

**PHATIC COMMUNION IN INSTANT MESSAGING:  
A PRAGMATICS PERSPECTIVE**

by

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Submitted

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to the



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## **CERTIFICATE**

This is to certify that the thesis entitled “**Phatic Communion in Instant Messaging: A Pragmatics Perspective**”, being submitted by Ms. Dipti Kulkarni for the award of the degree of **Doctor of Philosophy**, to the **Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi** is a record of original bona-fide research carried out by her under my guidance and supervision. I am satisfied that the thesis presented by Ms. Dipti Kulkarni is worthy of consideration for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

The results of this thesis have not been submitted to any other University or Institute for award of degree or diploma.

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## ABSTRACT

This research is a linguistic-pragmatic inquiry into the nature of phatic communion (Malinowski, 1923) in online social interactions. Following Jakobson's interpretation (1960) of the concept, phatic communion is understood here as the language in an interaction the primary purpose of which is to maintain contact between speakers. Contact in Jakobson's words, is the "physical channel and psychological connection between the addresser and the addressee, enabling both of them to enter and stay in communication". Jakobson does not elaborate further on this definition but, in this research, I propose that the 'physical channel' involves the *attention* that speakers must pay to each other in an interaction while 'psychological connection' is achieved through *showing interest* and *expressing agreement*.

I adapt qualitative conversation analytic methods to observe the salient pragmatic features of phatic communion in one of the most prevalent means of online social interaction namely instant messaging (IM). IM is a two-party conversation where participants interact through the exchange of text messages. The data for this research comprises of 60 IM chats collected from 20 participants. (Informed consent was sought from all the participants.) All the participants are of Indian nationality and belong to the age-group of 20-30 years. They chat in a mixture of English and regional Indian languages such as Marathi and Hindi. However, they use the roman script even when they converse in Indian languages.

The objectives of my analysis are: first, to identify the phatic cues used by interlocutors to signal attention, interest, and agreement in the IM conversations; and second, to observe the ways in which the use and avoidance of these phatic cues at specific locations in the conversations affects the contact between the speakers. My analysis suggests that, in the absence of nonverbal cues, IM participants signal and infer attention using the temporal resources available to them: continuous posts signal a strong contact and an open channel, whereas delays or breaks in the conversation may suggest a weak contact. However, it was also observed that the possibility of taking a break or responding with delay allows IM participants to stay in contact for longer durations, to start new topics following a lull in the conversation, and to negotiate occasions of disagreements. In IM, attention is also signalled

using verbal means and I analyze phatic cues in the openings, middles, and closings of these conversations for the role they play in establishing, maintaining, and terminating contact. With regard to securing the psychological connection, I propose that conversationalists have to show specific interest in (a) having a conversation (b) in the other person and (c) in the topic being discussed. Various interactional cues such as questions, further questions, and evaluations are observed and the role they play towards signalling interest is discussed. Agreement between the speakers has also emerged as important for establishing the psychological connection. It was observed that while agreement is preferred and secures contact and disagreement typically weakens the connection between the speakers, disagreement in playful topics or when it is favourable to the recipient does not hamper the contact. In sum, this thesis identifies the phatic cues in IM interactions used to achieve contact between speakers and highlights the interactional work done by interlocutors in maintaining contact.

*Keywords:* phatic communion, computer-mediated communication, instant messaging.

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#### *Appendices*

#### *Brief Bio-data of the Author*