

Was Malinowski Norwegian?

Norwegian Interpretations of Phatic Talk

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Abstract

From time to time, there is a public debate in Norway about Norwegian lack of politeness. The most recent debate started with a female Norwegian-American reader's letter to a Norwegian newspaper. Her critique especially targeted Norwegian lack of *phatic talk* (greetings and small talk) towards strangers; something that she thought was both arrogant and impolite. The corpus in this article is based on responses from the Norwegian public and social media. A qualitative content analysis of their metapragmatic comments gives clues into two different views on phatic talk and why some Americans and Norwegians, or even fellow Norwegians, may misunderstand each other's intent on this account.

Keywords: *phatic talk, greetings, small talk, intercultural communication, Norwegians, Americans*

1. Introduction

From time to time, there is a discussion in Norwegian media about Norwegian politeness, or rather, the suspected shortage of it in the eyes of foreigners. The most recent debate on this topic started off in 2013 with a reader's letter to one of the larger Norwegian newspapers (Mason 2013). It was written by a sixteen-year-old Norwegian-American girl named Emily who had moved to Norway from the United States with her mother and sister four years earlier. With the heading "Arrogant Norwegians" she writes that (translated from Norwegian):

I consider myself a fairly ordinary person. I say hei ('hi') to everyone I meet – the one sitting next to me on the bus, my friends' friends, teachers, shop assistants – anyone. I do it simply because it's a habit, it is to be friendly. I also appreciate it when a stranger greets me with a hei, or just gives me a smile. This is common in the States, at least. If there is something I have noticed in Norway, it is the fact that Norwegians are not friendly. They normally just care about themselves and their own. Of course, this doesn't apply to everybody, but to many.

When Emily goes to the shop nearby school to buy snacks with her friends, her normal small talk with the shop assistant at the cash register is for example: "Hi, how are you doing?", "We had a difficult test today, I'm totally stressed out!" or "The reason I buy so much cake is because it's my birthday tomorrow, you see". Her Norwegian friends are ever so embarrassed, and plead with her to stop talking, she says. She remembers a day after school. On the way to the bus stop, she met many friends, and among them, a girl she had not seen before. Emily introduced herself with her name and a hand shake. The girl returned her greeting, but looked as if she would have been happier without the exchange. What happened to normal politeness, Emily wonders.

Emily's letter received much attention, from the public and on social media. When the newspaper published the letter online, readers responded through the paper's comment section. In addition, there

were several featured articles and online blogs written in response and with added comments from readers. This constitutes the corpus in this study (80165 words).

Some readers were supportive, and agreed that Norwegians show little interest in other people. There are Norwegian studies (Jonassen 1983; Gullestad 1992) that place individualism and independence as highly important Norwegian values, something which may make them appear both arrogant and impolite (Røkaas 2000; Gray 2005; Aambø 2005, 2008). However, a limitation of most of these studies is that their arguments are not clearly supported by empirical evidence. Therefore, more empirical data is needed to either support or reject the existing literature, and this study may serve as a contribution in that respect.

The majority of the readers, however, defended the Norwegian way of communicating. Their comments might not be very objective as they seem overly negative to American communication practices. However, they might also give some important clues into the underlying values guiding these Norwegians' communication strategies and provide an alternative interpretation to that of arrogance and impoliteness. The notion of *politeness* within linguistic research has many interpretations (Culpeper 2012). In this article, politeness is interpreted from a relevance theoretical viewpoint (Sperber & Wilson 2006), which entails that it is the hearer's expectations that guide his ascription of impoliteness, not the speaker's intent. Those who defend Norwegian practices, take it for granted that Norwegians, in general, do not aim to be impolite. This is further discussed in section five.

In this study, the comments that Emily's letter received from Norwegian respondents are looked at from a linguistic, socio-pragmatic point of view. Emily's major disappointments concern Norwegians' lack of greetings and small talk towards relative strangers such as bus drivers, shop assistants, teachers, or friend's friends, and this may be related to the linguistic notion of *phatic talk*, and specifically phatic talk towards outgroup members. Hence, the Norwegian respondents' perception of phatic talk is the object of research in this article, with the following research question:

RQ: What perceptions of (im)politeness are indicated in the Norwegians' interpretation of phatic talk in this corpus?

Section 2 provides useful theories on phatic talk for discussing the corpus findings in section four from a linguistic viewpoint. In this article, I generalize into two large national categories, the 'Americans' and the 'Norwegians', because these are the categories used in the corpus, while being fully aware of research findings that nuance the picture (e.g., for American communication: Bailey 2000; Tannen 2005; Ryoo 2007). The validity and generalizability of the corpus findings are further discussed in section five.

2. Phatic talk

Most researchers agree that communication has both an information function and a relationship function (Scollon & Scollon 2012). However, there are often cases where one or the other function appears to be minimized (ibid. 136). According to Coupland (1992:214), phatic talk is used when there is minimal commitment to self-disclosure, truth and factuality (the information function), and maximum commitment to positive relational goals. Linguistic items that tend to receive a phatic interpretation are, for example, greetings, small talk, gossip, jokes and back-channeling cues. Much of phatic talk constitutes formulaic expressions which build on traditions and serve a socially binding function among people who are familiar with them (Ong 2003). However, as will become apparent below, the interpretation and evaluation of phatic talk is far from universal or context-free.

The term *phatic* originates with Malinowski (1923), a Polish anthropologist linked to the British functionalist school of linguistics, a precursor to modern sociolinguistics. He chooses the term *phatic communion* to 'talk' or 'communication' because, in his view, its main object is to be "a type of speech in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words" (ibid. 315). Thus, whereas communication resides on its propositional content (convey meaning, share information, have someone do something etc.), phatic communion, in Malinowski's view, has none. Hence, when a greeting such as "how are you?" is spoken in a phatic mode, it is not uttered in order to inquire about someone's well-being but only

functions to avoid the unpleasant tension that silence brings about, acknowledge the presence of the other person, and to keep the communication channel open. In the latter case, phatic talk may be spoken with the same intent as fillers (*uh, erm, well*), as people often resolve to it when they do not know what else to talk about.

Researchers have placed different importance on phatic talk. In Malinowski's view, expressions such as "nice day today" are interpreted rather negatively as "purposeless expressions of preference or aversions, accounts of irrelevant happenings" and something that "comments on what is perfectly obvious" (ibid. 314). In contrast, Laver (1981:290) points out that "linguistic behaviour of conversational routines, including greetings and partings, as well as please, thanks, excuses, apologies and small talk, is part of the linguistic repertoire of politeness" and, therefore, has a purposeful social function. Coupland (2003: 2), who has published extensively on the topic over the years, maintains that for most researchers today "the importance of small talk to social life seems incontestable" and, thus, one can assume that there are few researchers these days who would dare to discard it as pointless or irrelevant.

Coupland et al. (1992) provide a discourse analysis of responses among elderly people at a British Day Centre and their interpretation of the initial question "how are you?" Some interpreted the question as phatic and responded, "Alright thank you" even though they might not have felt very well. Others gave a non-phatic response: "Not very well", and elaborated on the cause of their discomfort. Still others interpreted it as both phatic and non-phatic and responded: "I'm alright (.) I do suffer with my nerves though I get injections every month (.) but I (.) I'm going to be fine". Thus, whether an utterance is interpreted as phatic or non-phatic is often a matter of negotiation of meaning and correct inference on the part of the hearer. When an utterance is interpreted as phatic, it is normally because the informational purpose is considered rather weak (ibid.215). However, one might imagine that with so few explicit cues from the speaker, the correct interpretation about the speaker's intent is not a straight forward one.

Senft (2009), who is occupied with why there has been so little research following up on Malinowski's ideas of 'phatic communion', refers to Hymes (1972:40) who criticizes Malinowski for not sufficiently acknowledging cultural differences in phatic talk. Many scholars (Coupland 2000; Jaworski 2000; House 2005; Schneider 2008; Scollon and Scollon 2012) argue that phatic talk is more common in certain cultures than in others. Jaworski (2000:116ff.) provides an abundance of examples from other studies to support his claim that different communities use different degrees of prescribed small talk in the same types of sociable events, and argues that Anglo-Americans tend to treat expressions such as "we must get together sometime" as phatic rather than non-phatic, whereas others might not. Scollon and Scollon (2012: 56) contend that when American strangers are thrown together by circumstances, such as sitting next to each other on a long-distance bus, they would normally switch to *involvement strategies* by, for instance, talking about the weather or showing each other pictures of their grandchildren. According to Schneider (2008), the latter also constitute phatic talk in an American context because personal topics in small talk are common there, but not in countries like the UK. The opposite notion, *independence strategies*, may be illustrated with German examples. House (2005), who has done several studies comparing German and English discourses, claims that Germans are less likely to engage in small talk and that they find this polite because "one does not actually lie in German when one is polite" (ibid. 25), implying that using a lot of phatic talk is to say things one does not really mean. Similarly, Pavlidou (2008), who investigates German and Greek telephone openings, finds that whereas a Greek uses phatic talk to build relationships, the German way is to "refrain from keeping the partner on the phone for too long and letting them know pretty soon the reason for calling". Scollon and Scollon's two opposite categories may also be linked to Brown and Levinson's (1987) notions of face; *positive face* (involvement by signalling intimacy is more polite) vs. *negative face* (avoidance by not intruding is more polite).

In the *relevance theory*, Sperber and Wilson (2006) draw attention to how people tend to interpret messages in accordance with their own expectations. In relation to this, Cruz (2001, 2014), who is occupied with the interpretation of phatic talk in an intercultural setting, mentions at least two reasons why correct interpretation of phatic talk in another language is especially difficult. The first is the general nature of phatic talk as a type of communication where the informational content is rather weak and interpretation, therefore, needs to rely more heavily on contextual cues. The second reason is that these cues are often sociocultural conventions that the community has in common, but which might be unknown to a stranger. The public debate mentioned in the introduction of this article is a good example

of how different perceptions of phatic talk can cause turmoil, and shows the necessity of further studies into sociocultural differences in phatic talk.

3. Methodology

3.1 Metadiscourses and the social media genre

The corpus under investigation contains *metapragmatic* data (reflections on one's own and others' contextualized language use, Spencer-Oatey 2008:333) from online discourses. The problem with studying metapragmatics is that the speaker's intuition about his own habits might not concur with reality (ibid.294), and his opinions might, instead, be a result of stereotypical views on communication in his community. In the current data material, there is another obstacle, namely the fact that statements about one's own or others' language use come in response to having one's culture criticized, and therefore frequently take on the form of emotive arguments of defense, i.e., protecting one's own face with a counter face-attack (Culpeper et al. 2003:156). Here, the notion of *face* is extended to one's national identity. What form the arguments take is further influenced by the type of channel in which they occur; in this case, computer mediated discourse (CMD). Researchers disagree on how uniquely different online discourses are to offline ones (Androutsopoulos 2006), but some obvious differences that may affect degree of politeness are the speaker's possibility to hide behind anonymity and the physical absence of the hearer (Crystal 2006). Comparing different CMD channels, Herring (2007) argues that in public CMD, such as the online discussion forums in the present corpus, people tend to care less about face work than in private CMD (e.g., e-mail or Facebook) and that individuals who post anonymously tend to "flame more than individuals who post in their offline identities". *Flaming* means aggressively attacking a specific topic and the sender behind it (Crystal 2006:58).

With these precautions in mind, people's display of uncensored opinions is also an advantage, especially when the topic of research is to look for underlying values guiding language use. *Values* serve as standards for what is good or bad, worth doing or avoiding, and so on (Schwartz 2012: 4). Since values are "beliefs linked inextricably to affect" (ibid. 3), people in affect may recognize them better. The way they become visible to others is usually by being reflected in pragmatic norms (Wierzbicka 1985: 173), and as mentioned by Cruz above, norms are often sociocultural conventions that the community has in common. However, as cited in the introduction with regards to studies on American communication, there is, to the best of my knowledge, no evidence that national culture imply homogeneity in norms.

In this study, I do not only look at the content of the responses but also at how their opinions are linguistically manifested. For instance, to call others' communication practices "fake" and one's own "genuine" is termed a *value-laden expression* below because it makes evaluative judgements where one is clearly more positive than the other. Further, when people use similar linguistic expressions to explain their own or others' norms, the choice of term might provide important clues about the sociocultural conventions of that group.

3.2 The corpus

The corpus contains the following texts:

- a) Emily Mason's original letter (Mason 2013) published online in BT (Bergens Tidende), a Norwegian newspaper, 14.03.2013, with 278 comments from readers.
- b) An article (Eriksen et al. 2013) from VG, another Norwegian newspaper, where Norwegian TV-personalities are asked to comment on Mason's letter, with 918 comments from readers.
- c) An online blog (Skårderud 2013) responding critically to Mason's statements, with 73 comments from readers.
- d) A feature article by Schwind (2013), a German media scholar at the University of Oslo, responding critically to Mason's letter on the webpage called *Ytring* administered by the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (NRK), with 19 comments from readers.

- e) A feature article (Arntzen 2013) responding positively to Mason and negatively to Schwind on the webpage called *Ytring* administered by the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (NRK), with 84 comments from readers.
- f) A reader's letter (Henriksen Lyså 2013) commenting on Mason's letter with an attempt to explain the rationale in Norwegians' behavior on the same web page as hers a month later, with 13 comments from readers.

In total, there are 1312 comments from readers to the six texts above. Generally, the more biased focus in the original featured article/blog/reader's letter, the more biased are the comments from the readers. The most factual comments are those in response to Emily's original letter, probably because they are often directed towards the author herself (she might read them), her text is personal and her age only sixteen, and thus, the respondents seem to make an effort not to offend her.

Most of those contributing to the comment sections are Norwegians, but fifty-one define themselves as non-Norwegian. Many sign themselves up as "guest" or "anonymous", and thus, one cannot know whether they are male or female, but for those who do sign up with a given name or a photo, there are more men (549) than women (307). Age is not specified, but one can often make a qualified guess based on language, the content, or the attached photo. The impression is that comments are fairly equally distributed across all age groups from those of about Emily's age (sixteen) to seniors.

3.3 Collection and analysis

The corpus was collected by searching through the internet for texts related to Emily Mason's letter. The analysis has been conducted in accordance with the traditions of qualitative content analysis (Glaser and Strauss 1967) where analyzing is an inductive process going back and forth between data and conceptualization. The process resulted in the following categories: 1) Supportive statements that support Emily and criticize Norwegian communication practices, 2) Defensive statements that criticize the American communication practices and/or defend the Norwegian ones. Comments that could not be placed in either of these categories were omitted from the further analysis looking for culture-laden choices of expressions that could give clues into the respondents' values concerning communication in general and phatic talk in particular.

3.4 Translation and presentation

The quotes from the corpus used in this article have been translated into English by the author. There is always a danger that nuances are lost in translation. Thus, in section four, culture-laden choices of expression are placed in bold with the original Norwegian phrase in square brackets [] behind for those who are familiar with both tongues. In some cases, when the selected quote does not clarify the agent of the statement, the nationality is placed in brackets, e.g., (American), in the text proper.

4. The responses to Emily's letter

As mentioned above, not all the responses could be placed into one of the two categories outlined in 3.3. For those which could be placed, forty-one (80%) of the non-Norwegians clearly supported Emily and said they had had similar experiences. However, since the scope in this article is limited to Norwegian perceptions, their views are not represented in the quotes below. When it comes to Norwegian readers, the total number of clearly supportive statements in the comment sections was less (275) than those defending Norwegian norms (367). However, the difference is not substantial enough to state that any of the groups can represent the Norwegian population. Whether supportive or defensive, their statements contain value-laden expressions which are highlighted in bold below. The quotes have been translated into English by the author and are presented in accordance with the procedures given in 3.4.

4.1 Example of supportive statements

The Norwegians, who support Emily and criticize Norwegian communication practices, have positive experiences from the States or other countries where people use more verbal involvement strategies towards each other:

- (1) I have chosen the United States as my holiday destination for years. Why? It is because people there are incredibly nice. In fact, I have surprised myself by chatting with strangers at home (in Norway) too.
- (2) We have much to learn from the Americans when it comes to noticing other people.

Norwegians are described as **cold** [*kalde, iskalde*], **sullen** [*sure*], **anti-social** [*asosiale*], **arrogant** [*arrogante, overlegne*], **spoiled** [*bortskjemte*], **introvert** [*innadvendte, introverte, innesluttet*], **reserved and shy** [*folkesky, reserverte, tilknapet, sjenerte*], **impolite** [*uhøflige*] and **unfriendly** [*uvennlige*]. There is a sense of embarrassment on behalf of fellow Norwegians, and a belief that people could, if they would, pull themselves together and show better manners. In their view, phatic talk is an important marker of politeness:

- (3) In the USA there are lots of set politeness phrases, but at least one is forced to be polite, and that is a good thing.

However, only 13 of the 275 Norwegians who support Emily state that they talk or smile to strangers when they are in Norway themselves; so obviously, it is other Norwegians who have to change first.

4.2 Example of defensive statements

The quotes below have been chosen because they represent some of the commonly held views among those who defend the Norwegian communicative norms. However, the reader must bear in mind that they do not provide objective opinions about either Americans or Norwegians, but rather illustrate how one's own norms are defended when being attacked as outlined in 3.1.

4.2.1 Defensive statements that criticize American communication practices

- (4) In the USA there is constantly hi, hello and empty talk [*tomprat*] with strangers. After a short while the Americans do not seem nice anymore, but rather **fake** [*falsk*] and **phony** [*påtatte*]. It is form without content. [...] Americans are **excessively** [*overdreven*] friendly.
- (5) Their friendliness is simply a **polished façade** [*polert fasade*], and has nothing to do with people's real feelings.
- (6) Emily hasn't quite understood that whereas it is quite natural in the States to throw **meaningless** [*intetsigende*] words such as 'love' and 'peace' around, it is not quite natural for Norwegians to say "elsker deg" (love you) and "kan du være så snill" (please) all day long.
- (7) I'd rather have good old fashion European sullenness than **empty and flowery rhetoric** [*floskler*].
- (8) In the USA I was taken aback by the **importunate** [*påtrengende*] friendliness.
- (9) I was once in the USA, and I was very **bothered** [*plaget*] by people who wanted to talk to me all the time.
- (10) I can do very well without American 'pretensehappiness' [*liksom-glede*].
- (11) People in the USA are **excessively nice** [*overhyggelige*] towards each other.
- (12) Many Norwegians are uncomfortable with the **effusive** [*overstrømmende*] American friendliness. What you (Emily) perceive as "ordinary, friendly people", we perceive as **phony** and **tiresome** [*påtatt og slitsomt*].
- (13) In the USA everyone keeps **jabbering on** [*mase*] about things, and it makes me crazy. You cannot even take the elevator without **meaningless** [*meningsløst*] chit-chat (the English term was used in the original Norwegian script).
- (14) In the States there is much **pro forma politeness** [*pro forma høflighet*] that does not really mean anything.
- (15) Americans are generally very **garrulous** [*pratesyke*].
- (16) People are **too loud** [*høylytte*] and talk to me when I do not want them to.

- (17) To force people into a **superficial** [*overfladisk*] conversation when they are not in the mood for it is actually quite impolite.
- (18) An earlier (Norwegian) class mate stayed for a while in Florida and was more or less **bombarded** [*overøst*] with “great to see you, come over some day”. And, when he actually ‘came over’, they were ever so surprised. It turned out just to be phrases without meaning.

4.2.2 Defensive statements that defend the Norwegian communication practices

- (19) It was fantastic to come home from the USA and **be spared from** [*bli spart for*] having to be outgoing all the time.
- (20) I am not sullen. I just don’t feel like smiling **without a reason** [*uten å ha grunn til det*].
- (21) To walk around and smile and small talk to everyone is very unlike Norwegians. The small talk should at least **have a purpose** [*ha en hensikt*].
- (22) To me, people (around me in Norway) are friendly and helpful **when I need it** [*når det trengs*].
- (23) Norwegians normally react negatively to what they perceive as **dishonest nonsense** [*uærlig svada*].
- (24) Without solidarity, **feigned** [*påklistret*] friendliness is just **fake** [*falsk*].
- (25) I think that, in Norway, if we ask things like “how are you”, we **mean it** [*mener det*].
- (26) How nice to be left alone when I feel like it and know that it is **genuine** [*ektefølt*] when I occasionally meet a friendly stranger.
- (27) Norwegian communication goes **straight to the point** [*rett på sak*]. It is **efficient** [*effektivt*] without too much **nonsense** [*snikksnakk**]

*According to the dictionary (www.ordnett.no), the Norwegian term *snikksnakk* carries only negative connotations. Thus, when translated into English, the authors have chosen terms such as ‘nonsense’, ‘rubbish’, ‘bullshit’ and ‘jive’. When the lexically similar English term *chit chat* is translated into Norwegian, on the other hand, it has been given positive translations such as ‘*småprat*’ and ‘*småsnakk*’ which may be understood as friendly small talk.

- (28) If one does not have anything to talk about, one seldom talks.
- (29) We are a bit **quiet** [*lavmælte*]. So what? It is what makes Norway such a relaxing place.
- (30) I value **privacy** [*privatliv*] and **peace** [*fred*] very much; to be able to **spend time alone** [*være litt alene*] at times.
- (31) I think it is really wonderful to come home to Norway where people let me **sit in silence** [*sitte i stillhet*] on the bus.
- (32) I enjoy living in a country where one is allowed to **walk in peace** [*gå i fred*] in the street.
- (33) Norwegians are also mostly polite, with some exceptions. They are **good at leaving others alone** [*flinke til å la andre være i fred*] and **respecting their integrity** [*respektere integritet*].
- (34) In Norway, we do not want to **annoy** [*irritere*] people we do not know by trying to create an emotional bond with strangers.
- (35) In Norway one shows respect by being **honest** [*ærlig*], **sincere/genuine/truthful** [*oppriktig**] and by keeping a certain **distance** [*distanse*] until you are invited in.
- *According to the dictionary *Norske Synonymer* (Gundersen 2010), synonyms to the Norwegian term *oppriktig* are *alvorlig* ‘sincere’, *ekte* ‘genuine’, *rederlig* ‘fair’, *sannferdig* ‘truthful’, *usminket* ‘plain, not made-up’, *likefram* ‘straightforward, direct’, and *åpen* ‘frank’.
- (36) Norwegian politeness is about **not being a nuisance** [*ikke plage andre*]. That is ultimate politeness; not being **importunate** [*påtrengende*] and **not bothering others** [*ikke bry andre*] with your problems.
- (37) It is not common among us to say “hi” to total strangers. We rather get to know new people through friends or through job situations.
- (38) We do not talk about personal things to strangers. “How are you?” is a personal question.
- (39) To talk about the weather is something you can do with anyone. If, on the other hand, a stranger says “hi” to me in the street, I think: “Where on earth did I meet that guy before?”

Categorizing the expressions highlighted in 4.2.1 and 4.2.2 further reveals a dichotomized presentation of the American style described as empty, fake, excessive and loud on the one side, and the Norwegian style as meaningful, genuine, to the point, and quiet, on the other. For the purpose of the discussion that follows, these (shown in bold) and terms with similar meaning are grouped together in table 1.

Table 1: Summary of value-laden terms used in 4.2 about the American and the Norwegian communicative styles

American communication	Norwegian communication
a) Empty , meaningless [<i>meningsløst</i> , <i>intetsigende</i>], superficial, nonsense [<i>snikksnakk</i> , <i>svada</i>], pro forma-politeness, empty and flowery rhetoric [<i>floskler</i>]	a) Meaningful [<i>vi mener det</i>], talk when something to talk about, (talk should have) a purpose/(not talk without a reason [<i>grunn</i>], when I need it [<i>når det trengs</i>])
b) Fake [<i>falske</i>], phony [<i>påtatt</i>], feigned [<i>påklisset</i>], pretense happiness [<i>likksom-glede</i>], polished façade, dishonest [<i>uærlig</i>]	b) Genuine [<i>ektefølt</i>], honest [<i>ærlig</i>], sincere, genuine, truthful [<i>oppriktig</i>]
c) Excessive [<i>overdreven</i>] friendliness, excessively nice [<i>overhyggelige</i>], bombarded with [<i>overøst</i>], effusive [<i>overstrømmende</i>] friendliness	c) Straight to the point [<i>rett på sak</i>], efficient [<i>effektivt</i>]
d) Loud [<i>høylytte</i>], garrulous [<i>pratesyke</i>], jabbering on [<i>mase</i>]	d) Quiet [<i>lavmælt</i>], in silence [<i>i stillhet</i>], (in) peace [<i>fred, i fred</i>],

5. Discussion

The Norwegians in this corpus provide a generalized picture of Americans, a picture that I do not discuss further here other than to say that the picture of American communication in research (cf. the introduction) seems to be more nuanced than these data suggest. However, the Norwegian opinions about Americans provide an interesting view on their own values with regards to phatic talk, and those are further discussed below.

5.1 The social value of phatic talk

Coupland defined phatic talk as something people use when there is minimal commitment to seriousness and factuality, but it still has a positive social value. Those who support Emily see phatic talk in a similar manner and try to explain to fellow Norwegians that they are wrong to expect phatic talk to signal serious, binding, and long-term commitment:

(40) The point is that small talk [*småprat*] HAS a value! It shows social intelligence. The whole point is that it is without obligation [*uforpliktende*]. If I utter something casual [*tilfeldig*] to the girl sitting next to me on the bus, it is NOT because I wish to follow her home or give her a thorough account of what I did in 1983!

(41) You all misunderstand! It (phatic talk) is supposed to be superficial. This has nothing to do with building relationships for the future, but with acknowledging people in the present, here and now!

In the material there are several examples of Norwegians' failure to interpret the American phatic talk as casual and momentary. There are examples when Norwegian students, who think they have been invited, surprise Americans by turning up on their doorstep (e.g., quote 18, see also Jaworski (2000) in section

two about “we must get together sometime”), those who are disappointed to find that small talk was not friendship, and there is the man who stops and tells about his sore throat in response to “howarya”. Those who support Emily, however, do not find the lack of serious, binding, and long-term commitment in phatic talk problematic because they emphasize its’ social function. Consequently, phatic talk becomes an important marker of politeness with a potentially valuable social function also in the Norwegian society.

Those who criticize it, do not. I emphasize especially three points about communicative norms from the latter group in the following discussion: a) Other politeness markers are more important than phatic talk, b) The non-phatic function, even in greetings and small talk, is more emphasized, and c) *Hvordan har du det* ‘how are you’ functions poorly as phatic talk in Norwegian. References to the quotes in section 4 are given in brackets.

5.2 Other politeness markers are more important than phatic talk

According to the findings from those who defend Norwegian practices, it seems that phatic talk is not tied to being friendly (relational, sociable, polite) towards strangers as much as it might be to others. There are other ways to show politeness, and they are linked to terms such as **privacy** [*privatliv*], **leaving others alone** [*la andre være i fred*] and **respecting their integrity** [*respekttere integritet*], keeping a certain **distance** [*distanse*] until you are invited in, **not being a nuisance** [*ikke plage andre*], **not being importunate** [*ikke være påtrengende*] and **not to bother others** [*ikke bry andre*] (quotes 33-36). In view of this, it is easier to understand why these Norwegians portray people who use much phatic talk towards relative strangers as importunate (8) or tiresome (12).

As mentioned in the introduction, studies on Norwegian communication practices are scarce in number, and, for the large part, anecdotal. However, the findings in this study support some of the anecdotes. Gullestad (1992:184ff.) argues that independence [*selvstendighet, uavhengighet*] is the key notion of Norwegian individualism, and is connected to the values of, self-control, and the belief that people need “peace and quiet” [*fred og ro*]. Gray (2005:57) holds that in Norway one does not greet a stranger out of fear of threatening negative face by intruding on his or her personal space. For this reason, Røkaas (2000) claims that the Norwegian language contains a limited number of conventionalized verbal acknowledgement strategies toward strangers, something that, quite understandably, is often judged by foreigners as aloofness or lack of politeness (Aambø 2005). However, Fretheim (2005:145), a renowned Norwegian pragmatist, argues that it is a “gross misunderstanding” that Norwegians do not pay attention to the face wants of their interlocutors, and that this perhaps is due to the fact that so little research has been conducted on the way politeness is reflected in the Norwegian language. This study finds that, to the Norwegian respondents who defend Norwegian norms, politeness is targeted towards the negative face of the interlocutor by not disturbing him with unnecessary talk, and when one does talk, to be meaningful, genuine, to the point, and quiet rather than to engage in small talk. This is in line with the way House portrayed Germans’ view on small talk, something which was categorized as *independence* politeness strategies by Scollon and Scollon (section two). Thus, not to use phatic talk does not indicate impoliteness, even if that is how people with other expectations judge it.

Still, an interesting question is why the comments from these Norwegians express such a degree of skepticism towards using exchanges with a phatic interpretation. Why is using phatic talk, which aims to build positive social relationships (Coupland 1992, section two), described as empty, fake, excessive and loud?

5.3 The non-phatic function of talk is more emphasized

Coupland argued that when an utterance is interpreted as phatic, it is normally because the informational purpose is considered rather weak. It seems that to Norwegians who defend Norwegian norms, the non-phatic (informational) function of talk is emphasized more, even in greetings and small talk. This is why one reader, a young man who is going to college in the States, writes that: “When people (in the USA) asked me “what’s up?” it took me some time to realize that I did not have to stop to answer every time”.

The Norwegians who criticize Emily seem to regard talk with a phatic function with the same kind of suspicion as Malinowski did (cf. section two). He saw phatic talk as purposeless expressions because it had no propositional content. The Norwegians in question see it as **empty** [*tomprat, floskler*] (4, 7),

without meaning [*intetsigende, meningsløst*] (6, 13), **nonsense** [*svada, snikksnakk*] (23, 27) and as **pro forma** politeness (14), indicating that it has form but no content. Malinowski (1923:314) argued that even without a content, phatic talk functions to avoid “the strange and unpleasant tension which men feel when facing each other in silence”. The Norwegians in question, however, seem to be of the opinion that without content, silence is a better option (28).

Further, they seem to agree with the German view on phatic talk described by House (section two). According to her, Germans evaluate phatic talk similarly to a lie. Likewise, these Norwegians describe it as **fake** [*falskt*] (4), **phony** [*påtatt*] (4, 12) and **feigned** (24). A Vietnamese professor resident in Norway (Longva 2005:79) has found a common objection to expressions such as ‘how are you’ to be: “But, it is fake”, meaning that unless one really wishes to know how someone is feeling, one should not throw words around like that.

In addition, it is viewed as unnecessary as it is described as **excessive** [*overdreven*] (4, 11), **effusive** [*overstrømmende*] (12) (note that all the Norwegian translations in table 1, c. start with the prefix *over-* meaning surplus), and people who use a lot of it are **garrulous** [*pratesyke*] (15) and **too loud** [*høylytte*] (16). This concurs with the Germans observed by Pavlidou (section 2) who did not wish to waste the interlocutor’s time on meandering and trivia when talking on the telephone.

5.4 “How are you” functions poorly as phatic talk in Norwegian

There is another discussion in the data that has to do with what formulaic expressions serve best in a Norwegian setting. A respondent maintains that *hvordan har du det*, the Norwegian equivalent to “How are you” does not work well as a politeness phrase with a phatic interpretation in Norway because it has different connotations than in the States. That is, it is rarely used towards strangers, but rather towards people one is already acquainted with in order to ask about their factual well-being (non-phatic interpretation). Thus, the question is too personal to function in a conversation with a stranger (38). If someone is looking for ways to make small talk with strangers in Norwegian, it is better to talk about impersonal topics such as the weather (39) or use a greeting without semantic content such as *hei* ‘hi’, *hallo* ‘hello’ (Rygg, under review for publication), a nod, or a smile.

On the other hand, Norwegians had better interpret the American “how are you” similar to Norwegian casual and momentary greetings such as *hei* ‘hi’, a smile or a nod, which only require a similar swift and non-committed response in return. If Emily, in her story in the introduction, had greeted the unknown girl with any of these instead of a hand shake (which Norwegian youngsters never use towards each other, and which is perceived as relatively formal and committed even by adults), she might have caused less bewilderment to the girl.

6. Limitations and ideas for further studies

The findings in this study might lend the impression that Norwegians avoid phatic talk all together. However, one must bear in mind that these data only comment on small talk towards strangers, not towards ingroup members, i.e., people one knows. There are studies (thus, of an older date) that observe frequent small talk for social purposes to ingroup members in small communities in Western Norway (Larsen 1984; Hollos 1970). It is possible that Americans and Norwegians are not so different when talking to ingroup members, and this is a possible topic for another study. In addition, this study needs to be supplemented by data uttered under non-defensive circumstances, and examine Norwegian small talk in a number of contexts (e.g., in the corpus there are claims that people from the north of Norway use more small talk than ‘Southerners’, that Norwegians living in the countryside use more than those living in the city, and that people engage in more phatic talk when they are hiking in the mountains, sailing in their leisure boats, enjoying holidays abroad, or when walking their dogs). Another topic of interest is that young Norwegians might become more open to phatic talk. Miller (2008) argues that social relationships today are increasingly influenced by the social media which he terms a *phatic culture* because its main communicative purpose is to stay in touch rather than to be accurate and sincere. In a Norwegian newspaper article (<http://www.budstikka.no/nyheter/hjerte-flom-blant-unge-jenter-i-sosiale-medier-1.8362143>) Norwegian teenage girls report on frequently using expressions such as *beste* ‘(you’re) the

best', *vakreste* '(you're) the most beautiful' and *elsker deg for alltid* 'love you forever' to their online girlfriends without putting too much into it. In contrast to the findings in the present study, time will tell if they take this 'un-Norwegian' use of phatic talk with them into adulthood and to what degree it spills over into offline discourses.

7. Conclusion

Both the Norwegians who support and those who criticize Emily's views agree that Norwegians are not prone to phatic talk towards strangers. There are also significantly few in both groups who state that they use phatic talk towards strangers themselves. It indicates that phatic talk towards outgroup members is not very common in the Norwegian society. However, where they differ is on the expectation and evaluation of phatic talk. Some deem the lack of it impolite and wish for more, others do not. Those who criticize Emily's views seem to do it not only because they harbor the same skepticism towards phatic talk as Malinowski did, but also because they do not want to be impolite. Those who support Emily, on the other hand, do not seem to have any problems with the lack of serious, binding, and long-term commitment in phatic talk because the social function supersedes the factual one. Two different views on phatic talk explain why some Americans and Norwegians, and even fellow Norwegians, may misunderstand each other's intent on this account.

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