter, we project an ongoing monitoring of those multiple relationships, and as we close the encounter we make claims about what sort of relationships we expect will hold upon resuming our contacts in future social encounters” (Scollon, 1983, quoted
in Coupland, 2000, pg. 8). It is through language that tasks, whether relational or transactional, are accomplished (Chubak, 2012). This is particularly relevant to this study, as phatic communion allows participants to accomplish relational goals by "doing small talk," "doing collegiality" (Holmes, 2000), or "doing friendliness." Engaging in phatic communion, through the lens of IS, is seen as incrementally and collaboratively accomplishing a speech activity (Gordon, 2011). The goal of a IS analyst, then, is to examine the ways that these activities are accomplished by the participants and what tools they are using to achieve them.

Interactions are viewed in terms of communicative practices or speech events, defined as "interactively constituted, culturally-framed encounters" (Gumperz, in Eerdmans et al., 2003; 8). These communicative practices are "constructed and construed in and through the ways in which the localized choices - utterances, speech acts, and so on - of the interactants relate to each other in the real-time unfolding of the discourse" (Thibault, 2003; 57). This relies very much on what Hymes (e.g., Gumperz & Hymes, 1972) refers to as "communicative competence"; that is, a speaker's knowledge of what to say, with whom to say it, when and in what manner. It also relies on a hearer's ability to interpret the conversation as part of the communicative practice the speaker intends it to be. This requires shared knowledge of not only grammatical rules, but social norms as well. It is at this crux - between the (micro) interactional moment and the (macro) background knowledge of the interactants - that IS researchers seek to gain insight on how communicative involvement is created and maintained and conversational goals are co-achieved in verbal encounters.

Understanding the background knowledge of the participants in communicative practices is a key component to IS. Following the work of ethnomethodologist Harold Garfinkel on the "etcetera principle" (1984), which states that talk can never be detailed enough to cover every aspect of meaning, and that interactants rely on "some combination of 'practical reasoning' and 'unstated, taken-for-granted background knowledge'" (Gumperz, 2001; 216) in order to understand what is meant by what is said, Gumperz stresses the importance of this background knowledge in IS analysis. This is not only knowledge of one's own sociocultural background, but also background knowledge of the context in which the encounter takes place, and of the appropriate language choices available for that context. For Gumperz, "it is long-term exposure to similar communicative experience in institutionalized networks of relationship and not language or community membership as such that lies at the root of shared culture and shared inferential
practices" (Gumperz, in Eerdmans et al., 2003; 18). Intercultural communication has long been a focus of IS researchers, as interactants who do not share similar communicative experiences, or social conventions, are at much greater risk of misunderstanding, and consequently the consequences of pragmatic failure discussed in Section 2.4 (e.g., Auer & Roberts, 2011; Gumperz, 1982). It is examining the means of signaling context in conversation, and the inferences resulting from it, which are crucial to an interactional sociolinguistic analysis of conversation.

2.2.3 Contextualization and Inferencing

According to IS, participants use their background knowledge in conversation through a process Gumperz calls contextualization. In order to manage conversation, interactants rely on indexical cues, which are features of the background context of the interaction assumed to be mutually understood by both interlocutors (Mirivel & Tracy, 2005). Indexical cues may be employed through grammatical or lexical choices; through prosody, or the “sound” of language, such as pitch, tempo, or amplitude; or paralinguistically, meaning through features outside the language itself, such as gestures or eye contact. For example, the sentence “I’ll meet you there in an hour” contains indexical information, at the lexical level, about the speaker (“I”), the hearer (“you”), the location (“there”) and the time (“an hour” referring to one hour from the time the sentence is uttered). At the level of prosody, the utterance “I’ll meet you there” carries a different indexical message than “I’ll meet you there,” pointing to the reference in the utterance the speaker wishes to be made most relevant to the hearer. Paralinguistic indexical cues, such as making or avoiding eye contact, hand placement, or winking will also help the speaker to clarify his or her meaning. In short, “indexicality allows utterances to represent vastly more than is said and thereby makes mundane conversation possible” (Boyle, 2000; 32/33). Indexical signs refer to the intended meaning of an utterance in an exchange, but also to the context in which it takes place, the relationship between interactants, and the larger sociocultural context of the participants. In other words, they signal “what is to be expected in the exchange, what should be lexically expressed, what can be conveyed only indirectly, how moves are to be positioned in an exchange, what interpersonal relationships are involved and what rights to speaking apply” (Gumperz, 1996; 396/397). Contextualization refers to the process by which the interactants co-create meaning from those indexical cues.
The process of contextualization is further complicated by the fact that conversational exchanges, and the indexical cues therein, are both context-creating and context-dependent (e.g., Gumperz, in Eerdmans et al., 2003). They are context-creating in the sense that each turn in conversation creates the context for the next, and in the sense that repeated verbal exchanges are what create communicative practices. They are context-dependent in that interlocutors follow (or flout) established linguistic and social norms in accomplishing interactional goals; the exchanges in verbal encounters depend on the context in which they occur for meaning. Participants must thus negotiate meaning on two levels; the micro level of the interactional moment, and the macro level of background knowledge. According to Gumperz (e.g., 1982, 1996, 2003), this is accomplished collaboratively in two ways; speakers employ indexical signs, among them contextualization cues, to communicate meaning, which hearers use in conversational inferencing.

Contextualization cues are a class of indexical sign that are considered “purely” indexical in that they do not rely on lexical or propositional meaning but are entirely context-dependent in meaning (Thibault, 2003). They are conveyed largely through prosodic or paralinguistic channels, such as amplitude, register, intonation, or gestures. These cues do not necessarily function in isolation, but often operate as constellations, the combined meaning of contextualization cues indicating how an utterance is to be interpreted. These cues are embedded in conversation as “flags”; thus “reliant on large doses of inferential reconstruction, [meaning that] the inferred content of the same cues can be different in different utterances” (Levinson, 2003; 37). Thus contextualization cues must be taken as components which work together to indicate the context of a verbal exchange, even as they are shaped by it. Taken together, it is these contextualization cues that make up an individual’s “conversational style” (Tannen, 2005) and indicate how a given utterance is intended to be interpreted, which a hearer does through the process of conversational inferencing.

Conversational inferencing refers to how a hearer deciphers the speaker’s utterance, presupposes the context of the encounter, and is able to maintain talk. According to Gumperz, this happens on two levels: global inferences and local inferences (Prevignano et al., 2003). A hearer will make global inferences about “what an exchange is about and what mutual rights and obligations apply, what topics can be brought up, what is wanted by way of a reply, as well as what can be put into words and what is to be implied” (Gumperz, in Eerdmans et al., 2003; 14). This macro level of inference will be dependent on a hearer’s background knowledge of the communicative practice being enacted, his or her relationship with the speaker, as well as institutional, social, and cultural
norms at play. Local inferences occur at the micro level of turn-by-turn talk, wherein hearers interpret conversational moves and decide what is expected by way of a response (ibid). Conversation, then, in the IS framework, is the relationship between interpretive assessments (conversational inferencing) and the signaling processes (including indexical signs, among them contextualization cues) through which they are negotiated.

Interactional achievement in verbal encounters thus relies to a great degree on shared inferential assessments and communicative resources (Auer, 2011). Communicative failure, according to Gumperz, is usually the result of either different sociocultural assumptions about the situation and appropriate speech behavior (global inferences), or a lack of shared local inferences about preferred moves in conversation (Di Luzio, 2003). These inferences, global and local, are shaped and learned in particular speech communities, not only cultural or ethnic but also institutional and social (Auer, 2011). This is also true of indexical conventions such as contextualization cues. A particular focus of IS, and of Gumperz in particular, has been intercultural communication and the communicative practices of individuals in multicultural settings, and the degrees to which participants from diverse linguistic and sociocultural backgrounds share inferential conventions in co-creating interactional achievements (e.g., Gumperz, 1982; Auer, 2011).

2.2.4 Methodological Approach

IS uses a combination of ethnography and situated, on-line analysis in its methodology. Due to the importance of background knowledge and context in interpreting contextualization cues and conversational inferences, the researcher must first gain some knowledge of the interactants or speech community under analysis. Thus, time is spent in the speech community, wherein “the researcher soaks and questions within a particular environment in order to understand how and why encounters take place and how local actors manage them” (Auer, 2011; 389). This ethnographic phase allows the researcher to familiarize his/herself with some of the background knowledge of the participants in order to attempt an interpretation of the practice under study that is emic. Emic refers to interpretation from the perspective of the participants in the interaction, rather than from an etic, or outside, analysis. Gumperz himself stresses the importance of going beyond a general perspective of a communicative practice and examining data “in terms which
account for native perceptions of significance” (Gumperz, 1982; 78). He uses the notion of “communicative ecology” to refer to the set of communicative practices of a particular environment (ibid). The IS researcher thus spends time observing and participating in the community in order to better understand its communicative ecology and the conversational inference conventions of the interactants under analysis.

This ethnographic phase is used in the analysis of audio- or video-recordings of interactions dealing with a particular communicative practice. Rather than isolating multiple examples of a particular practice in interaction and cross-comparing them, IS examines the interaction holistically (Auer, 2011). The recordings are first indexed and examined for content and rhythmic organization, informed by the researcher’s knowledge of the communicative ecology of the interaction and the participants themselves. The goal here is to isolate event sequences, defined as “sequentially-bound units, marked off from others in the recorded data by some degree of thematic coherence and by beginnings and ends detectable through co-occurring shifts in content, prosody, tempo or other formal markers” (Eerdmans et al., 2003; 12). Defined as they are from the researcher’s knowledge of the interactional context and, as much as possible, from within the communicative ecology of the recorded encounter, the criteria for identifying these event sequences will come from the participants in the interaction themselves, grounded in the data and not superimposed prematurely by the researcher. These event sequences are subsequently the foci for detailed analysis of indexical cues and conversational inferencing at a micro, turn-by-turn level.

At this stage, speech events are transcribed, and the analyst creates “interactional texts” from the data, composed not only of what is said – that is, lexical or grammatical choices – but also any indexical cues, such as the prosodic or paralinguistic features of the interaction (Gumperz & Berenz, 1993). It is from these interactional texts, complete with contextualization cues highlighted in the recorded data and informed by ethnographic participation in the communicative ecology of the interactants in the verbal encounter, that an analyst can begin to make interpretations regarding how the speakers and hearers negotiate meaning and collaboratively achieve their interactional goals, and attempt to gain insight on the conversational inferences needed to create and maintain conversational talk.

Noting again that IS has been interdisciplinary since its inception in the late 1970’s and 1980’s (e.g., Levinson, 2003), IS researchers can and will use other methods of data collection, such as
post-interviews, in order to complement the ethnographic stage of understanding, getting a “bigger picture,” as it were, into the context of the encounter and the background knowledge of the interactants. Regardless, the focus of IS remains on the interactive ways in which speakers and hearers co-create meaning in conversational practices and the degree to which they share communicative resources in order to do so.

The present study, undertaken within the IS framework, explores the various ways in which speakers and hearers negotiate meaning in phatic communion, through the use of contextualization cues and conversational inferencing, and the strategies they employ in co-achieving phatic talk.

2.3 Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to examine naturally occurring phatic communion in a casual setting, particularly for L2 users. This study focuses on adult English language learners (referred to as L2 users) attending integrated English classes at a private language institute in Toronto, and uses grounded theory and interactional sociolinguistics (IS) to analyze the various ways in which participants engage in phatic communion in an informal social setting outside the classroom, during "conversation pubs" which were audio-recorded. The use of semi-structured interviews to analyze the participants’ understanding of phatic communion, or “phaticity,” and situational appropriateness, complements the audio-recorded data and helps shed light on the comprehension of phatic communion, rather than solely on its production in interaction. This study attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. What meaning do L2 interlocutors derive from their utterances in phatic communion, and how do they interpret their interactions?

2. How do L2 users engage in phatic communion, and do they do it in a meaningful way (i.e., to build identity and engage in social bonding with others)?

This study is aimed at providing valuable insight for language educators regarding the social value of small talk, as well as encouraging them to include phatic communication in their language curriculum and provide more opportunities for L2 students to develop phatic and pragmatic competence.
3 Methods

3.1 Research Design

This is an exploratory study designed to elicit and examine phatic communion occurring naturalistically in a Canadian setting. Participants attended “conversation pubs,” which were audio-recorded, transcribed and analyzed within an IS framework. Key Participants later participated in semi-structured interviews to discuss their experiences during the conversation pubs, and the nature of phatic communion as they perceived and performed it. The data from the interviews, along with my ethnographic notes about the location of the study as well as prior relationships with (and among) the participants where relevant, were used as a complement to the conversation pub data. Conversational features were chosen for analysis as they became salient in the data set.

3.2 Participants

There were six participants in this study, including me in my role as a participant observer. Four of the participants were ELLs who, at some point, had studied at the same school (referred to in this study as School X), though not all had attended simultaneously. The other two participants, Noah and I, were or are teachers at School X and had worked together in a professional capacity. All participants, identified in this study by pseudonyms, were recruited through word of mouth. Background information and past relationships are outlined below.

3.2.1 Maria

Maria is a recent university graduate from Japan who had studied English for 11 years before moving to Toronto. Before her arrival in Canada, she had made three short trips to other English-dominant countries, each for under a month. She is 24 years old, and attended School X for five months, graduating from the Advanced level. At the time of the interview, she had lived in Toronto
for seven months, and was living in a shared house with other ELLs. She was also working in a restaurant, where she used English on a daily basis.

Maria is a former classmate of both Dora and Uma, and remains close friends with each. She attended classes taught by Noah, and had attended a few of the same large social gatherings, though never in smaller groups. She is also a former student of mine, and at the time of data collection, she, Uma and I had also seen each other socially in the same type of locale as the "conversation pubs." She has many friends from different cultures, and uses English to communicate with them face-to-face and via text message. She is a cheerful and outgoing individual, and reports that she speaks English "every day with my friends, roommates, co-workers, and sometimes strangers." She did not report any discomfort using English to me, and says only that her confidence in English has grown since her arrival in Toronto. She was a Key Participant in this study (i.e., she participated in the semi-structured interviews), and thus her background information comes from her biodata questionnaire, interview, and my knowledge of her as a former student and social acquaintance.

3.2.2 Uma

Uma, 27, is a Japanese university graduate and professional with a background in magazine advertising. She attended School X for six months, and was a classmate of Maria and Dora, as well as a student of both Noah’s and mine. She graduated from the Upper Intermediate class, which is one level below Advanced. Like Maria, she was living in a shared house with people from mixed language backgrounds, where she reports using English every day. At the time of the study, she had been working as a barista in a coffee shop for approximately two months.

Uma had also made several short (less than one month) trips abroad to English-speaking countries such as Ireland and the US, and prior to her arrival in Toronto had been studying English for over ten years. In Toronto, she self-reports as using English at home, at work, and while out with friends. She and I have a prior social relationship, which began after her graduation from School X, and she is close friends with Maria. She knows Dora from their time at School X, and they are friendly acquaintances. Uma is quite friendly and loves to laugh, though is a bit more reserved than Maria and Dora. She is quite self-conscious about her English, and has commented more than once - in
her interview, on her biodata questionnaire, and in conversation with me - that she feels great frustration in not being able to express her true feelings in English. She also feels that she has trouble understanding when English-dominant interlocutors speak at a rapid pace.

Uma was also a Key Participant in this study, and her background information stems from her interview, biodata questionnaire, her contributions in the conversation pubs, and from my experience of her as a student and friend.

3.2.3 Dora

Dora is in her early twenties, a Swiss citizen who self-identifies as Congolese due to her family background. She attended School X for five months, graduating from the advanced class after taking classes with both Noah and me, alongside Maria and Uma. She has spent significant time in English-speaking countries, most of it in the UK, and her English is fluent. While in Toronto, Dora lived with other students from School X, and spoke only English in the home. Dora did not work in Toronto, but spent a few months travelling around Canada and the US before returning home. She has been accepted into a business program at a university in England.

As mentioned above, she and Maria remain close friends, and she maintains a friendly relationship with Uma. At the time of the study, she and I had known each other in a professional capacity only, when I was her teacher. Similar to Maria, she had spent time with Noah at large social gatherings, but never in a smaller group as at the "conversation pubs." Dora is ebullient and confident in her speech, reflected in her data as well as her interview and interactions with me. She was a Key Participant in this study.

3.2.4 Yuna

Yuna, 23, is also a recent university graduate from Japan, and came to Toronto to learn English and pursue graduate studies in medical technology. She attended School X for three months before moving on to English classes at a local university. She is a former student of Noah's, and has no
prior relationship with me. She attended only one "conversation pub," and did not recognize the names of other participants from School X, so it is assumed that she studied at a separate time.

From her conversation data, it is clear that Yuna's English is very accurate (Noah discussed her high test-scores more than once during the conversation pub). She is quite reserved during the session, and claims she is still not comfortable with rapid conversation. She was not a Key Participant in this study.

3.2.5  Noah

Noah is a Toronto-born ESL teacher in his thirties, with approximately seven years of teaching experience. He is a former teacher of Uma, Maria, Dora, and Yuna, and is a current teacher at School X. Noah is English-dominant, but speaks some Japanese, which he describes as rudimentary. He spent two years teaching in Japan, and his wife is Japanese.

He and I worked together for approximately three months, but had never socialized prior to this study. He is a well-liked teacher, and frequently attends parties with his students, including Maria and Dora. It is worth noting here that his teaching specialization is in conversational English.

3.2.6  Me as a Participant Observer

I am a Canadian-born ESL teacher in my thirties, and have been teaching since 2006. Uma, Dora and Maria are all my former students, and I am a former colleague of Noah, with whom I worked for three months. I identify as English-dominant, but speak French and have been a language learner of French and Russian.
3.3 Procedure

3.3.1 Participant Recruitment

Recruitment for this study took place through word of mouth, and was voluntary. The criteria for recruitment were that a) the participant must be a current member of an ESL (English as a Second Language) school, either as a teacher or a student; b) the participant must be over the age of 19; and c) the participant must be present in Toronto for a period of 3 months after the completion of the study. The reasoning behind said criteria was to recruit participants who would in some way be representational of a multicultural Canadian ESL community, who were legally allowed to be in the pub where the study took place, and who would be present for either an interview or any questions that could arise post-collection. A budget of $50 per session was set aside to pay for drinks and/or food during each conversation pub. At the request of the participants, they will also be provided with print versions of this paper upon publication.

Participants were all told, at the time of giving written consent, that the general focus of the study was social talk, and that they would be recorded. They were also given the choice to either participate in the interview section of the study in addition to the conversation pubs, or to opt out (see Appendix A for the written consent form).

3.3.2 Data Collection

Data for this study were collected in two ways: firstly, from audio-recordings of three “conversation pubs,” and subsequently from semi-structured interviews with three Key Participants. As all of the participants, including me, are members of the same community – they attended or worked at the same English school in Toronto – audio-recorded data were accompanied by the researcher’s personal notes on context, prior relationships, and personal experience with participants where relevant.
3.3.3 Data Collection: Conversation Pubs

The concept of a “conversation pub” arose from the researcher’s own experience as an ESL teacher of nearly ten years. Conversation pubs are weekly gatherings, often organized by an ESL school, which take place in a local bar or restaurant, providing students and teachers with the opportunity to speak English outside of school in a casual setting. The purpose of conducting the data collection for the study in a pub was to generate as much “casual chit-chat” as possible, while also reducing any hierarchy, such as that between students and teachers, existing in the group. This is echoed in Young (2008), where the act of “going for drinks” is seen as encouraging an equal-status relationship between participants.

Three conversation pubs were held, with a total of six participants, four of whom were present at each session (see Table 1).

Table 1: Summary of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session 1</th>
<th>Session 2</th>
<th>Session 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maria *</td>
<td>Maria *</td>
<td>Noah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uma *</td>
<td>Dora *</td>
<td>Yuna *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dora *</td>
<td>Noah</td>
<td>Uma *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah (researcher)</td>
<td>Sarah (researcher)</td>
<td>Sarah (researcher)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: * = self-identify as an English language learner

As noted above, all participants came from the same ESL school in Toronto (School X), either as teachers or as students. At the time of the study, all student-participants had graduated and were either working or attending other schools, and only one teacher-participant, Noah, was currently at School X. The conversation pubs took place in a downtown pub familiar to all participants, and were each between 1.5 and 2.5 hours in length, for a total of 7 hours of recordings. All conversation pubs were audio-recorded. At each conversation pub, participants sat around a single table, on top of which a voice recorder was placed. While there are small sections in the data set where two
conversations are occurring simultaneously, the vast majority of data consist of single conversations between two or more interlocutors.

Due to technical difficulties, two portions of data were unusable, either due to file corruption on playback or sound quality. The final usable data set from the conversation pubs totaled just under 5 hours.

3.3.4 Data Collection: Semi-Structured Interviews

The second stage of the study, the semi-structured interviews, was developed with the aim of examining the participants’ understanding of phatic communion and phatic tokens, as this has been identified as a weakness in English language learners (Kasper, 1984).

Three participants, referred to as Key Participants, agreed to take part in the interviews, which took place in the library of the OISE building approximately two weeks after the last conversation pub. Each interview was between 20 and 30 minutes in length. These three participants were Maria, Uma, and Dora.

The interviewees were all asked the same ten questions regarding the nature and style of phatic communion, as well as their general experience at the conversation pubs, but other questions were discussed depending on how the prepared questions were answered by each individual.

The first five questions concerned the ways in which participants interpreted small talk, the norms (or lack thereof) to which small talk adhered, and any similarities or differences in small talk, as they understood it, between Canada and their home country. The next four questions concerned the conversation pubs and the participants’ general experience and comfort level speaking with either English-dominant individuals or other English language learners. The final question asked for information regarding how a person might “improve” their small talk skills. The full list of interview questions is included in Appendix B.

Participants each added personal stories to the interview, outlining memorable experiences with small talk, and the interviews also included what Chubak calls “personal interstices” (2012); personal conversations between the interviewees and I that are more casual than the on-task
discussion, but also deal with small talk. These are particularly salient, as they involve engaging in phatic communion about phatic communion.

The interviews were also audio-recorded, indexed and transcribed. Key Participants also completed a biodata questionnaire to provide more background information on their experience with English and English-speaking communities (Appendix C).

3.4 Analytic Methodology: Interactional Sociolinguistics

Data analysis for this study began with what conversation analysts call “unmotivated looking” (e.g., Sacks, 1984); broad band listening of the audio-recordings from the conversation pubs as well as the interview sessions. Indexical notes were taken at this time, specifically looking at themes regarding topic, orientation, and “conversational style,” broadly defined as made up of the various indexical cues employed by a speaker (Tannen, 2005). Careful attention was paid in isolating “speech events” as they arose from the data. The second run-through of the data involved rough transcriptions modelled after IS conventions as described by Gumperz & Berenz (1993). A full list of transcription conventions used is included in Appendix D.

3.4.1 Transcript Evolution

The goal of the rough transcriptions was to create what Gumperz (1982; 2003) calls a “living text,” or “interactional text”; a written record of conversation that includes not only the verbal exchanges, but also prosodic or paralinguistic features, such as voice speech, intonation, or pitch, in order to give a richer description of the conversational encounter (see Section 2.2.4 for further discussion on interactional texts). As features of the data emerged from multiple reviews, examples from the data were chosen to highlight features of the overall conversation that became significant for this study. These excerpts were then isolated and subjected to finer grained transcriptions.

The analysis of the second stage of the study, the recorded interviews, underwent a similar procedure in that rough transcriptions were created based on multiple run-throughs of the data. The focus for this stage was content, however, rather than conversational exchange, and so the
rough transcriptions as well as indexical notes on the interviews were used to inform and support the data from the conversation pubs, rather than stand alone as evidence.

3.4.2 Selection Criteria

As the explicit purpose of the conversation pubs was to generate phatic talk, the entire data set from this portion of the study falls under the umbrella of relational talk, or phatic communion. The initial transcripts for both the conversation pubs and the interview data totaled over 400 pages, however, and so decisions had to be made regarding what to include here for analysis. Conversational sequences regarding the study itself, such as discussions on the written consent or references to the recording, were excluded. The goal of this investigation, concurrent with IS practices, was to examine the encounters holistically, rather than attempting to isolate and compare recurring practices out of context. Thus, the excerpts discussed in later sections are meant to support an analysis of the overall conversational features of phatic communion as it occurred in the three particular group settings; that is, to help elucidate the “language of particularity” (Becker, 1995) that the participants are employing, in “doing small talk,” and what strategies they use in order to negotiate meaning therein.

The five greetings (three initial, and two occurring mid-conversation) were chosen for analysis, as well as the one audible leave-taking, because these margins of conversation are taken to be the most formulaic of phatic utterances, and thus contain utterances that are the easiest for members to interpret as phatic (e.g., Padilla Cruz, 2013a). Topic choice, topic changes, and orientation were also primary goals of investigation, and excerpts from the data were isolated to discuss these elements of the conversation in more depth. Deeper study of the data also looked at what strategies participants used to maintain or prolong the conversation, and segments of the data were chosen to highlight these features as well.

Each of the three conversation pubs was distinct in character; for example, each was attended by a different combination of participants, news-offerings are re-introduced at subsequent meetings, and the conversational styles of the participants shift during the course of the three sessions. Greetings were isolated in this study for line-by-line analysis, as it is generally agreed among researchers that greetings are explicitly phatic and thus among the easiest for listeners, particularly
L2 users, to negotiate (e.g., Schneider, 1988; Mirivel & Tracy, 2000; Coupland et al., 1992). Topic choice is also analyzed in detail, as the literature also indicates a general consensus that, taking into account sociocultural variability, there are certain topics discussed in social conversation that interactants easily interpret as phatic in nature (e.g., Kasper, 1984; Padilla Cruz, 2007; Schneider, 2002). It was also assumed that the participants’ topic choices would play a large part in developing an understanding of what strategies they use in engaging in phatic communion. Finally, a deeper look was taken as to the orientation of phatic remarks, with a view to beginning to interpret the participants’ conversational styles.

In selecting excerpts to address the second question of this study, examining the meaning that the participants derive from phatic utterances and how they interpret the interactions, I draw on participants’ contributions from the interviews as well as comments in the conversation pubs, that deal directly with the nature and content of phatic communion and how it is conceived of by the interactants.

The names of all participants in the study have been changed, with the exception of my own. The name of the school where the participants met has been changed to School X. The names of any other individuals referenced in the data set have been replaced with a single letter followed by a double dash (e.g., F— or G--).
4 Analysis

Each of the three conversation pubs was distinct in character. For example, each was attended by a different combination of participants, news-offerings were re-introduced at subsequent meetings, and the conversational styles of the participants shifted during the course of the three sessions. Greetings were isolated in this study for line-by-line analysis, as it is generally agreed among researchers that greetings are explicitly phatic and thus among the easiest for listeners, particularly L2 users, to negotiate (e.g., Schneider, 1988; Mirivel & Tracy, 2005; Coupland et al., 1992). Topic choice is also analyzed in detail, as the literature also indicates a general consensus that, taking into account sociocultural variability, there are certain topics discussed in social conversation which interactants easily interpret as phatic in nature (e.g., Kasper, 1984; Padilla Cruz, 1992; Schneider, 2002). It was assumed that the participants’ topic choices would play a large part in developing an understanding of what strategies we, as individuals and collectively, use in engaging in phatic communion.

In order to begin interpreting the data and examining how the participants were engaging in phatic communion, it was necessary to first look at how phatic communion was defined by the community under analysis. It is worth noting again here that phatic communion is defined in the literature primarily through its function(s) and general characteristics; that is, as a “constellation” rather than a single term or concept, and one to be constantly negotiated by the interlocutors involved. Seen through the lens of interactional sociolinguistics, it was anticipated that the participants would create and participate in phatic communion by adhering to (or rejecting) norms that they themselves define. They are engaged in constant moment-to-moment interpretation and negotiation of verbal encounters, and yet simultaneously are dictating the terms under which the encounter is to be negotiated. Before presenting the data from the conversation pubs, in which the verbal encounters are being navigated by the participants, I begin with an emic definition of phatic communion. Data from the Key Participant interviews, in addition to ethnographically-gleaned information about the participants and the collective identity of the group, are used to arrive at a conceptualization of what phatic communion means to those participating in the conversation pubs.

Following the analysis of the participants’ definitions of phatic communion, conversational features of each conversation pub are presented, after which greetings and topic choice are isolated for closer study.
4.1 Defining Phatic Communion

As discussed in the literature review of this study, and in keeping with the IS framework, the concept of phatic communion cannot be imposed etically, and phatic communion as it occurred in the data must be defined by the participants themselves. In order to address the first research question of this project, concerned with the meaning that interlocutors derive from phatic utterances and the ways in which they interpret phatic exchanges, an emic definition of phatic communion was sought explicitly by way of semi-structured interviews, and was also expected to arise from the conversation pub data.

When asked outright what they considered “small talk,” Key Participants all pointed to its mundane nature, as “nothing big” (Uma), “talking about random things that are not meaningful” (Dora), or “casual conversation” (Maria). Uma felt that the term social talk was too formal, and suggested the use of “easygoing talk” in her interview. Weather was mentioned as a common phatic topic by all Key Participants, alongside others such as culture, current events, or recent events. Uma mentioned that a common phatic topic for her was “something different or weird,” a noteworthy comment as she is the only participant in this study to employ such a strategy, by introducing a Japanese eel cracker to the group during the first conversation pub. Dora named school, jobs, movies, and music as possible topics. She does not initiate talk in the conversation pubs on any of these topics other than school, which is to be predicted since School X is common ground for all participants. Maria stressed the flexibility of phatic topics, mentioning twice that “anything can be” phatic. Key Participants disagreed on taboo topics in phatic communion; Maria insisted that there were no “rules” in small talk, only that she did not consider the speech events of “announcements” or “speeches” to be phatic. Dora also felt that phatic communion did not have built-in restrictions, only that it should not be “long.” Uma reported that phatic communion did not include personal information, such as age, work, or romance, though the conversation pub data do contain discussions on the latter two, with her participation.

Often, phatic communion was defined in the interviews more through negative definitions; through examples of what is not phatic or by violated norms. Maria, in elaborating in her comment about announcements and speeches, gives the example of Noah’s repeated monologues during the
second conversation pub as examples of what is not phatic communion: she says “when Noah came? It was not like conversation pub, you know (...) It was just his speech, and we are just listening.” Extended storytelling, then, is not part of how Maria conceives of phatic communion. This is in line with Dora’s comment that phatic talk is short in length (although whether she was referring to the length of a single individual’s turn, or the interaction as a whole, is unclear). Maria also offered the example of an acquaintance of hers, who, according to her, tends to tell long stories and/or monologue, but without a point: “we just we listen to his talk and at the end we are like so what?” She did not consider this an example of successful phatic communion.

Uma was vague in her initial definition of phatic communion, saying only that she thought it was about things noticed – she gives an example of it being acceptable to discuss a tree only if there were visible deformities such as abnormal branch size or growth – or global evaluations about “not important issues” such as the weather. When pressed, however, she told a story about a customer who came into the café where she worked and said “hey, what’s up?” She felt uncomfortable at that time – she was a new employee in the café – and was taken aback: “like you are the customer? But I didn’t say it like, but you are the customer. And he said, oh just tell me ‘go to hell’ [laughs].” She felt, at that time, that the customer was being too familiar, and the memory of that, along with his instruction that she also violate traditional norms of politeness, invoked such a reaction that she chose this story to recall during the interview.

A recurring theme in the interviews was the emphasis on the “seen-but-unnoticed” nature of phatic communion (Seedhouse, 2004). Participants overall expressed an attitude of “it’s just talking,” and each reported that they had never thought about small talk as having norms or rules. Maria commented that she felt she made small talk “all the time,” meaning that any time spent chatting with friends or strangers was inclusive in her definition of phatic communion. Dora was more particular in her definition; she felt that phatic communion was used mostly between interlocutors with social distance: “If I don’t know you well, I don’t feel comfortable speaking for a long time.” At the same time, when asked about her comfort level during the conversation pubs, she replied that she had fun because “I was with my friends” and “I got to know you [meaning me, the participant observer and her former teacher] better,” which seems to indicate that she distinguishes between “small talk” with strangers and phatic communion among friends. By contrast, Maria’s first response when I asked for her definition of “small talk” was that it only occurred between friends and family. Later she clarified that it could occur between interlocutors with little to no
degree of intimacy, including strangers. After some elicitation, she also discussed workplace collegiality, stating that “it makes us feel comfortable to work together.” Both Uma and Dora also reported that they felt comfortable during the conversation pubs due to social factors; each reported feelings comfortable because “you are my friends” (Uma) and “I like you guys” (Maria). In all three interviews, the exploratory function of phatic communion was at the forefront of the participants’ understanding of small talk.

Another topic that was discussed in the interviews concerned the teachability of phatic communion, or whether small talk skills could be taught in a classroom. This question elicited three quite different answers. Uma laughed at the idea, and joked about creating a “how-to” guide on how to make small talk in English. At the end of the interview, however, when asked if she wanted to add anything, she told me she wanted the real answer to that question (whether phatic communion was teachable). Dora shared her belief that the only way to improve phatic competence was to be confident, and by “really trying to know the person to whom they are talking,” again stressing her belief that phatic communion primarily plays a relational, exploratory part in conversation. Maria’s response was that, in order to be a “good small speaker” (in her words), it was important to observe and mimic someone they believe to be phatically skilled. When asked about the potential for a formal ESL class about phatic communion, she laughed and said she felt it might be awkward, but perhaps helpful for very shy ELLs.

Phatic communion was thus understood by the participants in ways that overlap, but are by no means homogenous. While all participants cited the weather, for example, their later answers reflected something more detailed. Maria believed that small talk was essentially social entertainment; that is, something we all do constantly just to pass the time. Uma felt that it was a way to avoid silence; she also believed that topics that were out of the ordinary (such as an unusual tree) were more desirable than banal comments on the weather; that curiosity or observational acuity may play a part in successful phatic talk. Dora focused on the intimacy factor in phatic communion; more than once she spoke about using phatic communion for deepening friendships or becoming more comfortable with someone by exchanging personal information.
4.1.1 The Phatic Spectrum

The second research question of this study concerned how the participants engaged in phatic communion. Phatic communion, it has been established, is multidimensional by nature; it allows interlocutors to accomplish multiple goals simultaneously by virtue of its illocution- and/or inference-dependent nature. What is or is not phatic is a matter negotiated by the interlocutors, and is both bound and created by the context in which it occurs. This does not, however, generate objective criteria for whether a specific utterance or exchange is phatic or referential (Kasper, 1984), or to what degree.

The purpose of the conversation pubs was to generate as much small talk as possible; it was clear to all participants that the focus of the study was social conversation, and so the entire set of data can be seen as phatic, in that no transactions took place in the conversations, and the interactants are accomplishing relational goals only. Some referential information is exchanged, in the form of information-sharing, but in these exchanges it is clear that the speaker’s illocutionary force is phatic (see Example 2). It is also worth noting here that, as discussed in the literature review, phatic communion is not a type of talk per se, but is best conceived of as a “cluster of sociopsychological orientations to talk” (Maynard & Hudak, 2008; 214). The data from the conversation pubs thus established a spectrum of phatic talk, ranging from the explicitly phatic nature of a greeting, to exchanges that are phatic and also referential (Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Phatic Spectrum**

Example 1, situated at one extreme end of the spectrum, is the greeting from the first conversation pub. To reiterate, Maria, Dora, and Uma are my former students. I had visited with Maria and Dora socially within the previous few weeks, but had not seen Dora since our time together at School X. I was the last to arrive.
Example 1

1  M: hi:: =Sara:h
2  S: =~hi::
3  M: [laughs]
4  S: {[ff]~hi::}
5  M: =[laughs]=
6  U: =[laughs]=
7  D: how are you:/
8  S: *good==how are [hi]*~you//
9  D: i'm *good
10 S: how are =you://
11 M:  =[laughs]
12 U:  =[laughs]
13 S: oh it's good to see you/ =you look ~great//
14 D:  =yeah i am so happy/
15 S: [ac]hm? you **look =happy/ you look so healthy//
16 U:  =[laughs]
17 M: always/  =[laughs] (huh) how are [hi]*you:/
18 U:  =[laughs]
19 S: oh, {[ac]fine fine}// crazy// as always//

The actual words in this encounter were ritualistic and predictable; the participants were “doing a greeting.” No information was exchanged, and other than the compliment in line 15 the exchange was composed of stock phrases. This greeting is emblematic of a “pure” phatic encounter on the phatic spectrum of the data.
Interactions from the data that were placed at the opposite end of the spectrum involved referential remarks or were informative in nature. Example 2 is from the third conversation pub, attended by Yuna, Noah, and me, prior to the arrival of Uma. Yuna is Noah’s former student, and she and I had never met before. The conversation prior to this exchange dealt with comparing Canadian and Japanese weather. Vancouver had been mentioned seven times in the five minutes preceding this exchange, four times by Noah and three by me.

Example 2

1 S: Vancouver it's just, <1> it's steady but it's quite grey/ and you just you know it's gonna rain/ everyday/ probably/ <2> it's just rainy//
2 N: <2> i love i went there for (only a) week, i loved it// it
3 S: ==it's =beautiful
4 N: ==was gor= and i went in the right season/ i went in August so it was sunny
5 S: oh yeah//
6 N: yeah so I could see the mountains and <1> it was such a=have you been to Vancouver?
7 Y: (hm) [shakes head]
8 N: () if you can/ stop there on your way==are you taking Air Canada?
9 Y: yes/
10 N: they might allow you to stop/ without charging you more// i'm==i/ they did it for me but I'm not sure? just stop for two days// it's a beautiful city//
11 S: <2> my family lives in Vancouver//=
12 Y: =o:::h
13 S: =it's =beautiful
14 N: it is the *most beautiful==like if i have to move from Toronto, that's the by far that's the first/ city i would ever// <1> you know i would *love to live there//= yeah//
15 Y: <2> i heard ah Vancouver there're many rain?
16  S: mhm?
17  Y: every day rain?
18  S: <l> oh yeah a [dc]lo:t of rain
19  Y: rai:- ~a::h

The language in this exchange was far less ritualized. It contained some referential information – Yuna has never been to Vancouver, and so there was information-sharing from Noah and me. Noah’s suggestion that Yuna visit was accompanied by a specific suggestion for how to do so (to stop on her way home to Japan, and the fact that she may be able to stop at no extra cost). The context here remained phatic, however; there is no evidence that Yuna took the suggestion to be anything else. She did not reply to Noah’s suggestion, but did so after I offered a personal disclosure about Vancouver in line 11. Instead, she returned to the topic of weather in line 15, after a short pause. Though the language is referential and some information was exchanged, the participants nevertheless oriented themselves to the talk as phatic.

The phatic spectrum offered here is not meant to serve as a universal model of phatic communion, yet it offers some clarification on phatic communion as it occurred in this particular data set. It also aims to highlight the range of strategies employed by the participants in these sessions to initiate, maintain, and negotiate phatic talk.

4.2 Conversation Pubs: Conversational Features

As noted in Section 3, the three weekly conversation pubs yielded approximately seven hours of recordings; however, technical difficulties resulted in one portion of a recording being unusable, and another portion was inaudible due to noise factors, with the result that the final data set was just under five hours. Of the six participants, four were present at each conversation pub.
4.2.1 Conversation Pub 1

The first conversation pub was attended by Maria, Dora, Uma, and me. This session was approximately 2.5 hours, 1.5 of which was usable as data. The participants at this session were all former students of mine at School X in Toronto, and the three of them are close friends. I had met socially with Maria and Uma a few times prior to the study, and would describe my professional relationship with Dora as very friendly and familiar. I was the last to arrive, and so there is one greeting in this data set. Not surprisingly, much of the conversation during this session involved news-sharing and gossip about common acquaintances from School X. Other topics included the weather, future plans and recent events related to the participants’ personal lives, cooking/food, and references to the service at the pub. Talk was continuous, with only four pauses longer than ten seconds, two of which occurred while participants were eating nachos. No pause was longer than fifteen seconds in length. The talk was characterized by lots of laughter, as well as a preference for agreeing and complimenting, and expressions of personal preference or aversions. Much of the talk was either directed at me, as offering news, or initiated by me, as with topic introduction. Significant contributions, such as new topics or personal disclosures, were offered by all participants. Other than laughter, the talk did not feature overlaps, but speakers took individual turns at talk.

4.2.2 Conversation Pub 2

The second conversation pub was attended by Dora, Maria, and me, with Noah joining approximately half an hour later. Two greetings are thus present in this session. The audio recording of this session lasted approximately 2.5 hours, though the participants remained at the conversation pub after my departure, a story told at the next session. The second half of the recording was unusable due to noise pollution in the pub, and so 75 minutes of the data were viable for analysis. Prior to Noah’s arrival, much of the conversation concerns news offered in the first session, primarily a trip to Chicago that Dora and Maria had taken in the week between the first and second sessions, and plans for an upcoming visit from Dora’s sister. Similar to the first conversation pub, upcoming events in the participants’ personal lives were prevalent in the conversations, as well as comparisons between the home countries of the participants; in this case,
workday schedules and vacation standards. Overlaps were present in the conversation, though rare, and participants primarily took individual turns at talk.

The session changed significantly on the arrival of Noah, who is also a former teacher of Maria and Dora. Post-greeting, the remainder of the conversation was dominated by Noah, whose turns were much longer than the other participants, whose contributions consisted mainly of laughter and sounds of agreement, or offered opinions on the stories shared by Noah. As in the first conversation pub, the topics discussed concerned common acquaintances from School X, though mainly other teachers and the administrative staff. The conversation was gossip-heavy, as Noah delivered stories as monologues and other participants reacted to them. Contrary to the first conversation pub, the preference here was for negative comments and complaining. Taboo subjects were discussed, such as marijuana use, though only by Noah, and participants tended to agree with his negative comments rather than counter them. After the first hour, nearly all contributions to the conversation were offered by Noah or me, as other members made offerings of laughter or agreement. There is a sequence about a known celebrity and a movie he had starred in; however, talk soon returned to Noah, his dislike of School X, and his plans to find another job.

The orientation of this conversation pub was geared almost solely toward Noah; he made self-oriented contributions, and others asked other-oriented questions or offered conversational support, as sounds of understanding or agreement. Overlaps were much more present in the session after his arrival, as well as interruptions. Laughter was employed often, and reference to drama, as opposed to news, was also present.

4.2.3 Conversation Pub 3

The third and final conversation pub, lasting approximately two hours, was attended by Noah, me, and Yuna, a former student of Noah’s whom I had never met. Uma joined the conversation nearly 45 minutes into the session; this session also featured two greetings, as well as a leave-taking. Uma and Yuna attended School X at different times, and had never met.

This session was unique in that it contained two introductions, yet the two were similar in that reference to Maria, a common acquaintance of all participants who was not present at this session,
was offered as part of the introduction; this is a significant feature that is discussed in more depth in Section 4.4.2. Personal information about Yuna was gleaned through my other-oriented questions, or Noah’s offerings. Topics in this session included Yuna’s current activities, her former university, and a lengthy discussion (nearly twenty minutes) of weather. Yuna is Japanese, as is Noah’s wife, and so much of the conversation (including the weather) was about Japan. Once Uma arrived, she and Yuna were introduced and the conversation turned to cultural stereotypes and politeness, before turning to a discussion of books. In the last half hour of the session, the conversation split into two dyads. Uma and I spent the remainder of the session talking about recent personal events and upcoming Canada Day events.

The conversation, when all four participants were involved, was characterized by many overlaps and interruptions, nearly always from Noah or me. The bulk of the conversation concerned neutral topics, such as the weather, and speakers’ orientations were largely self-directed; although Noah dominated the conversation once again, it was to a lesser degree than in the previous session. Questions were rare, with the exception of the margins of the conversation pub. Preference was expressed for negative comments, as in the second conversation pub, but they were geared toward less personal topics (the comments in the previous session had largely been about the staff at School X, whereas the negative comments or aversions in this session generally occurred in discussions of the weather). All participants left the conversation pub together, and the closing sequences took place outside the pub.

4.3 Greetings

4.3.1 Greeting 1

Example 3, first mentioned in Section 4.1, as an example of “pure” phatic talk on the phatic spectrum, is the first greeting from Session One, and is continued below from line 19. As noted above, all participants are known to each other; Maria, Dora, and Uma are friends and former classmates as well as my former students. Maria, Uma and I have a social relationship, though Dora and I had not seen each other for a few months and had had a professional acquaintance only.

Example 3
19 S: oh, {[ac]fine fine//} crazy// as always//
20 M: you got tanned//
21 S: oh/ thank you// a tan is very *nice// a kind thing to say// {[ac] I got a burn//}
22 [laughter]
23 S: it's so beautiful out/
24 M: yeah/
25 U: she graduated//
26 M: yeah/

As noted earlier, this speech event was composed nearly entirely of ritual phrases; this was clearly identified by all participants as an act of greeting. During this greeting, hugs were also taking place, indicating solidarity. Relational work was at the forefront, notable in the prosody of the exchange; the final vowels in “hi” in lines 1, 2, and 4, were markedly elongated, as were the final vowels in “you” of HAY (“how are you”) in lines 7, 8, 10, and 17. Vowel length here was used by Maria, Dora and me, to indicate excitement at seeing each other, and the fact that we were happy to be engaged in the greeting. There was a marked difference in volume and vowel length between my greeting in line 2 and the one in line 4; I had not been expecting to see Dora, and used prosody to indicate my happiness at her attendance. There was also a large amount of laughter in this exchange from Maria and Uma; this may have been because they were expecting a reaction from me at seeing Dora. Their laughter may also have indicated mirth at the exaggerated vocals of the greeting, or simply an expression of pleasure. Uma skipped the verbal greeting altogether, but contributed to the ritual through laughter and a friendly embrace.

The only HAY responses in this greeting came from Dora and me and were also highly predictable; the ritual nature of these responses was accentuated by a drop in vocal pitch on the word “good,” from me in line 8 and from Dora in the next turn. Upon sitting at the table, I self-selected as the first speaker and offered an extended greeting in line 13, and continued with a compliment (“You look great”). Dora’s response was intended to be phatic, as in “I am happy to see you too,” but this was redirected into a continuation of the same compliment in line 15. Maria echoed the compliment as the next speaker, and returned to a HAY sequence. My response was dismissive, as “fine fine” was spoken quickly and at a lower pitch before finishing the utterance with an implication that
things are always busy for me, also inferring that the other participants know this about me, due to our prior relationships. The response also indicated that my current state was unimportant, and signals that the talk should then move on. This cue was picked up by Maria, who offered her own compliment, which was met with a second compliment (“that’s a kind thing to say”) and a joke. I self-selected as the next speaker in line 23 with a phatic comment on the weather, which was accepted by Maria but rejected by Uma, who instead offered news of Dora as a topic. This was accepted by the other participants, and the talk continued.

4.3.2 Greeting 2

Greeting 2 is from the beginning of the second conversation pub. Maria and Dora had already arrived when I approached the table.

Example 4

1 M: () Sara::hi/
2 D: [hi]hi::
3 S: [f][gi]hi:
4 M: hehh
5 S: how's it going/
6 M: <l> good/ we just came back from Chicago//
7 D: yeah/
8 M: yes but
9 S: ==oh ([ac]yeah yeah yeah)
10 M: last night//
11 S: and?
12 D: it was so: [lo] nice
13 M: yeah

This greeting was markedly different from the first, perhaps because we had all met one week prior. Maria offered my name by way of greeting, and elongated the last vowel in a parallel fashion
to the “hi’s” of Example 1. Dora and I contributed with similarly stressed vowel sounds, while Maria offered a laugh-like sound. There were no hugs, though all three participants offered waves and smiles. I was the last to sit, and offered a stock HAY-like question to start the conversation. After a short pause, Maria self-selected as the next speaker, and after a ritual response (“good”), immediately offered news as a first topic, which was accepted by Dora. I offered a response indicating that I remembered them offering the topic of their trip as news the week before and continued the conversation by attempting to elicit elaboration. Dora self-selected to give the response in line 12, a positive evaluation stressed by the vowel length of “so.” The talk continued on this topic.

4.3.3 Greeting 3

Example 5 is a greeting that took place approximately half an hour into the second conversation pub, with the arrival of Noah. To recap, Noah is a teacher at School X, and a former teacher of Maria and Dora. He and I maintained a friendly professional relationship at School X, though we had never socialized outside of work.

Example 5

1  M: yeah but =it’s
2  N: =[[singing] here I come= foxy lady]
3  S: [hi]he::y there/
4  N: how are you guys doing/
5  M: hi: [laughs]
6  N: oh I'll sit right here//
7  S: oh I forgot to tell you Noah is coming [hh]
8  D: =[laughs]
9  M: =[laughs]
10 N: yeah I just got my hair cut/
11 M: =[giggles]
12 D: [hh]
13 N: a:gh// so itchy//
14 S: how's it *going/
15 N: what are you doing/
16 M: =[giggles]
Noah approached the table in the middle of a conversation, and interrupted Maria’s utterance. He greeted the table by singing lyrics from a song about approaching a beautiful woman. There were no hugs or waves. I offered a greeting, with a higher pitch and elongated vowel sound, in line 3, which Noah skipped and moved straight to a HAY question. Maria also offered an extended “hi,” which again was unreturned as Noah found a seat at the table. My next utterance was offered to Maria and Dora, framed as a news-forgetting; the two students interpreted it (correctly) as a joke, and responded with laughter. Noah self-selected as the next speaker in line 10 and offered news of where he had been; this comment was acknowledged by Maria and Dora, and he elaborated on how his haircut felt. I returned to ritualized greeting phrases in line 14, directed at Noah, and he responded with another question, clearly intended as phatic since, in the literal sense, he knew what activity was taking place and the purpose of gathering. This was also interpreted as phatic by the other participants, as Maria offered a small laugh and I offered another phatic token in line 17, echoed by Dora. This was acknowledged by Noah’s affirmation in line 19, and appears to have been taken as a criticism for his arriving late, as he apologized but did not complete his excuse verbally and instead gestured to his hair, indicating that he had been late due to his hair appointment. Dora made a sound of understanding as a response, overlapped by my question on whether he had come from work. This was not responded to directly, but was redirected by Noah through a comment on the immediate situation; that it was difficult to meet socially during the week. The conversation continued with talk of Noah’s weekday schedule.

4.3.4 Greeting 4

Example 6 is a greeting that took place at the beginning of the third conversation pub. Noah and Yuna had already arrived; Noah had gone looking for me, and so this greeting took place in two parts; Yuna and I introduced ourselves, and we were then joined by Noah.
Yuna is Noah’s former student at School X. She and I had never met before.

**Example 6**

1. S: [hi]oop
2. Y: ==ahh
3. S: yes/ [hi]~*hi
4. Y: ~hi nice to meet you/ ah now Noah is walking and
5. S: ==oh i'm so sorry i'm late/ nice to meet you,
7. S: [hi]hey/ <4> how's it [hi]going/
8. N: i {[dc]saw you go} this way so I
9. S: oh
10. N: ==chased you// how are you doing/
11. S: how are ya/
12. N: {[ac]pretty good/ pretty good/}
13. S: i'm so sorry i'm late, i got about
14. N: ==you worked there with me too was
15. S: five emails cancelling//
16. N: at our school do you?
17. S: no we've never met/
18. Y: no//
19. N: () when did you start// School X// maybe?
20. Y: ah Mar- ah March 30?
21. N: ah {[ac]yeah yeah} you were/
22. S: i think i was *long gone by then//
23. N: {[ac]yeah yeah}

Yuna and I greeted each other with “hi’s” that were friendly – each using intonation that rose and fell in the vowel – but the vowel length was not noticeably elongated in either speaker. The greeting sequence between Yuna and me consisted of ritualized phrases (“nice to meet you”) interspersed
with comments on the situation: Noah’s whereabouts and my tardiness. We were each thus accomplishing several goals in lines 4 through 6: Yuna was greeting me and giving information about another participant, and I was greeting and apologizing. My apology was rushed, followed immediately by a greeting phrase, signaling the phaticity of the remark; I was not actually remorseful, but instead offered an apology to mitigate any annoyance she may have felt at having to wait. In turn 6, Yuna appeared to interpret my apology as such, as she quickly dismissed my apology by rapidly repeating “no,” communicating that she was not offended, and also moved on, repeating her phatic utterance before calling for Noah to return to the table.

My greeting on Noah’s return to the table was of a higher pitch and stress, but, as with Yuna, there was no lengthening of the vowel sound, only the same rise-and-fall intonation earlier used to indicate friendliness and pleasure. As in Example 5, I offered a stock greeting phrase after a 4-second pause, which Noah ignored to explain why he had left the table. He offered a phatic greeting phrase on the heels of his explanation, to which I did not respond but instead mirrored with another HAY question. Noah responded with a preferred answer in line 12. I returned to my apology, this time directed at Noah and followed by an excuse. Lines 13 through 16 consisted of Noah and I speaking “at” each other, taking turns at different speech events; I was giving an excuse for my lateness, while he was attempting to establish co-membership between Yuna and I. There were no interruptions in this sequence; we were merely taking turns at making utterances. In line 17, I responded to his unfinished question, interpreting it to mean whether Yuna and I had met. This was confirmed by Yuna in the next line. Noah pushed the question further in his next turn, confirming Yuna’s start date at School X, before acknowledging our lack of overlap. I seconded his confirmation, which Noah again echoed. The conversation then moved to talk of the study itself.

### 4.3.5 Greeting 5

The final greeting in this data set, Example 7, was interstitial, occurring approximately 30-40 minutes into the third conversation pub. I returned to the table with Uma, having met her outside the pub. Uma and Yuna were meeting for the first time.

**Example 7**
N: [hi]he::y =there you are
S: =look what I found
N: [hi]Uma::
U: hello,
Y: hi: =how are you:/
N: =have you met= each other?
U: no? i don't think so/
N: Yuna, Uma/
Y: nice to meet you [laughs]
N: friends with Mar*ia/
Y: ~a:a:h
U: a:::h [laughs]
S: the famous Maria/
U: yeh famous Maria [laughs]
Y: yeah/
N: <2> yeah so we were talking about Brazilian time?

Noah greeted Uma with an elongated “hey” and indicates that he had been expecting her, overlapped by my announcement that she had arrived. Noah followed with her name, similarly extending the final vowel, and Uma directed an non-accentuated “hello” to Yuna. Yuna’s response in line 5 was an elongated “hi” followed by HAY, which in all of the other greetings had been used with participants who have previously met. Uma did not respond, nor does she need to, as Noah overlapped Yuna with a question about previous acquaintance, and Uma confirmed that they had not. After Noah’s introduction, Yuna’s next turn was “nice to meet you,” which is the same phrase she used when she and I had met at the beginning of the session. Noah’s turn in 10 established co-membership by mentioning Maria, who is a common acquaintance of both Yuna and Uma. This was acknowledged with long “ah” vowels from both Yuna and Uma, and Uma laughed. In line 13, I commented on the fact that Maria was well-known at School X; Uma reaffirmed this and acknowledged the joke with laughter. Yuna also agreed with this comment in line 15, and after a short pause, Noah filled Uma in on the topic that had been under discussion prior to her arrival. Talk continued on the topic of cultural notions of punctuality.
4.4 Topic Choice

4.4.1 Weather

As noted earlier, all of the Key Participants in this study cited weather as a common phatic topic, and this was indeed reflected in the data collection, though it was not the most prevalent topic. Two long sequences regarding the weather appeared; one in session one, of four minutes, and one in session three, of approximately thirteen minutes. Weather was suggested at other times in the data, but it was invariably dismissed or overlooked in favour of other topics.

Example 8 is an excerpt about weather from the first conversation pub. Uma, Dora, Maria and I had been discussing the recent visit of Maria’s mother.

Example 8

1   M: time *flies// Toronto really/ [laughs]
2   U: [laughs]
3   S: it really does// I can't believe it's the middle of [f]June/
4   D: yeah/
5   S: that's crazy/
6   M: [laughs]
7   D: yeah/ really//
8   M: time passed so::: fast// ([ac]so fast)//
9   S: it feels like yesterday we were complaining about the cold/
10  [giggling]
11  D: but i can't believe they will like be there next winter really i can't/ oh my god// so great//
12  U: [giggles]
13  S: it's true it's funny how you forget the pain/
14  [gigging]
15  M: but sometimes, i miss winter//
D: [hi]wha::t?
M: no?
D: no *way heh
[giggling]
D: no: way// heh
S: i understand// i miss winter// often//
U: just for a little bit// snow/
M: yeah snow i *miss snow actually//
U: we don't have snow/
M: a lot
U: ==not lot
M: not a lot in Japan so,
D: ehn/ I'm fine//
[giggling]
D: it can stay like this for (a while)/
S: you're a summer baby?
M: [giggles]
D: heh ([ac]yeah yeah yeah} i *love summer/ but now it's a little bit
getting really hot but it's okay/ it's okay//
S: i start complaining when the nights are hot//
U: mmm
S: i don't mind if the daytime's, hot as long as it's nice and cool at
night//
M: yeah/
S: but now that the nights are starting to get gross
U: gross heh
S: a ~little gross/
M: mm yeah//
S: by august i always just feel a little bit dirty//
U: mm
S: like i want to take
D: ==nice
S: ten showers every day//
M: [giggles]
D: it's true//
M: is it humid, {[dc]in August?}
S: to *me it's humid//
M: okay/
S: um but people who live here, don't really complain about it// it's just me// complaining//
D: [giggles]
M: maybe we won't complain because in Japan *totally humid//
S: [dc]really/
M: I [f]**hate/ Japanese summer// i [f]**hate//
S: so like how hot is it/
M: it's sometime it's,
U: last summer was so: hot//
M: yeah/
U: every day 35 degrees//
M: over five-35/
U: yeah/ every
M: and
U: ==everyday like alarm/ alarm/ alarm/
M: and with humid// humidly?
S: humidity//
M: humidity//
S: yeah and is there a [hi]breeze, at least?
U: {ac}yeah yeah} so you should you should take a lot of water//
All participants agreed that time had passed very quickly; the three former students had all arrived in Toronto the previous winter, nearly five months before the study. In lines 3 and 9, I highlighted the passage of time from our first meeting (in the winter) to the time of the study, and Dora commented on the fact that both Uma and Maria planned to stay in Toronto through the following winter. Her addition of “so great” implied that she believed this to be a good thing – not the weather itself, but the fact that Uma and Maria would continue on in Canada. This became clear in the negative comments she later made about the cold weather. In the wake of my contribution about the pain of winter, there was laughter at the table before Maria added that she enjoyed the cold weather, perhaps inferring from Dora’s turn in line 11 that this was a potential consensus of the group. Dora disagreed, but with exaggerated pitch that demonstrated she was open to being challenged on this point; Maria appeared surprised, and Dora continued in the same vein, elongating her vowels and giggling to underline the humour of the encounter. In line 21, I affirmed Maria’s positive comment on Canadian winter. From lines 22 through 26, Maria and Uma revealed that the novelty of snow lay behind their lack of aversion to winter, as there is not generally much snow in their home country of Japan. Dora, who comes from wintry Switzerland, made an exaggerated sound indicating that she was not convinced, and reaffirmed her happiness with the current sunny weather. After more laughter, I followed this vein by pushing for more information from Dora about her seasonal preferences. She replied with another comment on her preference for warm weather, making a small negative comment about the heat before concluding with her opinion that she enjoyed the current weather.

I began to voice my own weather preferences between lines 36 and 46, as the other participants interjected to indicate that they either understood, agreed, or sympathized with my opinion. I also
indicated solidarity with the other participants in line 52, suggesting that, like them, I am an outsider in this city. Maria and Uma then took the floor and took turns giving information about Japanese summers; Maria was vehement about her opinions (she used the word “hate” repeatedly with very strong intonation), and her information was confirmed by Uma, though with less vitriol. Dora was silent during this time, and my contributions consisted of clarifying information or aligning my opinions with theirs. After nearly 35 turns, I attempted to include Dora in the conversation by asking about the climate of her native Switzerland, suggesting co-membership by pre-emptively comparing it to my own home country and contrasting it with Japan.

Although weather was the general topic being discussed here, it was also an opportunity for other relational accomplishments. Weather was introduced as a way to measure the participants’ overall length of stay in Canada, and continued throughout this sequence as a means of sharing personal opinions and cultural information. Although there were utterances that indicated aversion or negativity, they served to underscore the fact that all participants were happy to be in Toronto at that point in time, presumably together. There was a lot of laughter and joking to underscore this; there were four instances of “whole-table laughter” in this four-minute sequence, as well as multiple instances of individual participants chuckling. While “weather” is considered the heading of this exchange, it was certainly not the main focus of the participants’ interactive goals.

The only other long sequence about weather occurred in the third conversation pub. This sequence was much longer, at nearly 13 minutes. The participants had been discussing Yuna’s university in Japan; Example 9 is the beginning of the weather sequence.

**Example 9**

1. N: yeah it's beautiful/
2. Y: so in summer/ so: hot/
3. S: mhm?
4. Y: ve:ry very hot the, <1> () and the so, in morning
5. N: --do you walk up there like/ do you walk up?
6. Y: yes/
7. N: you don't take a bus?
8. Y: sometimes i take- i took/ the bus? but very crowded so,
N: o:h/
Y: i have to wait/ i have to wait *many bus// hh
N: how many/ how long is the ~walk/ how long does it take to walk/
Y: uh, (fifty?) minutes/
N: ah that's crazy/
Y: ()
N: in that heat?
Y: ()
N: up the hill/ up, a [f]hill/
Y: yes/
N: in like thirty, thirty? thirty-five degrees? but the humidity is in*sane in Japan//
S: ew/
Y: yes/
N: like {[dc]really sticky}(/
S: really/
N: we actually ==when we were teaching in Japan, we had a special room/ to change our clothes// you know how like
Y: ==oh hh
N: School X you just come in, whatever i put on my tie// we have like a men's, like men's and women's room cloakroom/ because it's so humid that you have to ==you cannot//
Y: oh/ hh
N: you can't just walk to ==you can't come into work// without being wet//
S: hm/
N: like so we would come in, with regular clothes like t-shirts/ go in the cloakroom and put on our like our button-up shirts because it was so: you cannot imagine// when i came back to Toronto in July, i felt like it was nice and cool here//
S: [hi]ew//
Like Example 8, the conversation turned to weather as the result of another topic; in this case, Yuna offered a comment on the heat as an addition on Noah’s praise for the beauty of her former school. This may have been a way to redirect from the previous compliments directed at her, as she had earlier tried to play down Noah’s comments on how intelligent she must be to have studied at this particular university. In lines 5 through 19, however, Noah continued to stress the summer weather as a way to praise Yuna. Noah was using the Japanese heat to accentuate how challenging Yuna’s commute had been; he had earlier been stressing how impressive Yuna’s university was, and this may have been an extended compliment on her work ethic and intelligence. As of line 19, Noah dominated the conversation with anecdotes to prove how hot the summers in Japan are. He had spent significant time in Japan, and is married to a Japanese woman; as in Example 6, this can be considered “cultural talk,” and Yuna contributed to the conversation to agree with the information he offered. My contributions consisted mainly of appropriate reactions to their story-
telling; I made several small reactions of disgust, which I interpreted as preferred responses in this context, and confirmed information in lines 23 and 39.

This sequence stood alone as an encounter about weather in that, after line 19 (and for the next twelve or so minutes), the conversation consisted nearly entirely of monologues from Noah about the heat in Japan. Contributions from Yuna were between one and two words; nearly all of her utterances were affirmative answers or short spurts of laughter. My own were primarily follow-up questions directed at Noah, or short preferred reactions to his anecdotes. Weather here was the topic of discussion in a much more visible way, in that the conversation was overwhelmingly dominated by Noah’s self-oriented story-telling.

Example 10 is a short excerpt from the first conversation pub. It occurred immediately post-greeting.

**Example 10**

1 M: you got tanned//
2 S: oh/ thank you// a tan is very *nice// a kind thing to say// {[ac] i got a burn//}
3 [laughter]
4 S: it's so beautiful out/
5 M: yeah/
6 U: she graduated//
7 M: yeah/
8 S: i {{hi}[ac]saw a photo} Noah posted about it//

Example 11 is also from the first conversation pub, and occurred approximately 75 minutes into the session.

**Example 11**

1 M: () spicy? <5> [eating nachos] nice//
2 S: mm// that breeze is nice// it's too hot//
In both of these examples, weather was offered up by me as a possible topic of conversation (line 4 in Example 10, and line 3 in Example 11). In both cases, it was quickly rejected in favour of other topics. In Example 10, I offered it as a possible topic following the greeting, and as a way to diminish Maria’s compliment. Maria agreed with my deflection, indicating that she was willing to continue in this vein. Uma, however, offered recent news of Dora as an alternative topic in line 6; it is this topic that was taken up by the participants. In Example 11, the weather was mentioned in the middle of a conversation about nachos. This time it was not acknowledged by any of the other participants; though much of the data is inaudible due to noise pollution, the conversation remained on the subject of the food.

Of all of the suggestions of weather as a topic, Example 9 was the only instance of a suggestion by an ELL (Yuna); in all three other cases, it was introduced by me. In total, weather was introduced as a possible topic of conversation four times. Twice it was rejected outright by the participants.

4.4.2 Common Acquaintanceship

By far the most common topic initiation technique employed by the participants in this study was concerned with common ground. While many of the earlier examples discussing weather also involved common ground (e.g., Noah and Yuna spent several turns discussing their common knowledge of Japanese weather in Example 9, as did Uma and Maria in Example 8), there was
also a marked tendency to seek common ground by way of personal acquaintanceship. In searching for initiatory comments in phatic communion, the participants tended to introduce common acquaintances or offer information about each other. This is also perhaps not surprising, as the participants were familiarizing themselves with the group dynamic and making initial negotiations about how verbal encounters in this particular context were to be accomplished. To do this, they introduced news of common acquaintances, as the topic would be familiar to all participants, and thus, presumably, were topics that would generate extended conversation.

Example 12 occurred approximately ten minutes into the first conversation pub, immediately after introducing the study. It followed an 8-second pause, as participants were looking through the information sheet given to them. The names of people discussed have been deleted, and replaced with the first letter and a double-dash.

Example 12

1  S: who else is still at School X/ L--?
2  D: ah L-- yeah,
3  M: yeah/
4  D: but now she's in advanced class {[ac]she just moved} so she's really happy/
5  S: oh she must be/
6  D: yeah she's {[ac]really really happy}// and then J--/
7  S: how *is J--?
8  D: ah/ J-- is goo:d,
9  S: {[hi][dc]my friend J--//}
10  M: a:h
11  [giggling]
12  D: he's happy um/ and um what else/ S-- u::m a *lot of new students actually/ G-- you had G--?
13  S: yup,
14  D: you had G--/
15  S: i did//
Following the pause, I elected to introduce the topic, starting with the name of someone I knew was a current roommate of Dora’s; School X is common ground for all participants, as is the person mentioned, and this topic was readily picked up by Dora and Maria. In line 6, Dora maintained the conversation by offering the name of another person she knew was familiar; this was encouraged by me, as I asked a follow-up question in line 7, and commented on my fondness for this person. “J” is a favourite former student of mine, which was a subject of humour in the class I shared with these three participants; I used ascending-descending tone in the pronunciation of his name, and referred to him as my friend to underscore that past relationship. This was acknowledged first by Maria, who mimicked my prosody in her reply, and was followed by whole table laughter. This sequence appears to have given consensus as to the desirability of “news of acquaintances” as a topic. In line 12, Dora took a risk by mentioning a name she was not sure was known by everyone; in doing so, she was extending the conversation beyond predictable acquaintances. Common acquaintanceship was confirmed, and Maria offered news of another former classmate, stressing in line 19 the strength of her friendship with him by implying that she wished he were staying, elongating the word “soon.” The conversation then turned to new students and staff members at School X; while the people mentioned in following exchanges were not known to all participants, the environment in which the people being discussed remained common ground to all.

Talk of new students and staff went on for approximately four minutes, before returning to talk of common acquaintances.

Example 13
The conversation was redirected by me, away from people not known to the whole group, and back to common acquaintances. I introduced a recent sighting of “F” on the heels of a comment on my general feeling about School X. The sequence about “F” is longer than any of the sequences about other common acquaintances; discussions on “J” and “G” were 4 and 6 turns in length, respectively, whereas “F” was discussed over 15 turns. All participants spoke in the sequence about “F”; all earlier interactions on common acquaintances until this point took place in dyads
between me and the person to offer the name of the acquaintance (either Maria or Dora). The turns in this sequence did not overlap, but neither did they contain pauses – each interlocutor took her turn, but also indicated excitement by contributing to the conversation on the heels of the previous utterance. In line 18 the conversation turned to Noah, another common acquaintance and a participant in this study, though not present at this session. In line 21, Dora contributed by saying that Noah had also mentioned me in the same fashion as I had just mentioned him, as a conversational offering on common acquaintances. She ended her turn with a rapid “blah blah blah,” which either indicated that the act of mentioning me in conversation was what she meant to convey (as opposed to anything additional Noah may have said or any information he may have relayed about our prior contact), or to refer to the fact that he continued to speak after mentioning our acquaintance, but it was either not memorable or insignificant to the conversation at hand. I interpreted it as a reference to Noah’s chatty nature, and uttered the next line in reference to his character, which the other participants accepted by giggling.

The following excerpt is from the second conversation pub. Interestingly, the strategy of offering news of common acquaintances was almost always used in participants’ first encounters during the data set. Dora, Maria, and I were present at both the first and second sessions; while there was extended talk of common acquaintances in the first conversation pub, this was not a topic that was introduced by any of us during the second. It is only on Noah’s arrival that this strategy was used again, and it was initiated and, in the long-term, maintained by him. Example 14 occurred approximately seven minutes after the arrival of Noah. Prior to this exchange, Noah had been describing his commute to and from School X.

**Example 14**

```
1 N: most==a lot of people live out==like/ F--/ is==she's waking up at like *six//
2 D: hm/
3 N: so I don't==I can't complain//
4 D: yeah/
5 N: you [hi]know she's [lo]quitting
6 D: really?
7 M: ==what?
```
8 N: ([ac]she's [f]quitting// she [f]quit/) <l> she told N-- she quit she does==friday/ friday's her last day//
9 D: oh =my god
10 S: =wow//= =[p]F--//=
11 D: =F-- yeah she's like =the
12 N: =and I=
13 D: =head of ah hh =School X
14 M: =yea:h= heheheh
15 S: she's such a =frock//
16 D: =yeah//

“F” is a common acquaintance who had also been discussed in the first data session (see Example 13). In this case, Noah introduced her as an example of a long commute to School X, in order to stress the short distance of his own. In line 5, he offered a piece of surprising news; the lack of change in his tone and pitch suggested that this was simply an off-hand remark, yet there was no drop in pitch on his final word to signal the ending of a statement; this may have been an indication that he predicted that this would be of interest to the other participants. The use of “you know” here may also have been a way to gauge if the news would be treated as such, or if this was already known to others in the group. On the other hand, it could have been a strategic way to emphasize the weight of his news-offering. A third possibility is that he was implying that he had inside knowledge of this situation, and knew that others did not. Dora and Maria reacted with surprise in lines 6 and 7, each with a single-word question requesting clarification and elaboration. Once Noah had the floor, his speech was rapid and he repeated key words (“a form of “quit” was used three times in this line, and “Friday” twice), though did not elaborate further until later turns. Lines 9 through 16 were peppered with overlaps, as other participants expressed surprise; Dora referred to her leadership skills, as I offered a contribution about her steady character. Maria offered agreement and a short laugh at Dora’s remark. Following the excerpt shown here, Noah went on to monologue about his opinions on the senior staff at School X. The topic of “F” was mentioned continuously by other participants over the next ten to fifteen minutes, and background on the news offered, but further discussion was dominated by Noah, who controlled the flow of conversation for the next 30-40 minutes of the data set.
Example 15 occurred four minutes into the beginning of the third conversation pub, with Yuna, Noah and me in attendance. Prior to this, Noah had been commenting on the previous conversation pub, describing the gossipy nature of the conversation after I had left.

Example 15

1. N: ah yeah it was like {{gossip gossip gossip}}
2. S: <2> that's so funny/ <1> um,
3. N: yeah like=like Maria yeah/ she knows Maria//
4. Y: yeah
5. S: yeah// she's **wonderful///
6. Y: heh
7. N: yeah Maria’s awesome// she really==she's really (cool)//
8. S: yeah/
9. N: you should hang out with Maria// she's so fun//
10. Y: hm
11. N: {{yeah yeah//}} she's not coming tonight right?
12. S: no she can't come tonight//

There were two short pauses in my turn in line 2, which Noah took as a cue to introduce the next topic. This was shortly after the greeting and explanation of the study; Yuna and I had never met before this encounter. Noah offered Maria’s name as a way to indicate to me that Yuna was not unfamiliar with the group, and that she and I shared a common acquaintance; this utterance was directed at me, though Yuna uttered an affirmation. This may have been indicative of a misinterpretation; Yuna may have inferred that Noah was speaking about her acquaintance with Maria. It may also have been intended as a sign of interest, despite the fact that her pitch stayed flat, and did not rise, as in a question inviting elaboration. My turn in line 5 affirmed that I did indeed know Maria, and gave a positive evaluative statement emphasized with extra prominence over “wonderful.” Yuna’s laugh in the next line was ambiguous; she was smiling, but appeared to offer this syllabic sound as a way of participating in the conversation, rather than taking the floor with a full turn. Noah made a similar evaluative statement in line 9, and again in line 11, suggesting
to Yuna that she would enjoy Maria’s company. Yuna’s response was similar in purpose to her previous utterance; she remained present in the conversation by responding to an utterance oriented to her, but did not commit by accepting or rejecting Noah’s proposal (if his utterance was intended as such). This was a common strategy employed by Yuna throughout the data set. Noah persisted in this vein by checking whether Maria would be present at this session; my response referred to her inability to do so. This language was consistent with other references to attendance at the sessions; when the absence of an acquaintance was mentioned, responses were always framed in such a way as to imply that a certain person would have been there, and presumably would have enjoyed it, but was for some reason unable to attend.

This next excerpt, first used in Section 4.3.5 to illustrate the performance of greetings in the data set, is another example of the use of common acquaintances to establish common ground.

Example 16

1   N: [hi]he::y =there you are
2   S:   =look what I found
3   N: [hi]Uma::
4   U: hello,
5   Y: hi: =how are you:/
6   N: =have you met= each other?
7   U: no? i don't think so//
8   N: Yuna, Uma//
9   Y: nice to meet you [laughs]
10  N: friends with Mar*ia//
11  Y: ~a:a:h
12  U: a:::h [laughs]
13  S: the famous Maria/
14  U: yeh famous Maria [laughs]
15  Y: yeah//
16  N: <2> yeah so we were talking about Brazilian time?
In this greeting, Maria’s name was offered immediately after Yuna and Uma exchanged greeting phrases (line 10). Both Yuna and Uma acknowledged their common acquaintance with elongated “ah” sounds, and a short laugh from Uma. Uma often used laughter to indicate her familiarity with the topic, and so this may have been her way to signal that she was indeed friends with Maria. This was the second time Maria’s name had been used to establish common ground in this particular data session, and I commented on this indirectly in line 13. Uma, who had not been present at the first mention of Maria’s name, inferred that my evaluation was general, and affirmed it by echoing my utterance and laughing again. Yuna’s contribution in line 15 may have signaled her agreement with our evaluation, or have simply been a way to participate in the exchange.

4.4.3 News-offerings

Just as offering the names and news of common acquaintances was a common topic in the data set, so was the topic of recent events in the participants’ personal lives. There was a strong preference to direct questions and introduce topics about situations in other’s lives that the participants had previously been made aware of. This was done in one of three ways: a) through direct questioning, b) through the offering of another participants’ news, or c) through talk about news (i.e., “meta-news”).

Examples 17 through 19 refer to the direct questioning method of news-offering.

Example 17

1   S: how is your job going?
2   U: i have got *morning shift these days//

Example 18

1   D: how is your school?
2   S: you know what i *really *like it// it's been a very strange time//

Example 19

1   D: did you get to see your boyfriend?
In each of the three examples, a new topic was introduced by asking a direct hearer-oriented question about a situation that had happened since the interlocutors had last seen each other. In Example 17, I was aware that Uma had started a new job since I’d last seen her; in Example 18, Dora knew that I was working at another school; and in Example 19, both Dora and Maria knew my partner had recently visited. These were thus suggested as possible topics, as the hearer was assumed to be interested in talking about it.

Examples 20 through 22 illustrate the second strategy of news-offering; that of giving news of another participant directly.

**Example 20**

1. U: she graduated/
2. M: yeah/
3. S: i {{hi}[ac]saw a photo} Noah posted about it/

**Example 21**

1. N: she goes==oh you know what, she goes to U of T now/
2. S: oh ~nice/

**Example 22**

1. N: <2> ah you remember f- you know how F-- left?
2. Y: ~o::h,
3. N: she works with her now/
4. S: next door/
5. Y: [hi][f]oh
In all three of these examples, news of others was offered. In Example 20, Uma offered this news about Dora following a comment by me about the weather, which had been dismissed (see Section 4.4.1 for comments on the weather). Noah offered news of Yuna in Example 21 as a non-sequitur following a sequence about a national holiday. In Example 22, Noah offered news about me, that I worked with “F” (as mentioned earlier, a common acquaintance to all participants). In each case, other-oriented statements were used to introduce new topics, rather than speaker- or hearer-oriented utterances.

The third strategy, of discussing “meta-news”, is demonstrated in Examples 23 through 25.

Example 23

1   S: <3> {[ac]so i wanna hear more *gossip tell me more that's new/}
2   [laughter]
3   M: i *told you/
4   D: yeah
5   U: we told you/
6   [laughter]
7   U: she loves that question/
8   D: she loves gossips/
9   S: i wanna [hi]-know/
10  M: [giggles]
11  D: there is no gossips it's==that's why it's boring/
12  U: u:m,
13  S: oh
14  D: there's nothing to talk about/

Example 24

1   M: <3> do you have any news?
2   S: mhm?
3   M: no? nothing? <2> {[f]a::h you have//}
D: any what?
M: news/
U: news/
D: [f]oh// yeah okay,

Example 25

S: yeah it's weird// <1> that's all my news/ i have nothing else//
D: no but that's g-
U: ==great news//
M: yeah hh
U: that is *more than enough/
M: yeah/
[giggling]
[.]
[.]
M: ah why {{i don't have,} <2> anything to tell//
D: yeah/ i wish i had something//
S: you guys are going to Chi*icago//
D: mm
M: oh yeah/
S: that's pretty big news,
D: yeah it's/
S: it's an ~adventure,
D: yeah//

Significantly, all “meta-news” talk came from the first conversation pub. Example 23 occurred approximately half an hour into the data session. I self-selected to be the first speaker following a 3-second pause, and asked for “gossip” or news. This was met with whole-table laughter, and lines 3 through 8 revealed that this was a question that I had been expected to ask but which was not
necessarily unwelcome. Uma, Dora, and Maria had been my former students in the same class, and yet Uma and Maria had been the ones to anticipate the question, and apparently had informed Dora. Uma and Maria were the only ones I had had a social relationship with prior to the study; my request for gossip was one they must have anticipated from our social encounters, rather than from our former teacher-student roles. Whether or not Dora would have interpreted my question as phatic without this background information is unknown, though her comment in line 8 signaled that she did not feel it was an overly personal question. At the same time, she did not answer my request directly, but implied that my comment was humorous in its predictability. This may have been an attempt at deflection, but, more likely, she was displaying agreement with Uma and Maria in reference to the fact that they had expected this request. In turn 9, I repeated my request in a more indirect way; rather than the imperative “tell me what’s new” from line 1, my utterance in line 9 was framed as a personal desire for news. The fluctuation and higher pitch with which “know” was spoken was also meant to be playful and to acknowledge the humour in my request. Dora accepted this repeated request by asserting that nothing of significance had happened recently, and her use of the word “boring” in line 11, as well as her next turn in line 14, implied that she felt that gossip would have been a good topic of conversation, had there been any.

The concept of gossip, of news of recent personal events concerning the participants and common acquaintances, as a desirable topic in the phatic communion of these participants is illustrated again in Example 24, which occurred nearly thirty minutes later. The conversation immediately prior had been about our waitress. Just as in Example 23, a topic shift occurred following a three-second pause. In this case, Maria self-selected to change the topic, and her request for news was directed at me (in the previous “meta-news” sequence, I had directed my request at the group). I uttered a small sound of uncertainty, intended either to request clarification or as a “time-buyer”. Maria interpreted it as the latter, and pushed twice in her next turn (“no” and “nothing”). Although not indicated in the transcript, I recall making a facial expression that was interpreted by Maria as a silent “yes”. Her triumphant announcement that I had news was accentuated by the volume of her voice and the extended vowel of her “ah” sound of discovery. Dora, whose attention had been directed elsewhere, reacted to Maria’s exclamation and asked for clarification on the situation. Maria repeated only the word “news” and was echoed by Uma; the double repetition of that word, along with Dora’s indication of interest by way of a loud “oh,” all referred to the fact that the three
considered my forthcoming gossip to be an appealing topic of conversation. In particular, Dora’s “yeah okay” ended in a rising tone; she emphatically displayed her interest in this topic.

Example 25 occurred after a whole-table discussion on my news-sharing, which had been a self-disclosure about my personal life, approximately ten minutes later. As a way of signaling that the conversation should now turn to another topic, I gave a mitigating statement (“it’s weird” contrasted with the excited tone of the conversation immediately previous) and informed the others that I had no other news to offer. Each denied the mitigation, and insisted that the news I had offered had been of value. Uma, in line 5, insisted that the news was “more than enough,” a mysterious evaluation that implied perhaps that my offering had somehow exceeded the requirements of a “conversation-worthy topic.” She may also have simply meant to emphasize her positive evaluation of the news. Maria’s agreement in the next line instigated whole-table giggling, which could have been a group gesture of affiliation. After two more turns, Maria self-selected to be the next to contribute, this time lamenting that she had no similar news, and therefore nothing new to offer as gossip. Dora expressed a similar regret. In line 12, I countered with the argument that the two of them had an upcoming trip planned. Their responses in lines 13 and 14 were non-committal and flat in tone, implying that this was not the type of gossip they had had in mind. Once pushed, however, Dora conceded that it was indeed news. I pressed with further encouragement in line 17, fluctuating my tone on “adventure” to elicit a further response and Dora agreed again, albeit still reluctantly. Gossip was clearly a popular topic for this group of participants, although travel plans were seen as less attractive than personal self-disclosures.
5  Discussion, Limitations, and Implications

5.1  Discussion

This discussion will expand on the data analysis presented in Chapter 4 by connecting it to the existing literature on phatic communion in light of the two research questions that guided the study:

1. What meaning do L2 interlocutors derive from their utterances in phatic communion, and how do they interpret their interactions?

2. How do L2 users engage in phatic communion, and do they do it in a meaningful way (i.e. to build identity and engage in social bonding with others)?

The participants in this study co-created an emic definition of phatic communion, and it is within this definition that they interpreted, negotiated, and co-achieved meaning in the data. The discussion presented in this chapter will begin by further exploring this emically-defined meaning of phatic communion, and how it was interpreted by the participants during both the interviews and the naturalistically-collected data. It then continues with an exploration of how participants co-engaged in phatic communion during the conversation pubs.

5.1.1  Interpreting Phatic Communion

Phatic communion, viewed through the lens of IS, necessitates a kind of shared meaning among interlocutors. All participants in a social encounter must first be able to identify, among other elements, the following: the communicative practice underway; the context in which it takes place; what utterances are seen as (in)appropriate in this particular communicative practice and within this particular context; and what tools or strategies are available to them in order to negotiate talk (e.g., Eerdmans et al., 2003). Phatic communion, situated as it is on the extreme relational side of the relational-transactional talk spectrum, is co-achieved through indexical means, and is much more open to interpretation (and misinterpretation) than other, more information-driven types of talk. It is the function of phatic communion that defines it. Far from the verbal equivalent of petting a dog absentmindedly (Meltzer & Musolf, 2000), when interlocutors engage in phatic communion they co-achieve conversational goals that deal fundamentally with addressing our “intrinsically
human needs for social cohesiveness and mutual recognition” (Coupland et al., 1992; p. 11). In order to do this, interlocutors must first find a way to co-create meaning. The Key Participants in this study, after taking part in the conversation pubs, were asked to articulate how they managed to do so, and how they interpreted the communicative practice they had just engaged in.

Each Key Participant framed phatic communion in a different light; the simple answer to the first research question, regarding what meaning interlocutors derive from their utterances, would be: their own. Dora repeatedly reinforced her belief that phatic communion was about connection and social bonding; Uma felt that phatic communion involved avoiding silence, primarily by discussing concepts and objects that “stood out” somehow, and paid more attention to phatic deviance than any norms or conventions; Maria conceived of phatic communion as the all-encompassing verbal soundtrack to her social life. This is significant, not only in light of the fact that these three women successfully negotiated phatic communion throughout data collection for this study, but that they maintained a close social bond with each other both before and after the project. Phatic communion in this study was performed collectively by the participants – not only the Key Participants, but also by Yuna, Noah, and me - with differing (though not opposing) perspectives on what they were engaged in. Its collective success can be measured in the numerous instances of laughter from the data, or the very few instances of long pauses.

This variation of perspective is reflected in the existing literature on phatic communion. As noted in the literature review, there is little consensus among scholars on what is or is not phatic, or on how it is perceived by interlocutors. The interview data from the Key Participants in this study suggest that multiple interpretations, rather than existing in conflict, may be simultaneously correct. Malinowski’s conception of phatic communion as composed of “accounts of irrelevant happenings [and] comments on what is perfectly obvious” (1923; 150) and Schneider’s of talk that “signals in-group membership, seeks agreement or establishes reciprocity and affinity” (Padilla Cruz, 2013b; 147) are opposing views but do not contradict each other. A greater understanding of phatic communion, for both L1 and L2 speakers, may take these multiple perspectives into account.

Beyond the various differences in the Key Participants’ reports of how they conceived of phatic communion, what is also pertinent is where they overlapped. Dora and Maria both stressed that small talk should be “short;” I interpret that as not only referring to the length of a turn (as in
Noah’s monologues) but also in the structure of taking turns at talk, and of including others in the conversation. There is an overwhelming trend of goodwill in their interview responses. Reflections on the conversation pubs generated multiple responses such as “I like you guys,” “I had fun,” “I was with my friends,” and “I got to know you more.” Uma’s storytelling of phatic deviance ended in her laughter. Maria told a story about a friend who she saw as unskilled in phatic talk, and yet her reports of his unsuccessful attempts similarly ended in laughter. This is consistent with Laver’s propitiatory and exploratory functions (1975) as well as Schneider’s concept of friendliness (1988); Key Participants in this study consistently gave responses connected to feelings of positivity (the extreme of diffusing hostility) and the notion of strengthening new and existing social bonds.

Phatic communion, as defined by this community of participants, was viewed as any type of talk that concerns itself with relational work and social bonding, regardless of how or why that may occur. This was also reflected in the conversation pub data, in the ways in which they engaged in phatic communion.

5.1.2 Engaging in Phatic Communion

The participants in this study actively engaged in phatic communion during the conversations pubs by employing a variety of strategies to initiate and maintain talk, signal interest and inclusion, and by displaying signs of affirmation and inclusivity.

Participants in phatic communion, according to the literature, tend to opt for either spatio-temporal topics particular to the setting of the encounter, or to topics that are personal to both the speaker and the listener (Padilla Cruz, 2013b; Schneider, 1988; Laver, 1975). The participants in this study overwhelmingly chose the latter, as evidenced by the multiple exchanges on common ground, mutual acquaintanceship and personal news-sharing. This likely reflected the pre-existing social relationship between the participants, as well as the desire to maintain and strengthen those bonds (e.g., “I got to know you better.”). There was a high degree of predictability in topic choice; for example, talk of mutual acquaintanceship at School X was to be expected because that is where all of the participants had met. Mention of talk that had been introduced in previous conversation pubs was also frequent, as participants signaled to each other that they both remembered, and had
interest in, each others’ ongoing personal lives. Although weather is ubiquitously mentioned as a potential topic, both by researchers and in the Key Participant interview data, it was not a popular topic during the conversation pubs in this study. When introduced, it was usually as a way of diminishing a compliment (as in Examples 9 and 11), or was rejected in favour of other topics (as in Examples 10 and 11). Topics that generated the most talk, and elicited the most excitement in responses (indicated by both prosody and word choice), were personal in nature; namely, gossip about mutual acquaintances and personal self-disclosures. This is in line with Coupland’s assertion that phatic communion is ordinarily geared toward social cohesiveness and bonding (1992; 2000; 2003). Given the pre-existing relationship among these participants, the topics they chose served this purpose, whereas weather could serve this function in instances where such a relationship does not exist (as with participants who are meeting for the first time). In other words, the appropriateness of the topic choice as a way to create/maintain social cohesiveness, and bonding depends, among other things, on the relationship between the interlocutors.

Expressions of reciprocity, affinity, consent, and agreement are generally agreed upon in the literature as characteristic of phatic communion (e.g., Schneider, 1988; Padilla Cruz, 2013b; Malinowski, 1923). This was also reflected in the data; participants consistently displayed positive language in their evaluative statements (“she’s such a rock” and “you look so healthy!”) and in responses designed to validate the utterances of others (“it’s true” and “really?”). Inclusivity was displayed by both speakers and listeners; for example, each time a whole-table question was asked, the questioner was eventually asked the same question. Participants who did not often contribute long turns, particularly Uma and Yuna, used contextualization cues such as laughter and verbal sounds of understanding and interest (“a::h,” “mhm”) to signal their continued participation. Sounds of active listening, for example “hm”, were employed by Dora, Uma and me; Maria often used the word “yeah” for the same purpose. Instances of echoing (repeating another’s utterance or a variation of an utterance) and agreement were very common.

Within phatic exchanges that are stereotypically more rigid in norm and convention, participants demonstrated the same orientation to positivity and inclusivity through non-lexical cues. Prosody was an obvious strategy used by Uma, Maria, Dora, and me during greetings, as were vowel elongation. Participants’ pitch and tone fluctuated most dramatically during greeting and HAY sequences, and emphasis was universally placed on the hearer-oriented elements. “How are you::” was usually stressed and elongated, while responses such as “I’m good” were generally uttered at
a more rapid speed with less emphasis on individual words. All participants observed the secular rituals of phatic greeting (as in the exchange of stock phrases and preferred answers), but attended to relational goals through the use of contextualization cues to signal pleasure, excitement, and interest in engaging in communion with each other.

With regards to orientation, Laver (1975) and others have remarked on existing norms such as attentiveness to territoriality, social distance and hierarchy. Interlocutors who are in motion, for example, are seen as responsible for initiating phatic talk in communication with stationary hearers (Meltzer & Musolf, 2000). The participants in this study did not necessarily adhere to this norm. Of the five greetings present in the data, the approaching participant initiated talk in only two (Examples 5 and 6). In the other three greetings, it was the stationary participant who began the greeting sequence. This was likely due to the crowded location of the conversation pubs; the stationary participants were the first to see the moving person, and therefore more often initiated conversation. In Example 5, Noah approached the table mid-conversation and had not been spotted by the other participants. In Example 6, I was the first to speak as I approached the table and was the first to offer a greeting. It was unclear whether Yuna had seen me before I approached.

Regarding social distance, Laver (1975) specifies that interlocutors of unequal status displayed different orientations according to social hierarchy. Speakers of higher status, according to this argument, display hearer- or neutral-orientation in phatic talk and tend to avoid self-oriented remarks. Speakers of lower status, conversely, use self- or neutral-oriented talk. If teacher-participants can be viewed as having a higher status than student-participants, the data in this study did not support this norm. Noah and I offered personal self-disclosures that were more personal in nature to those offered by the other participants; Noah repeatedly discussed his negative personal feelings about his boss and colleagues at School X, and I revealed news about my personal life to Uma, Dora, and Maria. All participants, with the notable exception of Yuna, referred to personal news and preferences and made self-disclosures; similarly, each participant also oriented remarks at the hearer. This is consistent with Chubak’s (2012) findings. The participants in her study with the most social power in the workplace made self-disclosures just as often as those with more junior positions. She suggests that this may be indicative of solidarity and social bonding, which is consistent with the data in this study. Dora’s comment of “I got to know you more” in her interview data also supports this view. Social power and hierarchy were diminished by virtue of
location (Young, 2008) and also by virtue of mutual participation; participants indicated their willingness to deepen a social bond and thus transcend any pre-existing social hierarchy.

This study was originally motivated by my personal interest in exploring the nature of phatic communion, and by my concern with documented instances of phatic failure by L2 speakers. In my professional experience as an ESL teacher, pragmatics is the area where L2 speakers tend to struggle the most, and face the most rejection or misperception by L1 speakers, whether it be in gate-keeping encounters such as job interviews, the perception of competence in the workplace, or in social situations. The main body of existing literature on phatic communion has focused on either L1 speaker strategies, or on L2 phatic failure. Rather than isolating and investigating instances of failure, this study has attempted to contribute to an understanding of L2 phatic communion by exploring what strategies are employed successfully, and how interlocutors from differing linguistic and cultural backgrounds co-create meaning in phatic communion and co-achieve their relational goals in talk.

5.2 Limitations

This study is not without its limitations, which need to be mentioned here. These concern participant population, location choice, and my influence as a participant observer.

This research project focused on a very small group of participants; it was a study of particularity, rather than generalizability. Although this is not a limitation in and of itself, it does leave open the question of what findings would be arrived at in a study with more and varied participants. Further research with a larger, more diverse population of both L2 and L1 users would likely provide helpful data in better understanding phatic competence across age and socioeconomic background, or across nationalities, proficiency levels, or genders, among others factors. With the notable exception of Yuna, all participants in this study knew each other prior to data collection. This generated phatic communion as it occurs between acquaintances and/or friends. Research on phatic communion between interlocutors meeting for the first time is another potentially fruitful area.

The choice of research location itself is also a potential limitation. As the “conversation pubs” took place in a bar, alcohol was a potential factor in the research. While participants were not encouraged to drink alcohol, alcohol intake was not monitored. It was also not considered as a
variable in the study. The location of the research was chosen with the aim of creating a naturalistic, relaxed setting where participants were encouraged to mingle. The site was also chosen because, in the researcher’s personal experience, this type of location attracts both English L2 students and teachers, which was important as participant recruitment took place through word of mouth, and no compensation other than the bar tab was offered to participants. Guiora et al. (1972), for example, found that moderate alcohol intake improved L2 pronunciation. Pronunciation was not a focus in the present study, however, nor was there a noticeable change in the nature of phatic communion in each subsequent data session (where, I conjecture, the consumption of alcohol increased). Nonetheless, the presence of alcohol must be addressed as a potential factor in the phatic tokens collected during this stage.

Another potential limitation concerning the location of the study is the fact that it may have inadvertently excluded or biased participants. Holding an academic study in a bar likely excluded students and teachers who tend to avoid these venues, and attracted those who enjoy them. This, however, is a generalization, and exploring phatic communion outside the classroom in other venues, such as cafes or parks, is another rich potential area of research.

The final limitation concerns my role as a participant observer. I admit that I have a personal bias, as a teacher who encourages a lot of talk as part of her classroom work. Consciously, I took care not to elicit phatic communion “for the sake of it,” as a teacher in a classroom might. Instead, I participated in the conversation pubs in the way that would come naturally to me in similar circumstances (i.e., one where I was not participating in research). Similarly, many of the other participants were my former students, and there is the possibility that their data reflect a desire to please me. However, all three Key Participants reported that they felt very comfortable during the conversation sessions, and in explaining their answers each mentioned the friendly social atmosphere. No Key Participant mentioned my being their former teacher, or a perception of social distance or hierarchy, in their interviews. Dora’s comment, “I got to know you better,” was indicative of her feeling that we had strengthened a social bond, and likely implied a reduction in social hierarchy, rather than her perception of an existing teacher-student relationship. Overall, social distance did not appear to be a significant factor in the data.
5.3 Implications

The goal of IS is to explore the ways in which conversational participants negotiate and co-create meaning in verbal encounters. In this vein, the aim of the present study was to investigate the various means and methods used by a particular group of participants to engage in phatic communion, as well as to explore how phatic communion was interpreted and given meaning by the participants in a particular context and “sociopsychological cluster” (Maynard & Hudak, 2008, p. 214). This study first and foremost, then, aims to add to the growing body of research concerned with the pragmatics of social conversation, both in the fields of L1 pragmatics and L2 language learning. As noted in the opening sections of this study, there is a need for further research in, and a greater comprehensive understanding of, phatic communion within both of these academic fields.

Another implication for this study concerns L2 language education. Pragmatics, and notably phatic communion, is largely absent from L2 learning curricula, and yet its importance cannot be understated. If language learners hope to be successful in target-language communities, whether that be socially or professionally, the importance of being exposed to the explicit pragmatic conventions of the target community cannot be overstated. While this study focused on phatic communion within a social realm, it is a type of talk that is also relevant for success in academia and in the workplace. This in turn helps to strengthen the argument that greater emphasis on pragmatics, and particularly in phatic communion, should be present in L2 learning materials and classroom work (e.g., Kasper, 1984; Padilla Cruz, 2013b).

Beyond the field of education, countless adults annually migrate to Canada seeking work, whether permanent employment or temporary work assignment. Phatic communion, as with pragmatics in general, is no less crucial a skill in the workplace than grammatical accuracy or lexical strength. As mentioned, L2 users are often more at risk of being misperceived or misunderstood as a result of pragmatic errors than grammatical or lexical errors, as the former are more difficult to identify and forgive (e.g., Kasper, 1984). Further research in L2 phatic competence during job interviews or in the workplace are among the many areas where IS research has the potential to clarify and address issues faced by L2 speakers in Canadian contexts. This research is thus not only relevant for researchers and language educators, but also for workplace employers and L2 users themselves.
References


Richards (Eds.) *The meaning of meaning: A study of the influence upon thought and of the science of symbolism* (pp. 296-336). New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace & World Inc


Appendix A: Participant Consent Form

Consent to Participate in Research

Title of Project: How L2 users understand and engage in social conversation

Principal Investigator: Sarah Jones, MA Candidate, Language and Literacy Education, Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education

Purpose of the Study: I’m interested in how English language learners communicate with each other socially outside the classroom. I want to study “chit-chat” or casual English in a relaxed atmosphere, especially when English is not your first language. I hope that this project will help improve the social part of ESL textbooks and programs.

Participants: I am looking for around students, ages 19-30, enrolled in ESL classes in the intermediate level and above. You must be willing to speak English. You must be planning to stay in Toronto until March 1st or later.

Benefits: You will get more experience speaking English with each other outside the classroom. You will have the opportunity to meet other students and teachers in a relaxed environment.

What you will do: Four weekly “conversation pubs” will be organized. This will be a relaxed event at a local pub, where you can chat. You can talk about whatever you want. All “conversation pubs” will take place after school and will be 1-2 hours long. You do not need to stay for the entire time. At each conversation pub, your conversations will be recorded.

I will then ask a few Key Participants. These people will volunteer to come to the OISE building to talk about your experiences during the “conversation pubs.” I will show you recordings of your conversations and ask you to reflect on what you said. I will use the information in academic publications and/or presentations of my research, but all identities will be kept completely confidential. No one but my supervisor and I will have access to the recordings. If you don’t want to be a Key Participant, please tell me on this form.

Participants’ Rights:
The Right to Privacy: I will give you a pseudonym (a fake name) when you agree to participate and I will not give your real name to anyone. Only I and my supervisor, Julie Kerekes, will listen to your recordings, and I will only use your conversations in writing in my research (not your original recordings). No one else will listen to your conversations or have any personal information about you. This will not affect your grades at school. All of the information I collect will be kept on my private computer or in a locked cabinet in my office. None of your teachers or classmates will receive any information about you or what you say.

To Ask Questions: You can ask me questions about the study. You can contact me directly by phone (416-770-4416) or by email (sarahd.jones@mail.utoronto.ca) at any time during the study. You can also email my supervisor, Julie Kerekes, if you have any questions. Her email address is julie.kerekes@utoronto.ca. The University of Toronto also has a Research Ethics department, and you can contact them if you have any questions about ethics or about my research. The phone number for the Research Ethics department is 416-946-3273, and the email address is ethics.review@utoronto.ca.

To Withdraw (Leave) at any Time: You can leave the study at any time, up to one month after the project, by contacting me. If you withdraw, you can ask me to delete all of your conversations and I will do that immediately.

Risks: You might feel shy or nervous speaking to people in English, or about wearing a microphone. No one is testing your English ability, and I am the only one who will listen to your conversations. This will not affect your level or your grades at school.

Investigator’s Statement: I have explained the details of the study and have answered any and all questions. I am confident that the participant understands what is asked of them, and that the participant is fully aware of his/her rights as a research participant.

Name: Sarah Jones                                      Date: ______________

Signature: ___________________________________________

Participant’s Consent: I have read the information given to me. All of my questions have been answered. I understand what I will be asked to do, and am fully aware of my rights as a
participant in this study. I understand that my identity will be kept secret and that my conversations will only be used for the purpose of this study. I agree to participate in this study.

Name: _____________________________________                  Date: ______________

Are you willing to be a Key Participant if asked?    Yes    No

Signature: ______________________________________________

Please keep a copy for your records.
Appendix B: Semi-structured interview protocol

1. What is “small talk” to you?

2. What do you think about Canadian small talk?

3. In your experience, how is small talk different here than in your country?

4. What do you usually talk about?

5. Are there rules for small talk, in your opinion?

6. How was your experience at the conversation pubs?

7. How comfortable did you feel, and why?

8. Do you feel comfortable talking with other non-English dominant people?

9. Do you feel comfortable talking with English-dominant people?

10. How do you think people can improve their “small talk” skills?
Appendix C: Biodata Questionnaire

1. Name: _________________________

2. Email: ________________________________________

3. Gender: _____________________

4. Age: ___

5. Nationality: ___________________

6. First language(s): ______________

7. Which level are you in? (e.g., High Intermediate, Upper Intermediate) ______

8. Do you live in a homestay? ______

9. How long have you been in Canada? ______________

9. Do you often speak English outside of class? If yes, when? How often? With whom?

____________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________

10. Do you feel comfortable using English outside of class? Please explain your answer.

____________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________
11. How long have you been studying English?

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

12. Have you travelled to other English-speaking countries? How long were you there?

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

13. Please briefly describe when/how you use English.

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

Thank you!
Appendix D: Transcription Conventions

Temporal and sequential relationships

A single equal sign indicates overlapping talk. The overlapping sequence is reflected on the line beneath by placement and additional equal signs to indicate the beginning and end of the overlap.

== Double equal signs indicate that a speaker has latched on to the preceding utterance without a noticeable gap.

Intervals and omissions

<3> Angled brackets indicate a timed pause. The number indicates seconds; e.g., <3> indicates a pause of three seconds.

.. Two periods indicate an untimed pause of less than ½ second.

... Three periods indicate an untimed pause of between ½ and 1 second.

A period within square brackets indicates that a turn at talk is not included in the presented transcription. For example, because it is not relevant to the topic discussed, or because the excerpt is unnecessarily long.

Characteristics of speech production

// A double slash indicates a final fall in tone, to show that a turn or phrase is complete.

/ A single slash indicates a slight fall in tone, which may show that a turn is complete or that more is to follow.

? A question mark indicates a rise in tone, as in a question or to show uncertainty.

, A comma indicates a slight rise in tone, as in a list or to show that more is to follow.

Transcription conventions used for this study closely model those published by Gumperz & Berenz (1993)
A dash indicates truncation, as when a speaker self-repairs or breaks off mid-turn.

[hi] indicates a word or phrase uttered at a higher pitch register relative to the surrounding talk. For example, "the woman was [hi]tall" or "([hi] the woman was tall."

[lo] indicates a word or phrase uttered at a lower pitch register relative to the surrounding talk.

[ac] [ac] indicates accelerated speech, relative to the surrounding talk.

[dc] [dc] indicates decelerated speech, relative to the surrounding talk.

* An asterisk indicates prominence and precedes the stressed syllable.

** A double asterisk indicates extra prominence and precedes the stressed syllable.

~ A tilde indicates a fluctuating pitch and precedes the relevant syllable.

: A colon indicates an elongated vowel sound. Multiple colons indicate a longer extension. For example, ye::s, ye:::s, ye::::s.

[h] An [h] indicates voiced aspiration (such as suppressed laughter or a breath). Multiple h’s indicate a longer voiced aspiration.

[f] "Forte" indicates a word or phrase uttered at a higher volume. For example, "He had a [f]big dog" or "([f] he had a big dog)."

[ff] "Fortissimo" indicates a word or phrase uttered at a much higher volume relative to the surrounding talk.

[p] "Piano" indicates a word or phrase uttered at a lower volume. For example, "He had a [p]small dog" or "([p] he had a small dog)."

[pp] "Pianissimo" indicates a word or phrase uttered at a much lower volume relative to the surrounding talk.

[ ] A word or phrase between square brackets indicates a non-lexical phenomenon, vocal or non-vocal that interrupts talk; for example, as in a cough or gesture.

{} A word or phrase between both curly and square brackets indicates a non-lexical phenomenon, vocal or vocal, that overlays talk. For example, if an utterance is accompanied by a nod.
Transcriber's doubts and comments

() Empty parentheses indicate an unknown word or phrase.

(word) A word or phrase between parentheses indicates text that the transcriber is unsure of.