

Phatic Uses of Language in Print Media Discourse: Designing a New Model for Reader Engagement

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Abstract:

This article addresses the question of contact and its importance in journalistic communication from a pragmatic and linguistic perspective. Thus, the key concepts of this theoretical approach are the phatic function of language and phaticity, defined here as a property of language-in-use that allows individuals to establish, develop and maintain relationships through communication. The overall aims are to design a new research line in print journalism discourse analysis, and also to provide a discursive model based on the phatic dimension of language. In the light of the constant decline of print media audiences and of the rapid growth of online media audiences, this model could serve as a tool for print outlets to keep its readership close by strategically engage with it, using the discursive apparatus developed here. The main conclusion of this proposal refers to the necessary discursive turn in print journalism from referentiality (a context-centred approach) to phaticity (a contact-centred approach), a turn already embraced by other mass communication channels like radio, television and Internet. In other words, this study is an invitation for print media to lay more stress on how facts are expressed, along with what is communicated.

Keywords: print journalism, language functions, phatic, contact, model

1. Introduction and theoretical background

The approach of journalism from the perspective of language functions may be a difficult and long time engaging task for a researcher if we take into consideration that analyzing journalistic communication with linguistic tools is a quite recent investigation line: “Interest in the languages of journalism was slowing in coming to inquiry into journalism than were the focal points of other disciplinary perspectives. It was primarily in the mid – 1970s that journalism scholars began to respond to the fact that language had not been systematically studied as part of journalism. Some efforts have been made, but they were

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generally isolated and unrelated to each other” (Zelizer, 2004: 114). The meeting between Journalism and Linguistics had happened on the ground of mutual influences, the “curiosity” for the journalistic language growing bigger every time its practitioners (journalists and editors) were discovering – and then using – new ways of expression and addressing the public.

One way of approaching these new research topics was by analyzing the language of journalism, with reference to Jakobson’s Communication Model, questioning its validation in the case of journalistic communication. In Roman Jakobson’s Communication Model, every act of verbal communication is composed of six fundamental factors, as in the following logic scheme: the addresser (sender) sends a message to an addressee; to be effective, this message needs a context of enunciation (a referent) that the addressee can identify, and that has to be verbal or that could be verbalized; a code, partially or entirely common to both addresser and addressee (to the one that codifies the message and to the one that later de-codifies it); and, finally, a contact – a physical channel and a psychological connection between addresser and addressee, which enable both to initiate and stay in communication. Further on, a certain positioning of a speaker towards one of these six factors leads to a certain dominant or relevant function of a speech act. Note that all these functions are present hierarchically in every act of verbal communication, thus determining the verbal structure of the messages elaborated, which depends on the dominant function (Pomorska, 1987: 66). For example, if the focal point is the addresser, then the emotive function prevails. In the same way, the conative function focuses on the addressee; the referential function focuses on the object, the context or the referent of a speech act. The poetic focuses on the sign, on the message, while the metalingual is centred on the code. Finally, the phatic function, in Jakobson’s view, focuses on the channel through which speech is conveyed, being preoccupied with the contact between the addresser and the addressee (Malmkjaer, 2002).

As Jakobson postulated, in every speech event, in every concrete speech act – and, accepting that journalistic stories are sequences of speech acts (Romero Álvarez, 2002) – the addresser (the journalist, the newspaper itself or the news organization) sends a message (sequences of messages in the form of the different types of journalistic texts) to the addressee (although the journalist does not know who concretely the public is, he or she is aware of a profile of the reader); the message uses a code (the common spoken language of journalist and reader) has a context (or referent, meaning, in journalistic terms, the information that is conveyed via news stories and other journalistic stories) and is

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transmitted through a contact (a physical channel that allows the message to circulate from addresser to addressee, like the newspaper, or a psychological connection that facilitates the transmission, like i.e. the expression of common disagreement on some topic). Each of these factors accomplishes a linguistic function in the communication process, and of all functions one is dominant over the others, although all present.

The attempt to identify a dominant (specific) linguistic function for the journalistic language has become more difficult in time, as the forms of journalistic text have strongly multiplied. One can easily identify at least 15 different genres, not counting (a) the further diversifications inside the same genre (different types of news, different types of reportages, different types of interviews, etc.), (b) the more and more used eclectic forms (inquiry-feature story, news stories with subjective elements) and other still new genres (obituaries, infographics, advertorials). In such context, to establish a dominant function for the journalistic language as a whole is to risk a reductionist and inadequate research attempt. Most researchers have appointed a dominant referential function to the journalistic language, due in part to a confusing overlap between the correspondent linguistic function and a social function of journalism, that of informing the readers. Romanian Journalism professor Luminița Roșca considers that “of all six language functions [...] two are relevant for the journalistic text: the referential and the phatic, the others being subsidiary in this type of text” (2006: 10). Although the author provides an explanation for the omnipresence of the referential function, yet she does not mention at least one justifier for the phatic one. A cue to the phatic function’s relevance to journalism communication also appears in a comment of Pisarkowa regarding the reception of Malinowski’s work: “Phatic communion is conditioned by interlocutors’ conviction about its mutuality. It is this conviction that makes phatic communion possible – for the language of an individual, of a community, and finally, of mass-media” (Pisarkowa, 1999: 45). But Romanian linguist Stelian Dumistrăcel is the one making explicit the dominant position of the phatic function over, suggesting that, in fact, ‘what is specific to the journalistic language is the way the phatic function appears’ (Dumistrăcel, 2006: 7). Few decades earlier, Spanish professor Núñez Ladevéze (1983) also paid particular attention to the study of the phatic function in his work. He criticized at the time the restrictive approach of the phatic [function] in the Jakobson’s theory, stating that the phatic function has a much richer and vaster existence than the one later conferred by Jakobson, naming the variety of roles –

ritual and social – of the “phatic communion”, as defined by anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, the creator of the term.

Núñez Ladevéze analyses the phatic function starting from the idea of contact that Jakobson explained through a double consideration – both channel of transmission and psychological connection between sender and receiver – and adverts that here we have two different notions that should not be confused, nor overlapped: “the psychological contact, the communion, or the participation concerning the significant content is one thing, and the literally contact or the physical contact is another thing, that does not have to involve the other [the psychological connection] and that is performed through [the agency of] a transmission channel” (1983: 109–110). The psychological connection is closer to the desideratum Malinowski described in his work as (discursive) efforts made to maintain a feeling of community, solidarity and co-sharing (which is essential for the phatic function), while the channel of transmission aims at establishing a contact using the possibilities provided in this respect by the communication channel existing between sender and receiver.

Another amendment to Jakobson’s Model needs to be evoked here. In his study, the linguist refers to the six fundamental factors and the correspondent functions they fulfil in communication as being decisive for how the verbal structure of a message will look like. The concern here refers particularly to the original formulation of Jakobson regarding the “verbal structure” of a message, that has been taken as such, with no or little questioning about its validity in some eclectic, versatile and context-dependent types of discourses, like the journalistic discourse (van Dijk, 1990; Charron, 1996; Dumistrăcel, 2006). Clearly, the phatic uses of language in print media discourse cannot be properly identified (for further minute analysis) without strong references to Malinowski’s “Phatic Communion” or to Jakobson’s phatic function of language. Yet, the study risks a reductionist approach if limited to the “verbal structure” of the journalistic messages, as already had happened in numerous media studies and (journalistic) text / discourse analyses. Thus, to avoid this drawback, the model designed in this paper takes into consideration a recent theoretical direction, on how language should be seen and interpreted:

All texts are multimodal. Language always has to be realized through, and comes in the company of, other semiotic modes. When we speak, we articulate our message not just with words, but through a complex interplay of speech-sound, of rhythm, of intonation; accompanied by facial expression, gesture and posture. When we write, our message is expressed not only linguistically, but also through a visual arrangement of marks on a page. Any form of text analysis which ignores

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this will not be able to account for all the meanings expressed in the text’ (Kress; van Leeuwen, in Bell; Garret, 2003: 186).

According to Kress and van Leeuwen, “there is a trend in which, increasingly, the written text is no longer structured by linguistic means, through verbal connectors, and verbal cohesive devices (e.g. ‘in what follows’, ‘as was pointed out above’, ‘as my final point’) but visually, through layout, through the special arrangement of blocks of text, of pictures and other graphic elements on the page” (187). This is what the authors named multimodality and it will be the premise under which the model designed here (of phatic uses of language in print media discourse) will further on develop.

2. Towards a phatic model in print journalism communication

Furthermore, the present paper uses the distinction between physical channel and psychological connection (specific within the contact apparatus of the phatic function) to contrast it with a similar distinction used in print production (newspapers and magazines) that refers to two components of this process – graphic designing and editorial conceptualizing. The point of view suggested here is that, in order to engage with its readership, a print media outlet could exploit the characteristics and possibilities offered by these two components in a similar way that individuals use language phatically in order to initiate, maintain and interrupt communication with each other.

The figure bellow illustrates the analogies that allow us to build a communication model based on the phatic uses of journalistic language:

Phatic function of language	<i>Correspondences</i>	
	←	→
	Newspaper production process	
Physical channel uses	←	→
	Graphic design project	
Psychological connection uses	←	→
	Editorial conceptualization	

In accordance to the similarities suggested, analogically new concepts could be advanced, by distinguishing, within a newspaper, between two types of phaticity: (a) graphic phaticity and (b) editorial phaticity. As mentioned, both refer to how and to what extent is communication between newspaper and readership set off, prolonged and discontinued by the phatic uses of (journalistic) language.

2.1. Graphic phaticity

Graphic phaticity includes all the possibilities the physical channel offer so that the communication between newspaper and readership can be set off, prolonged and discontinued. This graphic component should be accepted and analyzed in the broad sense given by all the morphologic characteristics of layout and design elements, generated by the use of typography (fonts and styles), visual arts (photos, information graphics, caricatures, cartoons), and page layout techniques (creative use of grids, boxes, colours, lines, etc) in the context of the advent and development of new technologies and software used in Desktop Publishing. In this paper, to avoid the trap of exhaustiveness, we will encapsulate only those elements that are relevant for their phatic uses in the communicational strategies of a newspaper, namely paratext elements. Generally, paratext has been associated with books and referred to those elements that appear in a written work such as title, author's name, dedication, preface, introduction, page number, running head, illustration, chapter & subchapter titles, etc. Similarly, in the case of journalistic text, we can mention the paratext within a newspaper – newspaper peritext (the name of the newspaper, its frontispiece, masthead, banner headlines, page and section indications, etc.) plus the paratext within a newspaper article – article's peritext (headlines, subheads, straps, cross-heads, leads, body text, by-line, photography or/and infographics, captions, caricatures, and every other element that may appear as part of a graphic stylization process, like high-lightened text fragments, coloured or framed boxes, lines, bold letters, capital letters, drop caps etc.).

The use of paratext elements in journalistic text results in a very powerful captatio effect at a visual level; also, these elements orientate the reader, working as a sort of a guide: they establish information hierarchies and they imply – from a very first contact with the page – an order (of suggested preference) for the reading. Obviously, paratext also fulfils a phatic mission. For example, an horizontal line could represent the end of a text, thus suggesting to the reader the end of the reading; white spaces around headlines make them more visible to the reader, facilitating visual contact; the number of columns also contributes to establish a contact with the text: a story on four columns will be easier to read than a compact mass of text, without such arrangement.

2.2. Editorial phaticity

Editorial phaticity is mainly a result of the modalities in which an addresser structures, organizes and delivers a journalistic discourse with the main purpose of establishing a connection with the reader, as

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addressee of that specific discourse. So, while graphic phaticity is concerned with establish a connection based on the channel's possibilities in this respect, editorial phaticity aims at establishing a psychological connection. Most often, this type of phatic uses of language is to be looked for within the text (seen as communication unit endowed with a certain message) and its editorial treatment. Nevertheless, some of the paratext elements also have a verbal component and thus a correspondent editorial treatment, so, when discussing the editorial phaticity, these elements should not be omitted. Still, they differ from the body text in the sense that they are provided in co-authorship, while a text is the result of one's author's efforts. Paratext constituents do not depend on the author of the (body) text, as they can be subject to general and proof editing. In conclusion, the auctorial phatic depends on intellectual choices made exclusively by the author, whereas the collective phatic involves editorial decisions taken by other persons than the author himself, changing his/her status into "co-producer". The distinction is operational: furthermore, based on it, the references will be to co-authored phatic uses of journalistic language and to auctorial phatic uses of journalistic language. I insist that this sub-classification is adequate only in the case of editorial phaticity, because the other component discussed is in the charge of an entire team of designers, executors, in general those working with Desktop Publishing software, usually leaving the author of the text out of the process. "Unlike the case of other professions, for a journalist it is not compulsory to use the technology his work depends on because for this other people ['s competences] are required" (Núñez Ladavéze, 2002: 80–81). The intervention of a team of co-authors over the journalistic paratext is due to the multimodality of the journalistic discourse that we have used here as a working premise. As stated earlier, now the (journalistic) stories are not told anymore (exclusively) using text, but (especially) through headlines, photos and captions and other elements part of the paratextual assemble. In contemporary print media, paratext's importance is even greater than that of the text itself. Consequently, due to such high status, its management is removed from the charge of the author of a text and assigned to a specific team which the author can collaborate with.

Instead, the author is in full command of what we have labelled here auctorial phatic uses of journalistic language. These refer to the strategies an author elaborates himself/ herself in order to connect with the readers of its creation. Although some of the strategies developed here also apply to the co-authored phatic uses of language, in this case, the author acts like absolute discursive authority, with no other exterior

intervention over the message to be constructed and delivered. There are several strategies at the author's disposal: (a) to connect with the audience by generating a sense of proximity with the reader (Ringoot; Rochard, 2005), and thus reviving the "phatic communion" (Malinowski, 1946), and (b) to link the reader with the text not through what is said, but through how is said.

The strategies available in the first scenario (which I will name participative modality of contact) are concerned mostly with the relation between sender and receiver in some discursive hypostasis where contact is suggested by certain closeness to the reader, complicity of the reader, etc., asking for him/her to join into a commonly shared civility. According to Mark Kramer, "civic" emotions "are community-integrative. They include patriotic feelings, love of children and aged parents, respect for education, anger at criminals, praise for the charitable and job-providing, sorrow for the dying and ill, gratitude toward police and fire fighters, rage at corruption, and many other feelings. It is, in fact, a rich set of emotions, and everyone in town can share in them. They draw a town together" (2000: para. 40). Starting from these communitarian principles, a strong bond between journalist and reader can emerge, based on similar or very close life values, ideals or lifestyles. At discourse level, this bond can be created by the journalist through the use of (a) oppositional series in plural (us versus them, ours versus theirs, etc.) that suggest complicity, membership, and solidarity by exclusion, etc; (b) rhetorical interrogations and rhetorical questions; (c) direct speech with the reader (d) instigative formulae; (e) terms and expressions that suggest communion, membership to a specific guild or group; (f) expressions and formulae familiar to the reader; (g) formulae meant to generate, maintain and resolve suspense and curiosity in the reader; (h) formulae meant to re-establish connections (between ideas, recurrent topics, etc.); (i) verbal construction that announce something, with an obvious *captatio* effect; (j) terms that suggest the intimacy of a conversation; (k) paremiology; or, finally, (l) invitations to dialogue. These strategies of inducing phatic communion are more frequent in opinion journalistic discourse, due to the "elasticity" of the language used and the possibility of inserting personal views and statements on the matters discussed. In the participative mode, the journalist exploits the possibilities of developing a relation with the audience, in which the author and the reader emotionally, intellectually and physically co-participate.

As for the strategies available in the second scenario, these refer to ways in which phaticity is generated at the level of the intern structure of a discourse, the author trying to "trap" the reader not by what is said

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(at the verbal level, let's say), but by how this is said. This time, two possibilities of action are available: (i) the logic organization of the discourse structure (which I will call a rational modality) or (ii) the affective organization of the discourse structure (which I will call an emotional modality). Both will be further discussed.

An author can connect with its audience not only through verbal proposals, as we have seen earlier, but also through more “technical” ways, by manipulating the structure of the journalistic discourse. Note that I will refer to these forms of manipulation only from the standpoint of the role they play in generating or facilitating phaticity, even though some of them respond also to other linguistic functions and roles. The first solid attempt in this respect was the development of the inverted pyramid technique. This represented a way of structuring the text depending on the relevance of the information contained and, obviously, it had emerged due to a new type of thinking centred on the consumer of media products. “Journalists have always had to work to catch and hold the attention of their audiences. The inverted pyramid structure evolved as a way to present the main points of a story as quickly as possible, allowing readers to choose whether they stayed with the story or moved onto something more engaging” (Bird, 2000: 30). Since its generalized use, inverted pyramid has been the leading rule for the creation of many new formulae of arranging information in journalistic discourse. Yet in the case of long-form print journalism, structuring the text is a more complex task than in news, where the principles of inverted pyramid are easily and successfully applied. Generally, extensive stories have a visible structure (also graphically emphasized) composed by few essential parts: headlines, several decks, lead, body text (divided by subheads and crossheads), photos and captions. But beyond this visible structure, journalists count on the effectiveness of an internal structure when it comes to keep readers close to their texts: structure based on thematic blocks, dialectical structure (Ulibarri, 1994), thesis – antithesis, “paper doll”, “footed bowl”, round structure, Y structure (Friedlander; Lee, 1996) and others. All these structures suggest a logical arrangement of the discourse parts, so that the reader can easily follow and process the information presented.

But not all internal structure types aim at ensuring this coherency at reception. There are structures that rely partially on this rational modality of organizing a discourse, being more preoccupied with entertaining the audience by offering, through structure manipulation, emotional stimuli. In an experimental study, Knobloch, Patzig, Mende and Hastall (2004) analysed what they labelled “affective news”, in an attempt to investigate the effects on the reader of certain structure

manipulations. They identified in media presentations that the structure was based on five key-elements (initiating event, exposition, complication, climax and outcome, namely the event structure) and that, at the discourse structure level, specific permutations and combinations of these elements resulted in specific affective responses from the reader. The types of discourse structures and the associated affective reactions identified were: a linear type (with suspense as a primary affective response), a reversal type (generating curiosity and surprise) and an inverted time (triggering no reaction).

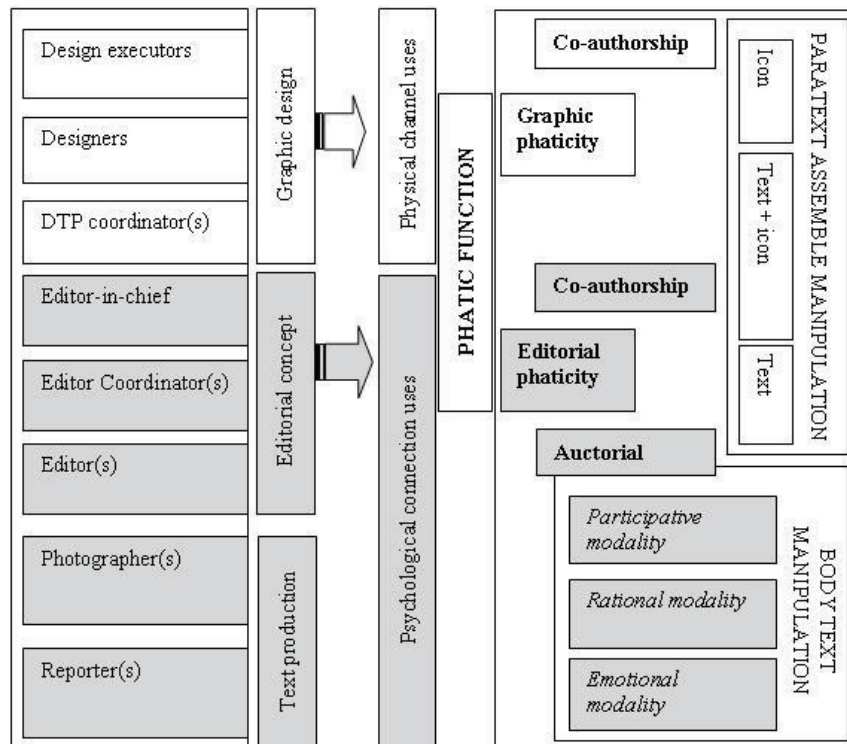
In the case of linear type, according to Barthes, “suspense is evidently but a privileged, or, if one prefers, an exasperating form of distortion: on the one hand, by keeping a sequence open (through emphatic devices such as delays and reactivations), it secures the contact with the reader, thus managing an obviously communicative function; on the other hand, it holds over him the threat of an uncompleted sequence, of an open paradigm (if, as we believe, all sequences have two poles), that is to say, a logical disorder. It is this disorder which is consumed with the particular anguish tinged with delight (the more to be savoured, since it is always straightened out in the end)” (1975: 267). On the second type, the authors commented: “The event structure of a mystery also features an initiating event in its beginning. Yet the discourse structure omits information on the initiating event but insinuates this lack of information. In consequence, this omission causes onlookers’ curiosity that is resolved toward the end of the narrative, when the missing information is provided.” (Knobloch et al., 2004: 262). Therefore, note that deliberately omitting some information implies a phatic intention from the author, in an attempt to make sure that the reader will keep close to the text until the end of the story. In the third type (which actually is the more famous inverted pyramid), since both initiating event and outcome are provided from the beginning, no emotional reaction is triggered. This is why such structure, like relies more on logic than on emotions. However, it is difficult to interpret a news story as narrative (in contrast to a feature story, for instance), because it rarely covers solely one whole newspaper page; and generally, in its case, it is the headline in charge of catching the reader’s eye and attention. As Barthes puts it, the headline is “a metalingual phrasing which plays a role similar to an aperitif, provoking in the addressee the desire to read a text. [...] As a text is ‘merchandise’, its selling should be preceded by a ‘boniment’ or an ‘appetizer’” (Dumistrăcel, 2006: 107). Thus, the inverted pyramid has the advantage of offering the most important information at the beginning, but this could be shadowed by a disadvantage: the readers might give up reading

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the rest of the text. But an explanatory paragraph – saying how the readers are directly impacted by the events reported – could work to save from readers' abandonment of a text structured by the rules of the inverted pyramid (Rich, 2010).

Resuming what has been discussed until now, in the case of the auctorial management of phaticity, three modalities to generate and stay in contact with the reader have been identified: participative modality (based on the revival of the “Phatic Communion”), rational modality (based on strategies of structuring the discourse in such ways that the reader could easily scan and understand a text), and emotional modality (based on strategies of structuring the discourse in such ways that the reader respond with affective answers like suspense, curiosity or surprise to what is read).

This paper suggests an exploratory theoretical approach to the production and interpretation of the components within print media discourse that could be perceived as phatic in the communication of journalistic messages. A discourse component (either verbal, or visual, or mixed) is phatic whether and when is being assigned an engaging mission by the addresser or whether and when interlocutors activate specific reading behaviour, primarily depending on the degree of attractiveness and connivance they detect in a discourse or in different parts of a discourse.



Phatic structures of journalistic communication in production stages. A model for print media discourse

The double-routed process of newspaper production (graphic project and editorial conceptualization) allowed me to investigate the question of phatic uses of language discourse elements following two separate paths. Thus, the possibilities in which the addresser can establish, maintain and discontinue the contact with the addressee are evaluated at both levels of phaticity – graphic and editorial – as shown in the figure above, representing a model designed in order to provide, in a synthetic manner, a general perspective concerning the phatic uses of language in print media discourse. The graphic phaticity is in charge of the layout and design teams, while the editorial phaticity involves both reporters and their coordinators/superiors. That is why the model insists on the idea that there are phatic components that are co-produced, co-authored and others that are the result of the work of a single person, most often the author of a (journalistic) story. In this second case, as described, the phatic proposals have a more subtle nature, as they are “hidden” in the way of structuring a discourse (rationally or emotionally) or in the socio-cultural back-ground that addresser and addressee share.

Conclusions

This paper pay particular attention to the semantic evolution of the notion of “contact” in mass communication, highlighting the central and decisive position it has gained in organizing the journalistic discourse. In relation with the phatic function and with phaticity, newspapers discourse is modulated by the need of establishing and strengthening the relation with the readers. The converged model of phaticity elaborated here suggests that, the modality chosen for transmitting the messages has become a top priority in print media discourse, blurring the boundaries between journalistic and entertainment communication. The difference between the two types has been explained by researchers Görke and Ruhrmann: “entertainment lays more stress on *how* things are expressed, whereas journalism stresses much more on *what* is communicated” (2003: 235).

A discursive turn from *referentiality* to *phaticity* would lead to fundamental changes in journalism, as profession, altering the journalistic routines. Nevertheless, if it occurs, this transition from effective to affective communication in journalism does not necessarily has to be connoted negatively, for it could also suggest a new way for media producers to bond with the public. As Susan Ager, columnist for *Detroit Free Press* puts it, nowadays “readers come to the newspaper the way they come to a party” (cited by Rich, 2009: 50). Her words abstract in the best way possible the fact that the newspaper has turned into a favourite *locus* for people: their behaviour when parting is similar to their behaviour within the pages of a newspaper: they socialize, make connections (thus instituting “Phatic Communion”), exchange information and emotions (thus they communicate) and, finally, they have fun (thus they entertain themselves).

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