

# Afterword to “Together While Apart”

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## Abstract

Rather than communicating content, phatic communication achieves affective focusing. We trace the history and modern resurgence of various conceptions of phatics, investigating their theoretical foundations and practical purposes. As an initial framework we arrange contemporary research in this area on a spectrum characterized by opposing ‘hypophatic’ and ‘hyperphatic’ directions, after Richard Fiordo’s (1989) notions of ‘hyposemiotic’ and ‘hypersemiotic’. We draw on media philosophy, especially from the writings of Peter Sloterdijk and Gilbert Simondon, to undo any sense that this is a true dichotomy, and to locate the common ground between these concepts. We give this core notion the name ‘mesophatics’, and conclude that its key feature is that of self-reference. We then turn to the other articles in ‘Together While Apart: Mediating Relationships’, and use the concept of (meso-)phatics to mutually illuminate themes from the articles in this special issue of *Networking Knowledge*, drawing on contributed discussions around mobile phones, gift exchange, participatory research designs, shared space, body modification, and networks of affective relations.

**Keywords:** phatic communion, phatic function, phatic communication, media philosophy, affective networks

## 1 Introduction

**Phatic echoes.** The beginning of this century has seen a resurgence for an anthropological neologism coined in the beginning of the previous one. Bronisław Malinowski’s (1923) curious *phatic communion* has seemingly outgrown linguistics and its comfort zone of small talk, gossip, and casual greetings.<sup>1</sup> The semiotic reinvention of the *phatic function* by Roman Jakobson (1960) on the other hand, which promised to breach the linguistic metacommunicative operations and open up the communicative substratum of various other signways, has effectively stagnated.<sup>2</sup>

Instead of systems of signs, the ‘phatic’ has become exceedingly popular in the study of new systems of communication. Indeed, phaticity has been cited as ‘the constitutive occasion for all communication’,<sup>3</sup> which in our era is increasingly digital, virtual, online, web-based, mobile, and otherwise technologically mediated. In consideration of these developments, a host of phatic terminology has sprung up, including – but not limited to – *phatic technologies* (Vetere et al., 2005; Wang, Tucker, & Rihll, 2011; Wang, Tucker, & Haines, 2012; Wang & Tucker, 2016), *phatic media culture* (Miller, 2008, 2015) and *phatic infrastructure* (Elyachar, 2010, 2012).<sup>4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11</sup>

**Hypophatic and hyperphatic.** In our meta-phatic survey of the lay of the land occupied by phatic discourse, there appears a visible chiasm between two distinct understandings of phaticity. The first of these may be called *hypophatic*: it focuses on the communicative function of social speech, its ability to form transient bonds between speakers (Malinowski, 1923) or

its effect on keeping the communication channel operative (Jakobson, 1960). The hypophatic interpretation is, to use a homonymous theological concept, apophatic: it is defined by what it is not. Thus, according to Malinowski it is not cognitive, emotive, or conative. According to Jakobson it is not any of the other five functions of language.

By contrast, La Barre's (1954) lengthy and thorough treatment of phatic communication emphasizes the affective dimension of communication in human relationships.<sup>12</sup> It can be viewed as a *hyperphatic* formulation of phaticity, with its collateral qualities of *hypersemanticty* (in that phatic communication often spawns private signs that have signification for only two people or a small group) and *hypersemioticity* (in that it signifies across several channels simultaneously, frequently, and intensely).<sup>13</sup>

It could even be said that hypophatic communication is self-corrective and hyperphatic communication is self-reflexive; meaning that when you're exchanging pleasantries with a stranger over the phone you're trying to get through it by attempting to match your responses to the superficial utterances hurdled your way, but when you're having a heart-to-heart with a close one you're deepening an already well-established relationship with more affection and appreciation. There is ample support in current (2016) literature for both orientations.

The importance of affect had already been theorized by the sociologist Herbert Blumer (1936) who emphasized that 'Feeling is intrinsic to every social attitude – it is not to be treated as an additional element fused into some symbolic structure which is to be regarded as central to, or as the corpus of, the attitude'.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless the role of phatics in contemporary theoretical approaches to social life is often confused between the hypophatic and hyperphatic dimensions, and the affective dimension is often obscured.

**This paper.** We draw on a range of literature from anthropology, linguistics, semiotics, and philosophy to contextualize and develop our theoretical apparatus. We then expand and illuminate the theory using textual data from scholarly papers. The primary contributions of the current paper are:

- In Section 2, **Cultural shifts in phatic contexts**, we briefly review the historic uses of the concept of 'phatics' in the linguistics, anthropology, and semiotics literature. Given the recent rise of phatic concepts we do well to recall that 'Real understanding of any scientific subject must include some knowledge of its historical growth; we cannot comprehend and accept modern concepts and theories without knowing something of their origins – of how we have got where we are'.<sup>15</sup>
- In Section 3, **For mesophatics**, we reconsider these notions drawing on concepts from contemporary media philosophy. Echoing the comment above: 'philosophical interpretation cannot afford to overlook ... genetical analysis.'<sup>16</sup> One of our aims in this section is, therefore, to trace some of the lines of connection between the foregoing foundational literature and contemporary theory.
- In Section 4, **Mediating relationships**, we apply these concepts to review the papers in this special issue of *Networking Knowledge*, 'Together While Apart: Mediating Relationships'. In this section we take a particular interest in the way affect is mediated. Drawing on the diverse contributed papers, we demonstrate through-lines that can lend structure to the current proliferation of phatic theorization.
- In Section 5, **Affective focusing in phatic contexts**, we offer some closing words and tools for others who may be interested to take up 'phatic studies'. We highlight the role of affective communication in semiosis (i.e., meaning making), following Blumer (1936) in thinking of sentiment as integral to the formation and communication of social attitudes.

## 2 Cultural shifts in phatic contexts

**Phatic foundations.** When Edward Tylor (1881) published the following words, he could not know that his own text was to be the impetus for a new word whose meaning would shift again and again over the course of a century, reaching us in the 21st Century as something more-or-less solid but endlessly varied:

As in the course of ages man's knowledge became wider and his civilization more complex, his language had to keep up with them. Comparatively few and plain expressions had sufficed for his early rude conditions, but now more and more terms had to be added for the new notions, implements, arts, offices, and relations of more highly organized society. Etymology shows how such new words are made by altering and combining old ones, carrying on old words from the old state of things to do duty in the new, shifting their meanings, and finding in any new thought some resemblance to an old one that would serve to give it a name. English is full of traces of these ways of word-making and word-shifting.<sup>17</sup>

*Phatic*, a quasi-neologism coined by Bronislaw Malinowski (1923) – ‘actuated by the demon of terminological invention’ (p. 315) – is understood to stem from the Greek *φασός* (‘to speak’). It is known to every undergraduate in anthropology and linguistics as a technical term for *small talk*. At first sight there is nothing complicated about it. When we’re hanging around with friends and talking about nothing in particular, we’re engaging in *phatic communion* in Malinowski’s sense, and when we say ‘Hi’ to a passing acquaintance and don’t necessarily care to begin a full conversation, we’re using language for its *phatic function* (Jakobson, 1960). But then we come to a third version, best known via John Austin’s ([1955] 1962) *phatic act*, which is popular in pragmatics but more often than not simply reiterated without elaboration.

It is this lesser known and understood interpretation that takes us to the heart of the shifting meaning of ‘phatic’. According to Austin, when we utter certain noises, we’re performing a *phonetic act*; when these noises become recognizable words belonging to a certain vocabulary uttered with a certain intonation, we’re performing a *phatic act*; and when these words become meaningful, we’re performing a *rhetic act*.<sup>18</sup> This is logical enough, as it implicitly follows the semiotics of Charles Peirce, detectable in Austin’s borrowing of his concept of *Rheme*, a propositional sign with full meaning which affords some information.<sup>19</sup>

But why on Earth would Austin use ‘phatic’ to describe the zone between meaningless sounds and meaningful statements? Surely this is not the sense in which Malinowski meant it! It is a question only a thorough reading of anthropological literature can provide an answer for. Had every author who touched this subject matter cited their sources rigorously then there would be no confusion to begin with. But things being what they are, one can only abduce that Austin must have read a then-recent book by Weston La Barre (1954), in which the concept of *phatic communication* is defined as the nonverbal communication of emotions, especially through vocal intonation.

**Phatic excavations.** Although Malinowski’s treatment of Tylor’s work has been reviewed competently with regard to broader implications,<sup>20,21</sup> it apparently hasn’t struck anyone to turn to the compendious *Anthropology* (1881) with the ‘phatic’ in mind. When doing so, a reader familiar with both phatic communication *sensu* Malinowski and phatic communication *sensu* La Barre will find an equal amount of congenial passages for both. For example, it can be hypothesized that contrary to the straightforward etymological interpretation given above,

'phatic', in La Barre's sense, may instead stem from a similar-sounding word with a different etymology: 'emphatic' (from ἐμφάτινω, I show). Tylor (1881, p. 291) had written:

On listening carefully to the talk going on around us, we may observe that it does not run in an unchanged monotone, but that all sentences are intoned to an imperfect tune, a rise and fall of pitch marking the phrases, distinguishing question and answer, and touching emphatic words with a musical accent.

Tylor goes on to discuss how the 'half-melody of common speech' distinguishes English dialects and how 'intoning in church arose from the same natural utterance of religious feeling' (*ibid*, 291). The relevant keywords here are 'natural' and 'common', terms which Tylor had used earlier in the book to describe communication through gestures and exclamations as 'a natural language common to mankind' (*ibid*, 132), i.e., what today would be called nonverbal communication.<sup>21</sup>

In current usage 'natural language' has taken on a meaning close to de Saussure's notion 'langue', meaning an evolved collection of rules shared by a linguistic community.<sup>22</sup> Malinowski, for his part, was fervently opposed the distinction between language and speech introduced by de Saussure and his followers, and chose to conflate speech and language in terms of their 'pragmatic character'.<sup>23,24</sup> The case of speech used 'to regulate . . . concerted work' (Malinowski, [1935] 1978, vol. 2, p. 8) stands for the broader scenario (pp. 8–9):

Speech is here equivalent to gesture and to motion. It does not function as an expression of thought or communication of ideas but as part of concerted activity. If we jotted down the words spoken . . . and treated them as a *text* divorced from its context of action and situation, the words would obviously remain meaningless and futile. . . . Words are part of action and they are equivalent to actions.

Broadly speaking, phatic communion is a special case: 'achievement of "rapport" through the use of speech' (Senft, 2009, p. 227) – even if its overt meanings 'cannot be connected with the speaker's or hearer's behaviour' (Malinowski, 1923, p. 315).

The 'emphatic hypothesis' presents us with no means of verification but would go a long way to explain the difference between phatic communion and phatic communication. Although there is some common ground between gesture and tone, Malinowski takes more closely to the movement-based idioms, whereas La Barre seized upon the tonal, emphatic aspects of Tylor's 'natural language' when he defined *phatic communication* as inter-communication through vocalizations and other emotive signs. When Tylor (1881, p. 132) described conversation by gestures and exclamations as a natural language common to mankind he finished the sentence by adding that it is 'half-way between the communications of animals and full human speech'. In this sense phatic communication is indeed a step above producing mere vocal sounds (the phonetic act) and a step below what we would consider speech full of meaning (a rhetic act).

Thus, while Malinowski *may* have thought of 'natural language' as denoting common speech in everyday action situations, La Barre appears to have taken much more closely to Tylor's meaning and elaborated his hints greatly by turning to the biological work of Louis Boutan. In particular, he found that primate vocalizations, especially those of gibbons, do not have the value of words but can be considered as a sort of pseudo-language that expresses vague notions of agreeable, disagreeable or dangerous situations or events, a sort of phatic communication about an individual animal's state of mind that succeeds in spreading a generalized emotional tone throughout the group (La Barre, 1954, p. 57).

**Phatic functions.** For an illustration of this type of phatic communication, Tylor (1881, p. 122) puts forward what in hindsight is a representative anecdote of phatic communion.

This natural language really exists, and in wild regions even has some practical value, as when a European traveller makes shift to converse in it with a party of Australians round their camp-fire, or with a Mongol family in their felt tent. What he has to do is to act his most expressive mimic gestures, with a running accompaniment of exclamations and imitative noise.

In this situation there is a language barrier that calls for nonverbal communication, but in treating the function of 'primitive speech' in and of itself, Malinowski removed that aspect, yielding an illustration of phatic communion as that which takes place 'When a number of people sit together at a village fire, after all the daily tasks are over' (1923, p. 313). From La Barre's perspective, when people sit around a fire and talk about nothing in particular they're actually engaging in a form of communication in which all that is really conveyed is a tone of voice, one which sets and maintains a relaxed atmosphere.

For Malinowski the theme of interest was the personal communion of people aimlessly gossiping together. He proposed that the 'atmosphere of sociability' created by this 'convivial gregariousness' binds people 'by a tie of some social sentiment or other' (1923, p. 315), leaving readers in the dark as to the exact nature of these sentiments and ties. In his view, speech is necessary in such situations because the silent stranger is viewed as dangerous. A later author, John Laver specified this as the *propitiatory* function of phatic communion, serving to defuse potential hostility.<sup>25</sup> That is, speech appeases or pacifies suspicion towards strangers – although one may wonder if lively gesticulation and vocalization, as in Tylor's illustration, might not achieve much the same.

A similar transformation of emphasis is evident in another representative anecdote. Namely, Malinowski includes 'comments on weather' among common examples of language use wherein the meaning of words is almost completely irrelevant, serving rather as a 'binding tissue ... which unites the crew of a ship in bad weather' (1923, p. 315). Tylor, on the other hand, had more linguistic intentions in mind when he wrote (p. 9):

Let us suppose ourselves listening to a group of Dutch sailors; at first their talk may seem unintelligible, but after a while a sharp ear will catch the sound of well known words, and perhaps at last whole sentences like these: *Kom hier! Wat zegt gij? Hoe is het weder? Het is een hevige storm, ik ben zeer koud. Is de maan op? Ik weet niet.* The spelling of these words, different from our mode, disguises their resemblance, but as spoken they come very near corresponding sentences in English, somewhat old-fashioned or provincial, thus: *Come here! What say ye? How is the weather? It is a heavy storm, I be sore cold. Is the moon up? I wit not.*

Malinowski, himself a well-traveled man, managed to point out the social function of such talk: whether on a ship in storm or at a sunny beach, the weather is always present as a topic of discussion, and can be used to make acquaintances. Yet, we don't talk about weather with strangers and traveling companions only but with most anyone, and La Barre (1954, p. 168) makes the function of weather-talk forcefully clear by stating that it has no 'real concern with or bearing upon current or proximate meteorological events: in this, people are taking the temperature and assessing the humidity of the inter-individual weather, not the earthly'.

Having surveyed the primary historical varieties of 'phatic' experience – phatic communion, phatic function, and phatic communication – we are now prepared to examine the contemporary uptake of these notions. We develop these ideas in the following section, beginning with the notions of hypophatic and hyperphatic introduced earlier, and then further elaborating the common themes using ideas from Peter Sloterdijk, Gilbert Simondon, Gilles Deleuze, and other contemporary authors.

### 3 For mesophatics

#### 3.1 Two representative contemporary views on phaticity

**A pharmacological phatics.** Our first representative quote is from Holba (2008), who offers a broadly hypophatic view, positioned within a relationship-centred framework:

It is in I-Thou moments that we find deeply connective communicative engagement and often authentic, genuine, and enriching communication. I-It moments can be more often connected to a technical/functional mode of communication that appears to fail to meet the other in a dialogic space because the communication content is not driven by an emerging idea that can bring people together. Examples of this technical/functional communication include people asking a stranger for directions and asking 'hello, how are you?' to an acquaintance as you pass by and continue to walk without waiting for a response. In these cases, people are not coming together under an idea or an interest. This failure to meet in a dialogic space is often typified as phatic communication.<sup>26</sup>

Despite these critical remarks, it shortly becomes clear that Holba's stance toward phatics is pharmacological rather than strictly negative. Phatics are functional, up to the point of being 'a biological necessity'. Indeed, Holba's phatics are specifically 'functional in small doses', even though they 'cannot contribute substantively to conversation'. Ultimately, even superficially giving attention to others can help to develop a responsive, derivative, dialogical 'I'.

**A pre-functional phatics.** From Clarke (1999), a broadly hyperphatic view, within a communication-theoretic framework:

From the engineering perspective, noise is built into the grid. All signals received are to some degree different from those sent as a matter of molecular course: there is a stochastic waver in any channel whatsoever. In his *Grammatology*, Derrida reminded us that writing itself, inscription in general, is both a structural precondition of speech and a material technology of communication. With this recognition the phatic function becomes the constitutive occasion for all communication, which can thus no longer be conceptualized in the absence of difference and delay, resistance, static, and noise.<sup>27</sup>

In contrast with Holba, Clarke's phatics are explicitly positioned as foundational and pre-functional: 'the constitutive occasion for all communication'. Notice, though, that Clarke's generally positive phatics are described with the negative terms 'noise' and 'stochastic'. In fact, he seems to be describing an attempt at a kind of Copernican revolution, in almost exactly the sense proposed by Kant—'that it should be possible to have knowledge of objects *a priori*, determining something in regard to them prior to their being given.'<sup>27</sup> In the Serrean formulation followed by Clarke, both subject and object are divided *a priori* into 'noise, disorder, and chaos on one side; complexity arrangement and distribution on the other'.<sup>28</sup> This idea is similar to Whitehead's notion of 'prehensions', according to which

Every actual occasion has an internal dimension; it contains both a subjective aspect and an objective one. From the external world towards our brain there is a progressive increase in the subjective content of every actual occasion up to what we call consciousness.<sup>29</sup>

What 'mesophatics' might be found in between the functional-hypophatic and foundational-hyperphatic formulations?

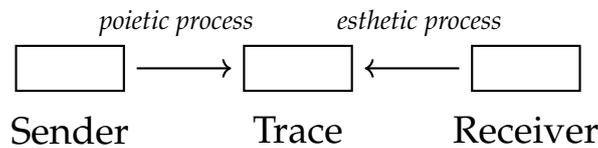


Figure 1: Nattiez's diagram: the Molino triple

### 3.2 Phatic architecture

**Gathered for the first time around the communal fire.** Peter Sloterdijk quotes at length from Vitruvius Pollio's *Ten Books on Architecture* (c. 15 BCE) in *Globes* (2014). To introduce the key themes, the following short quote suffices:

[I]t was the discovery of fire that originally gave rise to the coming together of men, to the deliberative assembly, and to social intercourse.<sup>30</sup>

Sloterdijk makes the following case:

Fire pampers humans and makes them dependent on forms of relief; thus civilization could begin as a history of pampering—and a battle for access to the scarce means of pampering. All other pampering and relieving measures, both domestic and urban, followed the first great convenience of the open fire. It is the warmth of the tamed fire that draws people together in a gathering place, as if around a focal point.

(Before continuing it is useful to interject that *focus* means 'hearth' in Latin, so that this 'focal point' serves as an effective metonym for any focusing of attention.)

Vitruvius highlights the decisive point very clearly: the first humans to enjoy that warmth called the next over, then communicated with them in gestures and primitive words about the benefits of the new-found, wondrous central force.<sup>31</sup>

At the center of the first human community, the hearth; and in the hearth, the fire. This is phatic architecture at a primordial level: first to shine ( $\varphi\acute{\alpha}\omega$ ) and show ( $\varphi\acute{\alpha}\iota\nu\omega$ ) and then to speak ( $\varphi\acute{\alpha}\mu\acute{\iota}$ ,  $\varphi\alpha\tau\acute{o}\varsigma$ ).<sup>32</sup>

**The semiology of contact.** According to Bernard Stiegler, fire is what first allowed humans to be 'outside themselves'.<sup>33</sup> An alternative account of human prehistory invokes the so-called 'mimetic mind' as a basis for pre-linguistic gesture-based communication before the use of fire.<sup>34</sup> In either case, the situation calls to mind the diagram above (Figure 1), which relabels and more importantly reverses an arrow in the standard Shannon/Jakobson model. The diagram is due to Nattiez (1990), however, Nattiez ascribes the associated 'semiological theory' to Molino (e.g., 1978). In brief:

- (a) a symbolic form (a poem, a film, a symphony) is not some "intermediary" in the process of "communication" that transmits the meaning intended by the author to an audience;
- (b) it is instead the result of a complex *process* of creation (the poietic process) that has to do with the form as well as the content of the work;
- (c) it is also the point of departure for a complex process of reception (the esthetic process) that *reconstructs* a "message."<sup>35</sup>

The trace – which need not be an ‘inscription’ – is nevertheless tangible. There is a further remark quoted from Molino that clarifies the situation (Nattiez, 1990, p. 8):

the sign is a fragment of actual experience, which refers to another fragment of actual experience that remains in general *virtual*, the one being the sign or symbol of the other.<sup>36</sup>

Beyond the straightforward fact that ‘The esthetic process and the poietic process do not necessarily correspond’ (Nattiez, 1990, p. 17), this hints that by a sort of regress there is always a further link in the chain that remains entirely virtual and prior to experience *per se*.

### 3.3 Simondonian relations

**Individuation: psychic and collective.** Simondon<sup>®</sup> advances an idea of ‘being as phase, in the relation of one phase of being to another phase of being’.<sup>37</sup> Elsewhere in the same work he writes: ‘we believe any thought, precisely as far as it is real, is a relation, i.e., it entails an historical aspect in its genesis’.<sup>38</sup> Thus, both things and thoughts exist in relation, and in a state of intermediate ‘evolution’, ‘becoming’, or (most typically) ‘individuation’. This phasic conception of being recalls Nietzsche’s image of man as a ‘rope stretched between the animal and the Superman’<sup>39</sup> – and Nietzsche was a key source of inspiration for Simondon.

With these ideas in mind, let us revisit Holba’s stance on phatics, described earlier. First, we noted that for her, phaticisms are functional. Second, we noted that the function they can potentially serve is to reorient wayward humans towards Buberian I-Thou moments. Even so, Holba asserts that in contemporary cultures phatics play a largely mechanical role. But are we really stuck with a functional, potentially alienating, and not-that-meaningful phatics?

Simondon offers us a new methodology from which to conduct inquiries related to communication as an empirical endeavor. An individuating methodology would seek to proceed by articulating instances of the modulation of communicative processes themselves, rather than in the simple “transmission” of meaning or data between pre-given, already individuated entities.<sup>40</sup>

For Simondon everything is coming into being in and through its relations with other things: what Holba calls an ‘emerging idea’ (Holba, 2008, p. 35) is just one sub-type. To be clear, Simondonian relations do not obtain between terms, as in logic, but between evolving entities that exist in tension with one another. In Simondon’s lexicon ‘information’ isn’t something that is sent in a message, but is the process whereby individuals (including beings and theories) take form. One can compare this with Blumer’s (1936, p. 517–518) perspective:

the treatment [of the social construction of attitudes] has been weighted heavily on the side of the symbolic content, stressing the formation of the attitude on the level of communication; i.e., in terms of definition or of the conveying of a meaning. Such treatment has not given proper recognition to the fullness and diversity of what takes place in interaction, and so has yielded, in my judgment, only a partial statement of what is involved in the formation of attitudes.

By placing the focus on ‘nonsymbolic interaction’ in his paper, Blumer recalls the ‘insignificant’ communication gestures that constitute the ‘Conversation of Attitudes’ in Mead’s parlance,<sup>41</sup> and ‘communization’ in Morris’s.<sup>42</sup> In effect, the argument is one familiar from later contributions of the Chicago school in sociology, which culminated in the study of nonverbal communication.

A Simondonian view can help us re-adjust our approach towards hypophatics. With regard to an alienated relationship with technology, Muriel Combes writes ‘it was not as a man that the worker entered the factory but as part of a mutilated humanity’.<sup>43</sup> Although at this point in her text, Combes is taking issue with Simondon, her observation here is thoroughly Simondonian. A mutilated humanity is one that cannot collectively individuate, nor, therefore, can its members psychically individuate, since these processes are always linked. Thinking in this way, we notice that Holba’s phatics only tentatively approach what we know of wolves, whose howling is a phatic semiosis that holds the pack together.<sup>44</sup> However, Holba’s perspective remains quite remote from the hyperphatic generalisation found in Deleuze and Guattari’s interpretation of Artaud’s ([1947] 1974) ‘body without organs’<sup>45</sup> – viz.: ‘not an empty body stripped of organs, but a body in which that which serves as organs (wolves, wolf eyes, wolf jaws?) is distributed according to crowd phenomena’.<sup>46</sup>

However, the mutilated humanity described by Combes is reminiscent indeed of the villagers who left their round villages and found themselves in a cultural wasteland.<sup>47</sup> The view that ‘Logos is always a *dia-logos* within which those who enter the dialogue co-individuate themselves – trans-form themselves, *learn* something’<sup>48</sup> suggests that the existence of a channel or container of some sort is theoretically fundamental, as much for Holba as for the Kant/Whitehead/Serre ‘*a priori*’ programme. Moreover, per Nozawa (2015), in practice humans tend to ‘desire the felt reality of a semiotic channel, even a hacked one and even only momentarily, whatever gets produced or moved through it’.<sup>49</sup> ‘Contact’ is not so much through the channel as it is with the channel (as we see in Figure 1).

**Mesophatics and technical mentality.** Simondon advances two postulates of the ‘technical mentality’ which are to be applied to study contemporary systems:

- (P1) The subsets are relatively detachable from the whole of which they are a part.
- (P2) If one wants to understand a being completely, one must study it by considering it in its entelechy, and not in its inactivity or its static state.<sup>50</sup>

Here, (P1) is as opposed to holism, and it is counterbalanced to some extent by (P2), which says that we should understand beings in the world.

Much in the style of the commonplace that has phatics beginning rather than ending conversations, Simondon writes:

If one seeks the sign of the perfection of the technical mentality, one can unite in a single criterion the manifestation of cognitive schemas, affective modalities, and norms of action: that of the opening; technical reality lends itself remarkably well to being continued, completed, perfected, extended.

Somewhat along these lines, Tucker and Goodings (2014) apply both Simondon and Serre to ‘draw attention to the use of social media in ways that are not “virtual”, but attempts to develop connections with others’.<sup>51</sup> These authors position social networks as also being sensory and anticipatory networks. They draw on Erin Manning, who writes:

Moving relationally we sense not the step per se (though we do step it, otherwise we would not walk) – we sense the intensity of an opening, the gathering up of forces toward the creation of space-times of experience into which we move.<sup>52</sup>

One must keep in mind that this sort of movement is not new. Figure 2 is a schematic from Carley (2015, p. 83) that describes the classical Japanese collaborative poetic form, *renku*, in which each verse links to the previous, but shifts decisively away from the previous-to-previous verse. This diagram reaches a quite extreme formulation of the communicative relationship:

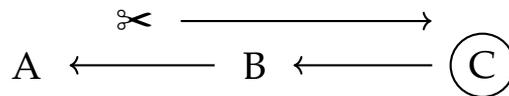


Figure 2: Carley's diagram: Link & Shift

at point C, it is as if contact was only with the channel, B and not the sender at A. However, *renku* is not simply a matter of 'AND, AND, AND – stammering'.<sup>53</sup> As far as Deleuzian idioms go, it is much closer to the 'organism without parts which operates entirely by insufflation, respiration, evaporation, and fluid transmission'.<sup>54</sup> In the height of *renku*'s refinement, even the link becomes a matter of a 'scent' rather than a specific content. In terms of their global structure, the poems are not amorphous: they have traditional stylistic requirements regarding the pacing and content of their distinct beginning, middle, and end (Carley, 2015).

Future social network systems will increasingly involve and combine automation and human experience: towards this end both humans and machines will need to learn new aesthetic and poietic processes. After tracing the outlines of hypophatics and hyperphatics, we have surfaced a mesophatic orientation in Simondon's work, where we find an emphasis on opening, replaceability, and detachability in line with (P1), together with a non-contradictory emphasis on relatively stable behavior under real world conditions, in line with (P2). These ideas give us the rudiments of a technical language that is capable of dealing with 'affective modalities' in networked contexts, while it at the same time 'allows one to get rid of the artificial and unhealthy character of social burden'.

**The self-referential nature of mesophatic media theories.** One thing that strikes the reader of philosophy in the Sloterdijkian mediatic style is the commonality between 'yoga', 'religion', and 'addiction'. All of these words are somehow synonyms for 'binding' in one way or another (*yoga* = yoking, *religō* = mooring, *addicō* = awarding as property). The fundamental aspects of connection and contact are baked into culture and language as much as into our neurology. A quote from the classic psychology literature can illustrate:

[T]he human mind is dependent for its objects to a great degree upon channels or means that are not under its own control. It is thus dependent on the thousand channels and means by which objects are introduced to it. But we need here only instance that wonderful assemblage in the human body. These organs which we term the senses, one or the other of them, convey to the mind its first object and afterwards all the new objects about which it acts.<sup>55</sup>

The same notion is echoed in a more media-centric way by Geertz: 'Man depends upon symbols and symbol systems with a dependence so great as to be decisive for his creatural viability'.<sup>56,57</sup> And yet there is an apparent gulf between contact in the sense of face-to-face or skin-to-skin interaction and the often faceless sociocultural entanglements that comprise Geertzian/Parsonian 'control mechanisms'.

It is useful to recall that early communication theory put less emphasis on control in the cybernetic sense. For example, in the following quote, Blumer (1936, p. 518) attempts to slip 'interpretation' into the stimulus-response sequence—in the special case of symbolic communication.

Suffice it to say that on this level individuals respond to the meaning or significance of one another's actions. The gesture of the other is subject to interpretation which

provides the basis for one's own response. We may say, roughly, that at this level of interaction the stimulus-response couplet has inserted a middle term in the form of interpretation which implies some checking of immediate reaction, and leads, as suggested, to directed response upon the basis of the meaning assigned to the gesture.

The essential feature of this kind of interjected interpretation is that it disrupts any overly simplistic causality, since agents are capable of thinking about their actions. The move is broadly Peircean, as the interpretant, interpreter, or interpretation is placed between the subject and object. Similar ideas have been expanded greatly by Paul Kockelman (2011; 2012), but the foundational notions were also explored by Jakob von Uexküll ([1940] 1982) and Jurgen Ruesch (1953).<sup>58,59,60,61</sup> Von Uexküll's thinking in particular had a documented impact on Simondon:

even at the level of affect Simondon is proposing that the relation between the resonance of the organism and its milieu is described in terms similar to von Uexküll's and Merleau-Ponty's notion of the *Umwelt*.<sup>62</sup>

The lines of influence are surveyed in detail by Elizabeth Grosz (2012) and Andrea Bardin (2015). The key point is that the subjective world of the *Umwelt* is organized by meanings. More exactly, objects stand for 'perceptual' and 'operational' meanings, with the general constraint that 'the operational cue extinguishes the perceptual cue'<sup>63</sup> (here, one can usefully compare Figure 2).

So, although there is room for subjectivity in Uexküll's thinking, there is also room for programming. For symbol-wielding species, the *Umwelt* and the *Umgebung* impinge upon one another. Thus the subjective world of the *Umwelt* is, so to speak, not entirely subjective. 'Semio-genesis redefines the relevant environment, changes the selective forces and thus indirectly influences the genetic outfit and its epigenetic expression.'<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, the very features that grant the individual a limited range of interpretive freedom also open the door to 'societies of control'.<sup>65</sup> For readers of Geertz and Parsons it is not a shock that we find these, or at any rate, reasonably convincing precursors, in language as well as in religion. Language 'binds' meanings into the *Umwelt*—

we believe that we know something about the things themselves when we speak of trees, colors, snow, and flowers; and yet we possess nothing but metaphors for things—metaphors which correspond in no way to the original entities.<sup>66</sup>

But here we can follow Blumer and assert that phaticisms work 'in an intrinsically different way' – one that 'is marked by spontaneous and direct response to the gestures and actions of the other individual, without the intermediation of any interpretation' (Blumer, 1936, p. 518).

Rather than being signs or metaphors, such usages stand for themselves in a given context – insofar as they 'stand for' anything. They avail themselves of what Clay (1882) had described as 'unconscious equivalents of interpretations' or 'vice-judgments'.<sup>67</sup> The similarity of the latter term to Deleuze's ([1968] 2004) 'vice-diction' is a curious coincidence to say the least. For Clay (1882, pp. 47–48), the defining features of vice-judgment are that 'The ideas [concerned] are objects of apprehension, not of judgment' and that 'Vice-judgment is conversant only about agenda'; for Deleuze, vice-diction is 'the procedure of the infinitely small, which maintains the distinction between essences', i.e., it is 'the procedure capable of following and describing multiplicities and themes'—as distinct from 'contradiction, which purports to determine essences and preserve their simplicity'.<sup>68</sup> The themes of tracing multiplicities with a mind to eventual action are united – for example – in the classical notion of gesture.<sup>69</sup> For our present considerations, the key point is that from the 'nonsymbolic phase of interaction – and here we may read the word 'phase' in Simondon's sense of 'being as phase' – 'come the feelings that enter into social and collective attitudes' (Blumer, 1936, p. 518-519).

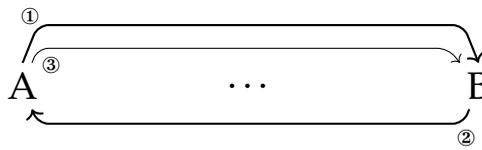


Figure 3: Contribution model diagram

Jakobson (1956) wrote that ‘the realistic author metonymically digresses from the plot to the atmosphere and from the characters to the setting in space and time<sup>70</sup> – and so it is with (meso-)phatics more generally. In a word, mesophaticisms are self-referential.

Notice that this not the same as the self-corrective communication in the *contribution model* (Clark & Schaefer, 1987), which nevertheless contains the idea of a recursive loop. Communication in the contribution model revolves around building a common understanding through iterated phases of ‘presentation’ and ‘acceptance’, which may be broken down into sub-steps as needed (Figure 3). In this setting, two voices speak almost as one. While this could potentially facilitate Holba’s ‘emerging idea’ that resolves itself in ‘dialogic space’, rather more obviously this style of recursion is perfect for facilitating ‘monological’ cybernetic control – e.g., A might be a rheostat and B some device like a heater. Multiplication of terminals in a network architecture would not significantly change the basic control-oriented logic.

By contrast, in mesophatics, after Wesling and Slawek (1997), there is not necessarily a shared understanding or even a shared feeling or ‘tone’. Wesling and Slawek refer instead to a process of ‘de-toning’.

Instead of a one-voiced subject, we have a polyphonic, even cacophonous subject. This subject describes itself in varied ideological discourses; it does not cease to exist, but rather disseminates on the level of intonation and rhythm where it normally was never placed or imagined.<sup>71</sup>

Thus, in contrast to a simple interpretation of La Barre (Section 2, above) that would only emphasize ‘social harmony’ (Miller, 2015), in mesophatic communication we may find, e.g., ‘sights that undercut what’s said’.<sup>72</sup> However, these undercuttings are not contradictions but the proliferation of tonic values (i.e., values pertaining to tension). Hijacking Sloterdijk’s comments on ‘Individualism’, we may remark that mesophatics ‘is capable of alliances with all sides’.<sup>73</sup>

As Malinowski ([1935] 1978, vol. 2, p. 9) described in the outlines of his linguistic theory:

The false conception of language as a means of transfusing ideas from the head of the speaker to that of the listener has ... largely vitiated the philological approach to language. The view here set forth is not merely academic: it compels us ... to correlate the study of language with that of other activities, to interpret the meaning of each utterance within its actual context; and this means a new departure in the handling of linguistic evidence.

Rather than serving to co-identify – or to control – an object within the milieu, as in the contribution model, mesophatic communication serves primarily to individuate and network itself. Sloterdijk (2013b, p. 68) reminds us that ‘self-referential systems are autological and self-eulogistic systems’. This was already hinted at in Section 3.2 with the illustration of the primordial fire. However it should be pointed out that such systems can just as well be self-defeating and/or self-destructive (as they say, fire is a good servant and a poor master). And yet, mesophatics do not in general occupy the extreme position in which ‘all literal, syllabic, and

phonetic values have been replaced by values which are exclusively tonic' (Deleuze, [1969] 1990, p. 101). Nor would it be accurate to elevate mesophatics to Clarke's hyperphatic 'constitutive occasion for all communication'.

Mesophatics provide a 'way in' to self-reference, opening the door to the 'us' beyond 'I' and 'Thou', and to affective communication as distinct from control. Their role is neither foundational nor functional, but intermediate: recall that the very concept of cultural control systems 'presupposes that control is partial and not complete'.<sup>74</sup>

## 4 Mediating relationships

*This academic Founder, M. Schtitt tells that this Founder was a student of types of sight. . . . The studying was not so much how one sees a thing, but this relation between oneself and what one sees. He translated this numerously across different fields, M. Schtitt tells.*

David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (1996)

**Reading 'Together While Apart'.** This special issue of *Networking Knowledge* is designed to explore 'how interpersonal relationships and affect are mediated in contemporary contexts'.<sup>75</sup> To use a somewhat overworn term, as this project traverses topics and approaches, it takes on a somewhat nomadic flavor – both in the philosophical sense after Deleuze and Guattari (an assemblage of intermezzos) but also, read in aggregate, in the sense of another more applied sort of nomadism, after G. E. Marcus and others who have written about the challenges and opportunities associated with multi-site ethnography.<sup>76,77</sup> In short, here we ask the mesophatic question: how can we read the articles contributed to this special issue 'together while apart'?

**Why can't you exit the Matrix on a mobile phone?** The several papers in this special issue illustrate different paths towards and through networked knowledge. Themes from Silas, Løvlie, and Ling suggest a particularly intuitive way in. These authors describe the ambiguous role that the mobile phone plays as a continuity element that accompanies the modern-day traveler, nomad, or 'pilgrim' from place to place. The phone in this regard is clearly part of a functional sense network *à la* Tucker and Goodings (2014): it is as useful for the temporarily-nomadic individual looking for a place to stay for the night as it is for staying in touch with folks back home.

Considered as an iconic image ('☑') the mobile phone invites a comparison with the Žižek/Lacan/Saussure notion of a 'master-signifier.' As a symbol of the phatic, the phone is not merely polysemous ('There's an app for that'<sup>TM</sup>). On its own terms, insofar as it is conduit and not content, the mobile phone signifies nothing. As an alleged omnipresent 'barrier to copresent interaction' the mobile phone reveals the phatic tendencies that circulate in human society.

It is in this regard a sensible but also problematic foil for the backpacker-as-pilgrim – someone who has invited a degree of isolation, pulling him- or herself out of the stream of normal existence and signification.<sup>78</sup> We have already seen, above, how phatic interaction in general is – in the understanding from Holba – both a potential barrier to intimacy and a potential entrée to deepening. And as for phones, so for the phatic – including for example in the 'expectation from friends and family that they stay connected.' Phatic labor after Elyachar (2010) here takes on a distinctly Debordian flavour:

At the moment of economic abundance, the concentrated result of social labor becomes visible and subjugates all reality to appearance, which is now its product. Capital is no longer the invisible center which directs the mode of production: its

accumulation spreads it all the way to the periphery in the form of tangible objects. The entire expanse of society is its portrait.<sup>79</sup>

With regard to some backpackers' self-diagnosis of phone addiction, it is interesting to compare Bruce Alexander's theory of addiction in connection with Combes's (2013) notion of a 'mutilated humanity'. Alexander's theory is that addictive behavior stems from the need to connect deeply with something – 'even only momentarily' in the words of Nozawa (2015). In lieu of other meaningful relationships, drugs, devices, or any other connection will do.<sup>80</sup> Research subjects in Silas et al.'s study reported the aim of getting to 'know themselves better' – but this happens in the context of tracing paths through unfamiliar territories.

**When is it better to give than to receive?** This matter of 'assessing the possibility of deepening the relationship over time' is relevant to Abidin's contribution as well, where it is again reminiscent of the Holba/Buber philosophy of communication. Abidin remarks that 'individuals who posted dyadic profile pictures on Facebook reported feeling more satisfied with their relationships'. We can now assert that such photographs function as a trace at the center of a 'phatic architecture'. That is, the (#)monthsary in Abidin's analysis is most typically a public milestone, one that invites or provokes a response from third parties: 'couples seem to display monthsaries on the internet as a way to outwardly display their affection.' In effect, the ontogenesis of a coupling is wrapped up with semiogenesis of the couple. The desire felt by these young couples to have 'a witness to their love affair' is broadly similar to Malinowski's idea of others' witnessing the speaker's enjoyment in phatic communion.

Here it is also worth remarking that the way the 'gestural exchange of gifts functions to develop and maintain a social relationship' is relevant beyond couples and is also repeated, for example, in the recurrent cycles of 'kula exchange' documented by Malinowski. (Malinowski has been criticized for leaving out the recurrent cycles of violence that existed in the Trobriands before Western intervention and that interleaved with the relatively peaceful exchange-oriented periods: a parallel might be found in the breaking-up-and-getting-back-together scripts of some couples.) Barthes's understanding of *phatic codes* generalizes the exchange-ist modality:

Communication should be understood in a restricted sense. It does not cover all the signification in a text, still less its signifying; it designates only every relation which, in the text, is uttered as an address (this is the situation with the "phatic" code, which bears the burden of accentuating the relation between narrator and reader), or as an exchange (the narrative is exchanged for truth, for life). In sum, communication should here be understood in an economic sense (communication, circulation of commodities).<sup>81</sup>

The exchange of gifts in the (#)monthsary is understood by Abidin as 'a highly gendered and heteronormative practice' – a sort of heterosexual and often consumerist camp. Although the entire orientation is different, with a Barthesian lens, a certain parallel can be drawn with Lee's discussion of the facilitated exchange of attention employed in her strategy for gathering oral histories.

### **What do we hear when we listen to a SEA shell?**

The acronym SEA derives from the words suggestion, expectation, and assumption – features inherent in the formulation of any particular question in any *inter vivos* context.<sup>82</sup>

Both Frolova and Lee engaged their research participants by *'giving them voice'*. The expected subjective (positive) value of mediated experience is mirrored in Frolova's results, which highlighted technological affordances to *'assist'* (as in the idiom, *'assistive technology'*), to *'exercise imagination through role play'*, to cultivate *'social exposure'*, and to build *'valuable IT skills'*. Although Frolova focused on parents' attitudes towards their children, these positive values of media use could readily apply in adult contexts as well.

Neither of these studies makes use of a positivistic design, and one wonders to what degree participants were reflecting back a self-referential bias that holds that their own behavior is better than that of others.<sup>83</sup> As Sloterdijk (2013b, p. 9) points out:

The different speaker-groups of history – all the various tribes and peoples – are self-praising entities that avail themselves of their own inimitable idiom as part of a psychosocial contest played to gain advantage for themselves. In this sense, before it becomes technical, all speaking serves to enhance and venerate the speaker; and even technical discourses are committed, albeit indirectly, to glorifying technicians. Languages of self-criticism are also borne by a function of self-enhancement.

The ability to brag about technological achievements includes at least two features: progress relative to previous generations, and at the same time the maintenance of previous good traditions. Thus, for example, if the *'television set'* in particular occupies a place in the modern household that is similar to the family hearth of yore, it is nevertheless worth questioning the degree to which *'new media technology'* can also function in this way. Frolova asserts that these technologies can *'can still be used for very traditional purposes of bringing the family together'*. Evidence from media portrayals of media seems to be mixed in this regard. For example, it seems particularly indicative that in their first appearance on network television, the eponymous *Rick and Morty* killed and later re-animated *The Simpsons* – using alien technology – in an especially violent (sub)version of the familiar couch gag.<sup>84</sup> One implication may be that in contemporary media environments it is the family itself that is made strange.

Certainly it is a truism to state that technologies can be used for both good and for ill. Frolova makes the distinctly uncanny-sounding observation that *'children don't see a difference between "seeing" and "talking" to grandparents online and face-to-face'*. But indeed the *'Granny Cloud'* devised by Sugata Mitra suggests that for purposes of encouraging the strivings of young persons, it may not even matter if it is *their own grandparent* whom they speak with.<sup>85</sup>

**Why does it have to be either/or?** Lee's paper opens with a particularly interesting quote from Jeanette Winterson's novel *Gut Symmetries* on the topic of duality. Following up with a Simondonian spirit we gain a related perspective on *'the drama of our beginning'* – and our becoming. As Bardin (2015, p. 27) describes it,

Simondon ... programatically dismantles the *'conceptual couples'* (form/matter, active/passive, subject/object, liberty/necessity) which have for centuries grounded a whole series of false alternatives, either opposing the individual to its milieu or dissolving it into the latter.

The concept of a milieu, literally *mi-* (mid) *lieu* (place), was used by Simondon and his thesis director Canguilhem to theorise an inherently related way of being, in which *'being as a subject and being as an object come from the same primitive reality'* (Bardin, 2015, p. 20). One may be put in mind of the Nattiez/Molino diagram presented earlier (Figure 1). By way of example, Lee's discussion positions the archive as a *'trace'* in the sense of that diagram. Indeed, the co-construction of the archive and of the individual identities of contributors might serve to

illustrate Simondon's notion of collective and psychic individuation, i.e., that the two always progress together.

The relevance of recording apparatus is simultaneously increased and diminished when many people have access to a similar technology (e.g., in the form of *Skype*, *Google Hangouts*, etc., together with screen capture tools). The distribution of media recording devices and archive-making processes also drives home the normative considerations described and criticized by Lee, with respect to '*the production of good and bad citizens*' and '*even good and bad archives*.' Thus, selecting an almost parodically innocuous example from amidst the minefield of surveillance, business intelligence, etc., a project like *StoryCorps* ('America's oral history project') focuses on an 'American' style of storytelling – even as whatever that term means is shifting – so that stories would be 'good' or 'bad' relative to evolving standards of this still fluid but nevertheless inherently nationalistic genre. Perhaps Lee's quote from Debora Gould would generalize: '*respectability, on a straight society's terms, was the price for admission*'.

**Why is it always a matter of life and death?** Lee helpfully points to Nikki Sullivan, whose 2006 anthology chapter on '(Un)Becoming Other(s)' develops a discussion of the fine-tuning of human bodies, and a thoughtful response to the intentionally provocative question (echoed above): 'what constitutes "good" rather than "bad" body modification practices'.<sup>86</sup> Sullivan's chapter also presents some carefully cultured ambiguity between 'the projection of all that is commonly held to be "negative" onto the marked body of the other, the monster', and the presumably still-more-monstrous concepts of (self-)mutilation and (self-)destruction.

In this connection it seems appropriate to introduce another quite specific notion of un-becoming from Simondon studies, namely the concept of *apoptosis* (cellular death) treated by Jean-Hugues Barthélémy (2009). Again, this theme is introduced to show how Simondon sought to 'subvert all the classical oppositions – and even that between life and death' (Barthélémy, 2009, p. 32). Thus:

On the one hand, the construction of the embryo implies the auto-destruction of a great number of cells. Whence the metaphors of 'sculpture' and of its condition – the cellular 'suicide' – applied not only to the formation of the brain and immune system, but also to that of the organism in its entirety. . . . On the other hand, and this second aspect verifies at the same time that the first aspect is really an auto-destruction of cells, every cell is equipped . . . for auto-destructing and hindering this auto-destruction, in such a way that the life of the organism once formed is only an inhibited death.<sup>87</sup>

From this description we can already derive the coming-together of an equally monstrous 'head' (in the form of a roughly independent decision-making entity within the cell) and 'body' (in extended networked relations of co-existence of cells) – numerous trillions of times over in animals such as ourselves. As Barthélémy argues, similar patterns show up again at the level of human populations in several ways; not only in the finite lifespan of individual humans, but also in our reliance upon non-living artifacts – including language – that support both mind and culture.

**The most dangerous selfie.** Human experience is situated between different regimes – 'different levels of reality and knowledge' – and shaped through different "'phases", processes, whose dynamic composition continuously constitutes and modifies the configuration of individuals' (Bardin, 2015, pp. 23, 15). The indwellers of modern cultures are affected by many processes that exist in tension with each other: myths (e.g., Medusa), metalurgy and the 'machinic phylum'

(Deleuze & Guattari, [1980] 1988, p. 411); biography and autobiography (e.g., *The Autobiography of Benvenuto Cellini*); opera (e.g., *Benvenuto Cellini*), cinema, television, the internet, Wikipedia ...

Here it is quite easy to get caught up in the excitement and revert entirely to the manner of 'AND, AND, AND'. Let us instead take a breath and explore our other options. Flusser describes a key innovation for dealing with complexity:

Traditional images are mirrors. They capture the vectors of meaning that move from the world toward us, code them differently, and reflect them, recoded in this way, on a surface. Therefore it is correct to ask what they mean. Technical images are projections. They capture meaningless signs that come to us from the world (photons, electrons) and code them to give them a meaning. So it is incorrect to ask what they mean (unless one gave the meaningless answer: they mean photons). With them the question to ask is, what is the purpose of making the things they show mean what they do? For what they show is merely a function of their purpose.<sup>88</sup>

Incidentally, notice that we can speak similarly of 'non-contentful' phatics *contra* traditional structuralist-inspired semiotics. Phatics are also interesting because of what they do.

For example, we can ask: what does 'Medusa' do (Figure 4)? First, recall the remark from Paasonen, quoted by Cambre: 'affect, understood as networked, is that which makes things matter, gathers attention and, possibly, adds to the individual sense of liveliness as intensity'. Secondly, consider another remark from Braidotti, quoted by Sullivan: 'the monstrous other is both liminal and structurally central to our perception of normal human subjectivity'.

The word monster derives from *monstrum* and *monere*, which means to warn, to remind, and at deeper etymological level, to think. A monster is something to be exhibited. Cellini's sculpture is itself an example. This sculpture does not simply show itself or show 'showing' – although it does these things. Rather – speaking, as we were, of self-reference – this particular sculpture is remarkable because it depicts a magical object that could turn witnesses into sculptures. Recall that Medusa was defeated with a mirror, but that even in death, her head, which Perseus kept in a bag, could be used to defeat enemies via projection. On several planes *Perseus holding the head of Medusa* shows the not-entirely-comfortable abutting of the traditional and the technical. Figure 1 schematizes the sculpture as exhibit; Figure 2, the sculpture as story; Figure 3, the mythic mirror.

In certain respects Cambre's move from heart symbolism ('♡') to symbols of fertility and thence from Demeter's earthiness to Medusa's horror-figuration also achieves a similar effect. It invokes the monstrous other in Braidotti's sense, and makes us pay attention. Secondly, however, Medusa is a familiar mythical symbol, not just a random gory image.<sup>89</sup> This fact allows our affective response to be networked, 'which makes things matter', in Paasonen's words. If there is any doubt about this, consider that Deleuze and Guattari's famous remix of Gregory Bateson's earthy 'plateau' develops along very similar lines.<sup>90</sup>

The Batesonian plateau is not simply a matter of elaborate and time-consuming rituals, although these feature heavily and many of them could be described as (hypo-)phatic.<sup>91</sup> Rather, Bateson notes a broader phenomenon in which a 'plateau of intensity is substituted for climax'<sup>92</sup> and uses this concept to address the question 'Why is Balinese society non-schismogenic?' (Bateson, 1972, p. 123). By contrast Deleuze and Guattari make the term the essential feature of the 'schizo body' ([1980] 1988, p. 150). 'Every BwO is made up of plateaus' 'The BwO is a component of passage' (*ibid*, p. 158). Here 'passage' may be understood as 'passage from one experiential state of the body to another ... implying an augmentation or diminution in that body's capacity to act'.<sup>93</sup>



Figure 4: *Perseus holding the head of Medusa*, 1554

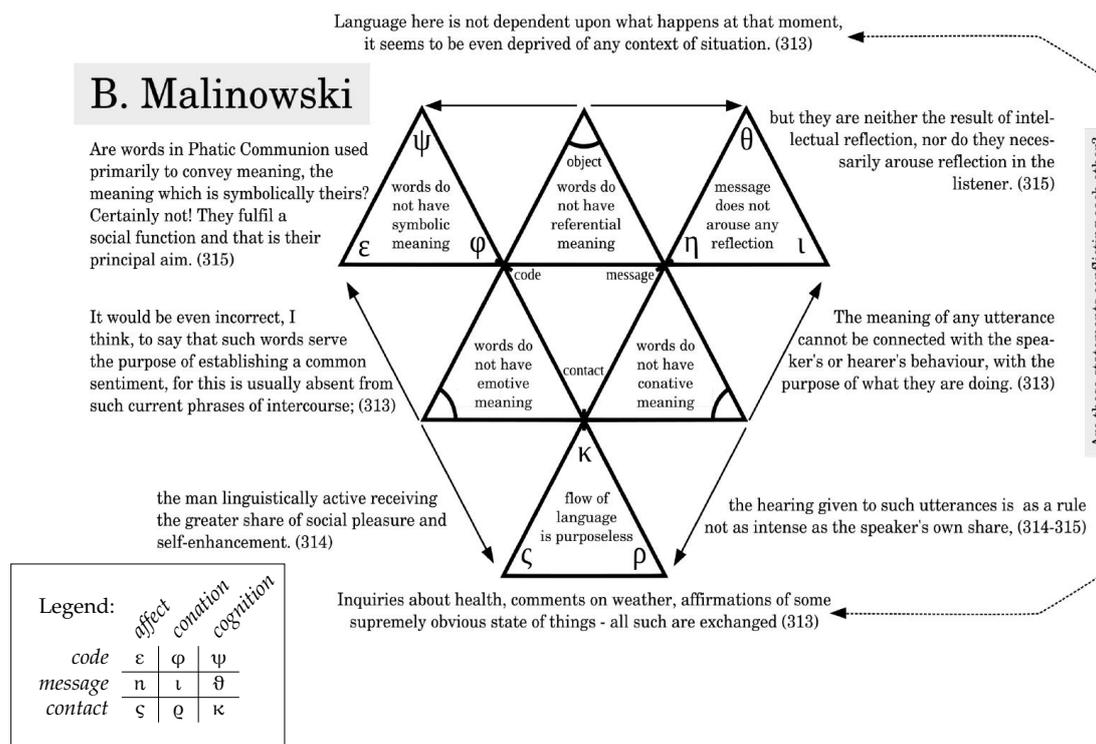


Figure 5: Nine semiotic metafunctions illustrated by way of an analysis of the apophatic status of Malinowski's (1923) concept of 'phatic communion'.

## 5 Affective focusing in phatic contexts

1. Communication is a semiotic process in which communicants not only share or *transfer* some information as if it were characterized by absolute uniqueness, but aid each other in *focusing* on clues to information they already possess, so as to invoke the other's attention and start a like-minded semiotic process. In effect, it is a form of shared sign-growth, a co-association of minds that leads people to have *familiar* attitudes towards certain entities (i.e., objects and relationships), *similar* actions towards those entities, and the *same* sentiments about them.

1.1. Barbara Grosz (1981, p. ii) writes that 'When two people talk, they focus their attention on only a small portion of what each of them knows or believes'.<sup>94</sup> In a similar vein, for our current purposes the whole framework of semiotic metafunctions (see Legend, Figure 5) can be stripped down to the affective column (ε, η, ζ), since we intend to examine the affective dimension of phaticity – the one most prone to Weston La Barre and his concept of phatic

contexts. Grosz writes about how communicants continually shift their focus of attention and ‘form an evolving context against which utterances are produced and understood’ (*ibid*, ii). The evolution of a context, so to say, can be viewed from the perspective of the contact row (ς, ρ, κ).

For example, ‘ς. affective phatic context’: feeling the same about certain entity, illustrated for instance by the intensity of the time of trouble, i.e., the pioneer’s experiences in harsh conditions,<sup>95,96</sup> or the community response to a natural disaster such as a tornado (Elkins & McKittrick, 1954, p. 330) or tsunami:<sup>97</sup> or even by the everyday personal experience of smiles and prolonged eye contact with strangers surprised by lightning and hail on a sunny summer day. Blumer (1936, p. 520) asserts that ‘expressive gestures are especially effective in catching attention and creating impression’. The broadness of a phatic context can be treated in terms of Ruesch’s communication matrix (intrapersonal, interpersonal, group, society). That is to say that there are personal affective phatic contexts (one’s feelings towards oneself), interpersonal affective phatic contexts (the emotional bond you have with another person, particularly intimate relationships with friends and family), group affective phatic contexts (the communal attitude towards something formed through shared experience or discourse, particularly among schoolmates, coworkers, army buddies, etc.), and finally the social affective phatic contexts (the social sentiments attributed to nations, countries, peoples, and perhaps to the whole of humanity, as a form of universally felt human experience of life on the green and beige surface of this blue ball).

## Acknowledgment

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## Notes

- ❶ A quite similar concept of a ‘*verbis naturalibus omnium gentium*’ is due much earlier to Augustine: ‘Their intention was shewn by their bodily movements, as it were the natural language of all peoples’.<sup>98,99</sup>
- ❷ Derrida was not the only contemporary writer to espouse a similarly ‘logocentric’<sup>100</sup> view: Burroughs put it as follows: ‘The written word is inferential in HUMAN speech; It would not occur to our wise old rat to assemble the young rats and pass his knowledge along in an aural tradition BECAUSE THE WHOLE CONCEPT OF TIME BINDING COULD NOT OCCUR WITHOUT THE WRITTEN WORD.’<sup>101</sup>
- ❸ Quotes given by Barthélémy (2012, p. 221) and Bardin (2015, p. 14) are translations from Simondon ([1964] 2005, pp. 317, 84).<sup>102</sup>

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