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ABSTRACT

This paper overviews a continuous study of the phatic use of language in literature. The analysis is functional (linear and contextual) and encompasses three levels of meaning, which is given priority over the cognitive approach. The paper focuses on the delicacy of meaning in the phatic use of English as exploited by Margaret Drabble and Jane Austen and on artistic effects of its abrupt termination in a play by John Arden while referring to its earlier study in Shakespeare's tragedies. It assumes that delicate senses of the phatic use of English require more or less elaborate contexts and so are employed only selectively by authors of different centuries. The blow-like effects of its abrupt termination suits fictitious rather than realistic contexts, which explains why it is predominantly employed in drama.

Keywords: verbal contact maintenance, phatic exchanges, verbal socialisation, conventional evaluations, termination of verbal contact, the phatic use of English in characterisation

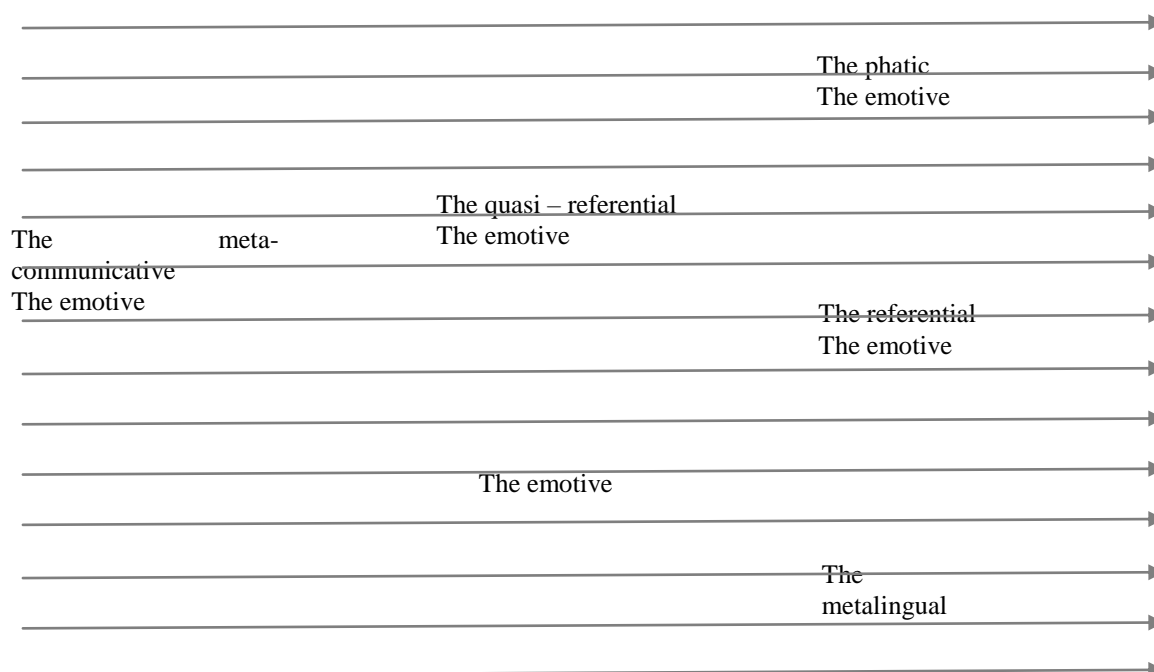
The phatic use of English means speech in contact maintenance. 'Phatic' is a Greek word: φάτις is translated as speaking, rumour, speech, words, saying, in an ancient Greek-Russian Dictionary. The term phatic communion was introduced by the Polish anthropologist, Bronislaw Malinowski (1960) in 1923, which he was tempted to use "actuated by the demon of terminological invention" (p.315) to name "speech in mere sociabilities" (p.314). *Phatic communion* identifies with small talk in Western societies. The phatic use of language is broader than phatic communion, which is the truest form of the phatic use of language. The phatic use of language includes all introductory words, opening and closing formulae, introductions and endings in writing, fillers-in in speech and other verbal means used in keeping up social contact, together with small talk.

In actual speech, the phatic use of language is conditioned psychologically. Whether used in overcoming embarrassment in a stranger's company, enjoying the company of acquaintances or attempting to learn about the interlocutor when first met, the maintenance of verbal contact implies and requires pleasant disposition (cf.: Campbell, 1903, 13). It should show in the quality and tone of voice, in the choice of words and in non-verbal expression. As in polite social conversation in the West, it is required not only to speak but also "to listen politely" (cf.: Campbell, 1903, 45; Eagleton, 1983/2010, 54) when keeping verbal contact. The tactful use of questions initiates talk and permits a polite listener to learn who his company is in human terms or how well a friend, a family member or an acquaintance is disposed. This knowledge of the company is possible because the phatic use of language has two levels of meaning: first, it means what the words used name and, secondly, it implies the speaker's attitude and disposition the way poetry implies superior sense of meaning. It is credible, therefore, to treat the phatic use of language and especially small talk as a figurative use of language. This psychological and linguistic interpretation has been deduced in the functional study of language in use and this is whence the terms the function and the use of language have come.

Resorting to cognitive linguistics, which acknowledges the functional origin of meaning, it is possible to support the above argument when applying the concepts of 'construal', 'perspective' and 'foregrounding' (Lee, 2001/2008, 2-6). Construal would explain how, depending on the situation and participants, the speaker would choose his opening words and how he would vary his continuous contact maintenance. Perspective would explain how much interaction he would show to the interlocutor, whether he would keep up verbal contact more or less mechanically or show genuine or "spurious" interest to the interlocutor. Foregrounding would explain the quality and spread of emotive accents in verbal contact maintenance. There usually is ample emotive load in the phatic use of English. The usual expressions of emotive character are "really interesting", "extremely useful", "very pleasant", "lovely", "enjoyable", "remarkable", etc. But the original concepts of cognitive linguistics do not carry explanation any further. Any broader and deeper explanation would have

to borrow from psychology, discourse analysis and pragmatics, which is not really consistent.

The present paper is based on the functional study of language, which takes in three levels of meaning (the semantic, the metasemiotic and the metametasemiotic) into consideration while the analysis is linear and contextual (cf.: Widdowson, 2010). It outlines the place of the phatic use of language in the total process of communication. The phatic use of language is shown in the interrelation with other uses of language, of which there are many (Halliday, 1976, 9, 29). The functional study of language also explains how complex uses of language, such as the metareferential, quasi-referential and the meta-communicative are formed. There are very few single uses of language. Most of them are linked with the emotive use or among themselves. A possible representation of current major uses of English may be shown in the drawing below:



As this drawing, earlier research (Drazdauskiene, 2016) and literary theory (Widdowson, 1979; Miller, 2002) suggest, the meta-communicative use of language, which represents imaginative literature, incorporates all and any use of language and transforms them into meta-uses to carry senses of the significance of a whole literary work. In one ordinary sense, literature is a use of language (cf.: Widdowson, 1992; Miller, 2002, 15ff). In other words, routine uses of language take on the implicature and metaphoric senses of the work in which they are incorporated. It is a truth generally accepted that literal meaning and meta-senses in a literary work converge into its generalised significance, which imposes the law of transformation on all the elements of the literary work (cf.: Eagleton, 1983/2010, 10-14; Miller, 2002, 15-54). There is a difference in how words of a language alter when subjected to transformation

in literature and how uses of language undergo the same process. Except for the emotive use of language, all uses of language become meta-uses in literature, that is, functional verbal variants metasemiotically enriched. In general communication, the emotive use attaches itself to virtually any other use of language and so it does in imaginative literature. But the emotive use of language also functions independently in imaginative literature and retains its realistic guise in all cases of its metarealisation. This is so because emotiveness can be either positive or negative, moderate, increased or decreased, and these measurements do not lose their credibility in imaginative literature. That is why it is assumed here that the emotive use of language does not turn into a meta-use in imaginative literature.

Words are polymeaningful in literature and take on metaphoric senses within the design of a concrete literary work. Words retain their literal sense in prose and even in poetry (cf.: Leech, 1969, 39-40; Widdowson, 1979, 31; Miller, 2002, 20; Lodge, 2002, 39, 50), but are not confined to it. That is how literature becomes based on metareferential representation (cf.: Widdowson, 1979, 33-39; Miller, 2002, 24-45), how it parts with real social contexts (Widdowson, 1979, 62, 69) and yet how it polishes and enriches the language of a learner who is well-read (Drazdauskiene, 2016, 215-216).

As the phatic use of language is a trivial use on the surface, it is rarely incorporated in literature as genuine small talk. Contact maintenance formulae lend themselves easier to meta-uses in imaginative literature and are exploited for that. But small talk in its genuine form does not, or does very rarely because it would diminish the value of literature with continuous trivialities and repetition on its pages. But because of its figurative senses, small talk is not empty talk. One of the authors most sensitive to the significance of small talk is Margaret Drabble. She has based her first novel, *A Summer Bird-Cage* (1967), on trivial society conversation to characterise the life of young people in England in the 1960s. Even so, her conversations in this novel are only partly specimens of small talk as they expose considerably emotive attitudes and interests of the speakers. That is, her conversations characterise both society and individual speakers and much of genuine triviality of small talk is gone from her conversations. Cf.:

I had a bad time explaining about Tony to Gill the next evening. /.../ What I did say was that I had scarcely spoken to him, and that he had been dancing with a friend of David's called Beatrice.

'What was she like?' said Gill, sitting on the floor and biting the quick of her nails.

'She had a horrid yellow dress on,' I said.

'Really horrid?'

'Yes, really horrid.'

'He likes such awful people,' she said. (*A Summer Bird-Cage*, Chapter 7)

In another situation, the first person narrator also speaks to Gill whose marriage with Tony had broken:

‘There are a couple of letters for you, Gill,’ I said, as she came back again, rubbing her hair with a towel.

‘Oh, are there? Where?’

‘On the mantelpiece.’

She read the first one very quickly and then opened the invitation; /.../ ‘I suppose you’ve got one too?’

‘Yes, I have,’ I said. ‘I haven’t seen David for ages, have you?’

‘No, I haven’t, and I can’t say I particularly want to.’

‘Why, what’s wrong with David?’

‘Oh, nothing.’

‘I thought I’d probably go.’

‘What on earth for? It’s bound to be an utterly sick-making drunken orgy, with foreign girls and models with their hair done up over bird-cages. And actors.’

She paused for my response, which didn’t arrive.

‘Well, isn’t it?’ she repeated aggressively.

‘I don’t know,’ I replied. ‘I suppose so. But I rather like that kind of person.’

‘Well I don’t. I think they’re silly and tiresome and I should be bored to tears.’

As she said that, I suddenly glimpsed in her the traditional university woman, badly dressed, censorious, and chaotic. I didn’t like what I saw, so I quickly said, ‘I like David.’ (A Summer Bird-Cage, Chapter 5).

The author does not miss the moment to mention what image of the speaker the narrator gleaned from the few casual words. This is how the sense of small talk becomes prominent and perceivable. In her later novels, Margaret Drabble employed small talk only sparingly, again characterising the situations and the speakers. In her novel, *The Witch of Exmoor* (1996), fragments of small talk are rarer than literary phatic in which the author breaks the narrative with meta-phatic comments. Cf.:

‘Patsy,’ she says, making an effort to smile. ‘How good to see you.’

They clasp hands. /.../

‘You must come and see me soon,’ says Patsy. ‘Now you’re better.’

‘You’re always so busy,’ says Sonia Barfoot calmly, without reproach.

‘And I’m not better. Not really.’

‘Ring me,’ says Patsy, squeezing the thin, blue-veined, old lady’s hand.

/.../ ‘Ring me. I must dash. I’ve got to pick up the Partingtons. I want to speak to you about my prisoner. Keep well, Sonia.’

(*The Witch of Exmoor*. pp.59-60).

This was just a fleeting bit of conversation, a fragment of realistic small talk which represents credible reality. The author’s interference into the narrative as a kind of the meta-phatic use of language is meant to involve the

reader but it also shows the author's sensitivity to the sense of the different uses of language. Cf.:

They also amused themselves by making a personal survey of the ethnic minorities of the South west, both resident and tourist, ... /.../ You might think this indicates an unhealthy obsession with racial origins, and you might be right. On the other hand, you might put it down to a natural sociological curiosity. **I don't have to have a view on this, I am simply reporting the facts.** The latest edition of *The Almanac of British Politics* informed... (*The Witch of Exmoor*, p. 98)

We are nearing the end. Soon we can go for the kill. Indeed, for the overkill. Frieda has killed Hilda, and we have killed Frieda, and Benjamin has tried to kill himself. There will be one or more deaths, but not many. Some will survive. (*The Witch of Exmoor*, pp. 250-251)

We are of the third age. Our dependants have died or matured. For good and ill, we are free.

More surprisingly, I had also brought up the subject of Julia Jordan. **I didn't mean to, but she just popped out of my mouth. I wonder if I am becoming as brazen as she is. She came up, if I remember rightly,** while we were talking about Naples. Mrs. Jerold said that she had contacts from the old days on Capri and in Naples. (*The Seven Sisters*, p. 148)

The author's interference with literary phatic leaves the impression of a somewhat relaxed rather than refined narrative. But it keeps both the author and the reader busy and involved. Although I was trying to show how sensitive Margaret Drabble is to the significance of the phatic use of English, it must be borne in mind that the author's interference with phatic asides in the narrative has had some tradition in the novels of the nineteenth-century British authors. This might confirm an extra time how culturally ingrained small talk is among the British.

It must also be borne in mind that the triviality of small talk is only its major feature. This form of the phatic use of language functions in a transformed sense when emotive accents are exaggerated, involvement is made spurious and the positive sense of utterances may well be ironical. Therefore small talk offers a rich resource of meaning which clever men use and abuse in front of girls, diplomats use to cover unpleasant messages by positive forms or to make meaning more general than a concrete situation suggests, and so on. In literature, though, the elaboration of meaning through small talk requires a relevant sociocultural context, for which modern fiction is too bare. We can find an elaborate use of small talk in the literature of other centuries. For instance, the novels of Jane Austen contain such contexts for the elaboration of small talk. If we take the conversation between Elizabeth, Miss Bingley, Mr. Bingley and Darcey, with Jane suffering from a cold in the background, in

Chapters 6 and 8 in *Pride and Prejudice*, we can see what a wealth of senses Jane Austen highlights in these sections of the novel.

A brief exchange between men, Sir William Lucas and Mr. Darcy in Chapter 6, can be considered a typical polite exchange or gentlemen's small talk at the party at Sir William Lucas's. It follows dejected thoughts of Mr. Darcy after Elizabeth's "no capital" performance:

Mr. Darcy stood near them in silent indignation at such a mode of passing the evening, to the exclusion of all conversation, and was too much engrossed by his thoughts to perceive that Sir William Lucas was his neighbor, till Sir William thus began,

"What a charming amusement for young people this is, Mr. Darcy! There is nothing like dancing after all. I consider it as one of the first refinements of polished societies."

"Certainly, sir; and it has the advantage also of being in vogue amongst the less polished societies of the world. Every savage can dance."

Sir William only smiled. "Your friend performs delightfully," he continued after a pause, on seeing Bingley join the group; "and I doubt not that you are an adept in the science yourself, Mr. Darcy."

"You saw me dance at Meryton, I believe, sir."

"Yes, indeed, and received no inconsiderable pleasure from the sight. Do you often dance at St. James's?"

"Never, sir."

"Do you not think it would be a proper compliment to the place?"

"It is a compliment which I never pay to any place if I can avoid it."

"You have a house in town, I conclude?"

Mr. Darcy bowed. (*Pride and Prejudice*, pp. 24-25)

This is a case of 'free, aimless, social intercourse', which was compared with that of Trobrian Islanders' by Bronislaw Malinowski and termed "as in a European drawing-room" (Malinowski, 1960, 313). In this conversation, the hearer does not intend to join in polite exchange, so Mr. Darcy's retorts keep up the line of only male talk. The utterances are straight and complete. The emotiveness is straight and conventional. The author manages to imply the manly tone of exchange by her comments which punctuate the talk and give not only this impression but also show polite society's custom not to press on with the talk when it is not wanted.

The conversation in Chapter 8 in *Pride and Prejudice* is almost wholly small talk. Its first part is wicked gossip by Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst of Elizabeth after her walk all the way to Netherfield. They are joined by Bingley and Darcy in comments of the low relations of the Bennets. "*With a renewal of tenderness, however, they repaired to her (i.e. Jane's) room on leaving the dining parlour, and sat with her till summoned to coffee*". This is followed by a talk of Elizabeth's inclination to reading, which she preferred to cards. At the card table, the talk continues of Mr. Darcy's library and of the house he may buy in Pemberley. After a paragraph in which Elizabeth realises that the

conversation at the card table left “*very little attention for her book*” and joins the players to observe them, a talk of ladies’ looks and accomplishment follows in a mixed company. In this, as in the previous exchanges of Elizabeth’s reading, evaluations and emotive accents abound. Reading and libraries are graced with evaluation tending to modesty: *I am not a great reader; so small collection of books; a delightful library at Pemberley; the beauties of that noble place; your house... may be half as delightful as Pemberley*. These utterances are terminated by a maxim, “*I should think it more possible to get Pemberley by purchase than by imitation*”. These utterances imply that the talk was a typical polite exchange and the evaluative words kept being repeated.

The talk of ladies’ looks and accomplishment is of a similar character. Cf.: *How I long to see her again; with anybody who delighted me so much; Such a countenance, such manners! Extremely accomplished; It is amazing to me; to be so very accomplished; All young ladies are accomplished*.

As Darcy diverts the empty praise of accomplishment, a definition and an enumeration of accomplishments follow with an argument who had seen “*such capacity, and taste, and application, and elegance*”. This is terminated, ironically, by Darcy’s interruption with a jibe, “*there is meanness in **all** the arts which ladies sometimes condescend to employ for captivation. Whatever bears affinity to cunning is despicable.*” (p.40). The irony to the reader was rudeness to the ladies, which Jane Austen cautiously rounds up with an understatement: “*Miss Bingley was not entirely satisfied with this reply as to continue the subject.*” (p.40)

It is significant how Jane Austen navigates the evaluating, spurious and intelligent talk in Chapter 8. Excluding the wicked gossip, the talk of Elizabeth, the reader, and of libraries, of the young ones’ growing and of accomplishments is given in utterances without a comment. The more complete the utterances, the more intelligent and manly the talk becomes. The author’s comments vary from *said, said, cried Elizabeth, said, replied, said, said, observed Elizabeth, cried his faithful assistant, to added Darcy, both cried, said, replied Darcy*. So scanty comments leave the impression of the intensity of the talk, while evaluations emphasise its conventional character. The conversation thus is not trivial nor boring and retains its social guise.

This illustrative summary shows how the author uses the verbs to indicate the flow of the phatic use of language to retain its natural image. The direct exchanges imply the pulse of this use of language, which at points is idle, involved and emotive from the point of view of the ladies, critical and provocative from the point of view of Darcy, and disagreeable from the point of view of Elizabeth, Mrs. Hurst and Miss Bingley, or “mixed with an incidental disagreement” (Malinowski, 1960, 314). Thus, Jane Austen makes her story and conversation in it an involving reading, the represented small talk an intense exchange and wholly creates an image of society’s verbal custom, lively involved characters while reflecting their interest in one another. It is not easy to find a richer literary representation of the phatic use of English in its traditional guise than that created by Jane Austen.

As this overview of the analysis of the few extracts from the two authors shows, Margaret Drabble illustrates, reflectively, society's custom to use small talk and thus creates the atmosphere and social relations in meagre contemporary contexts. Jane Austen analyses social attitudes in her treatment of trivial, gossip-like conversation and thus exposes relations and commitments of her characters. Moreover, Jane Austen continuously remarks of the sense and significance of conversation. Cf.:

1. He (Mr. Darcy) began to wish to know more of her, and as a step towards conversing with her himself, attended to her conversation with others. His doing so drew her notice. (Ch.6, p.22)
2. After listening one morning to their effusions of this subject (i.e. officers and Mr. Bingley), Mr. Bennet coolly observed:
"From all that I can collect by your manner of talking, you must be two of the silliest girls in the country. I have suspected it some time, but I am now convinced." (Ch.7, p.28)
3. At five o'clock the two ladies retired to dress, and at half-past six Elizabeth was summoned to dinner. To the civil inquiries which then poured in and amongst which she had the pleasure of distinguishing the much superior solicitude of Mr. Bingley's, she could not make a very favourable answer. Jane was by no means better. (Ch.8, p.34)
4. The sisters, on hearing this, repeated three or four times how much they were grieved, how shocking it was to have a bad cold, and how excessively they disliked being ill themselves; and then thought no more of the matter; and their indifference towards Jane when not immediately before them restored Elizabeth to the enjoyment of all her original dislike. (Ch.8, p. 34)
5. Her manners were pronounced to be very bad indeed, a mixture of pride and impertinence; she had no conversation, no style, no taste, no beauty. Mrs. Hurst thought the same... (Ch. 8, p. 35)
6. ..." no one can be really esteemed accomplished who does not greatly surpass what is usually met with. A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages, to deserve the word; and besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expression, or the word will be but half-deserved." (Ch. 8, p. 39)

Both Jane Austen and Margaret Drabble are equally conscious of the customary function of the phatic use of language, yet both represent it differently and with different degree of immersion. A broader elaboration of this use of language would trivialise imaginative literature, but the delicacy of the phatic use of language permits its impressive termination. This is a breach of the phatic which has had considerable representation in dramatic and routine contexts. Shakespeare used fragments of the phatic use of English to represent reality in all of his plays. But he also showed how an abrupt breach of the

phatic may be ominous or threatening, in tragedies *Macbeth* (V.5), *Antony and Cleopatra* (I.1) and *King Henry VIII* (V.2) (see: Drazdauskiene, 1986, 1997).

A breach of the phatic use of English can have different metasemiotic effects in plays representing mundane contemporary situations. This is what we find in the play, *Live Like Pigs*, by John Arden. Scene One in this play represents a meeting of two neighbours one of whom (Rachel) is a new resident in an urban area. Mrs. Jackson is advanced in years but not decrepit, loves gossip and is neighbourly. Rachel, on the contrary, is younger, a “handsome termagant aged about forty, and carrying it easily.” She is “arrogant and harsh-voiced”. In the exchange below, Sailor is Rachel’s husband, Sawney, who is a “strong old tyrant of seventy”. Mrs. Jackson enters the scene and begins her talk:

Mrs. JACKSON [*very friendly*]: Excuse me: it’s Mrs. Sawney, isn’t it? The rent collector give me your name, he said you were coming to live here, so I thought, well, I’d just pop round the door and have a word – like, it’s your first day here, and why not be neighbourly, I thought, and give ‘em a call? Eh, isn’t it a lovely day?

RACHEL: Who are you?

Mrs. JACKSON: I live next door, you see, so I thought why not be neighbourly; like it’s such a lovely day. Jackson’s the name. My husband, my husband he works for Co-op you know; like he’s their agent, drives around the villages all day in his van to the local branches; just in the grocery he used to be, but he got made Agent last year. By, be wor pleased, I can tell you. He’s got his van, you see: he’s like his own master no... What do you think to the Housing Scheme?

RACHEL [*dourly*]: Housing Scheme, is it?

Mrs. JACKSON: Well of course I mean, we think it’s lovely. We’ve been here nigh on two year. I’ll tell you where we used to live – you know when you went past the Town Hall, down by the Catholic Church – all them little mucky streets – eh it wor terrible. But they moved us out, moved us all out and pulled the lot down. That’s where they’re building new Corporation Offices, you know, now. Isn’t it lovely here, though? Wide streets, bits of garden, and all. Of course, it’s a long way from the shops and there’s only the one public. But my husband, he reckons that’s a good thing. He says –

RACHEL: Oh go to hell, you and your fizzing husband.

Mrs. JACKSON [*stopped gasping in midstream*]: I beg your pardon!...

[...]

RACHEL: I says go to hell. You’re not wanted here. Keep to your own garden, you like it so much.

/.../

SAILOR [*from indoors*]: Rachel! Rachel!

RACHEL [*shouts back*]: Oh so you’re out of your bed at last! What d’you want then?

(John Arden. *Three Plays*, pp. 112-113)

This is a very simple and straightforward representation of a rejected phatic use of English. As the author puts in the Introductory note, “the play is in large part meant to be funny”: “The Sawneys are an anachronism. They are the direct descendants of the ‘sturdy beggars’ of the sixteenth century, and the apparent chaos of their lives becomes an ordered pattern when seen in terms of a wild empty countryside and a nomadic existence.” “The Jacksons are an undistinguished but not contemptible family, whose comparative cosiness is not strong enough to withstand the violent irruption into their affairs that the Sawneys bring.” (John Arden. *Three Plays*, p. 101). In the context of this view of the author, the rejected phatic use of English is funny, but there is irony in it from the point of view of the reader. The play represents modern scenes of routine life and any reader who comes from the middle class background, reads irony in the above exchange of Mrs. Jackson and Rachel. None of the speakers here has the authority of the kings in Shakespeare’s plays to terminate the phatic exchange, and so Rachel’s refusal to participate in it is funny. This is perceived in the silenced and confused Mrs. Jackson’s response against Rachel’s brazen straightforwardness. Whether honour or irony, the play, *Live Like Pigs*, lends a context for a critical view of exhausted people whom, depending on their characters, modern circumstances may deprive of more delicate ways of communication and more or less of their humanity.

The analysis summarized in this paper shows that the phatic use of English can be used in literature to exploit all the wealth of meaning that it offers meta- and metametasemiotically. Such representation, though, requires slow and analytical point of view of the author and her selectivity to pin-point a banal, biased, naïve or ironic attitude of the speakers involved in phatic exchanges. The works reviewed showed exactly this kind of the author’s sensitivity and accuracy. Deliberate irony would also require an analogous disposition and development in fiction. But there is only one way to create a strong, blow-like effect when employing the phatic use of language. This is its abrupt termination, which, like clumsiness in talk, implies a rude person or an outraged authority and shows humour, irony and threat or extreme displeasure. It may be assumed that termination of small talk with whatever issues is more frequent in imaginative literature than in reality because the effect of a straight refusal to socialise verbally is always dramatic and too hard to hear or to inflict in actual fact. For the same reasons, it is useful in characterisation in imaginative literature and drama.

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