



## THE ROLE OF PHATIC SPEECH ACTS IN ENGLISH AND UZBEK LANGUAGES

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**Abstract:** *This article examines how speech act theory can be applied comparatively to English and Uzbek, with special attention to phatic speech acts as interaction-maintaining moves. Using qualitative pragmatic analysis of authentic dialogues and contextual interpretation, the study identifies convergent illocutionary patterns and language-specific realizations. Results show that phatic acts function as systematic organizers of politeness, stance, and turn management, enriching cross-linguistic pragmatics.*

**Keywords:** *speech act theory; English; Uzbek; illocutionary force; phatic communication; politeness; pragmatics*

### INTRODUCTION

Speech act theory remains one of the most productive frameworks for explaining how language performs social action, because it links linguistic form to the pragmatic conditions under which utterances count as requests, refusals, thanks, apologies, greetings, and other socially consequential moves.

In contemporary pragmatics, the central problem is no longer whether utterances can be actions, but how the same general types of action are packaged differently across languages and speech communities, and how these differences should be described without reducing them either to purely grammatical contrasts or to overly broad cultural generalizations.

This problem is especially visible in comparative work on English and Uzbek. English has an extensive tradition of pragmatic description grounded in speech act theory and politeness research, whereas Uzbek, despite important advances in functional stylistics, pragmalinguistics, and discourse studies, is still underrepresented in internationally visible models of illocutionary classification and interactional routines. As a result, cross-linguistic comparison often treats Uzbek data as illustrative rather than theoretically informative, and the specific interactional mechanisms that shape Uzbek conversational flow remain insufficiently systematized within speech act theory.

A particularly revealing case is the class of phatic speech acts. Phatic communication has long been recognized as discourse that primarily establishes or maintains social contact rather than transmitting propositional content. Yet within a strict speech-act perspective, phatic moves are not merely "empty" formulas; they instantiate conventionalized illocutionary forces that organize participation, display alignment, mitigate face-threat, and manage transitions between activities. In English, such moves are commonly studied through greetings, small talk, backchannels, and



routinized courtesy expressions, while in Uzbek they intersect with address forms, honorific choices, ritual inquiries about health and household, and culturally stabilized sequences around hospitality and leave-taking. The research gap lies in the absence of an integrated account that treats phatic acts as a systematic subset of speech acts with identifiable felicity conditions and discourse functions, and that demonstrates how these functions are realized differently in English and Uzbek without privileging one language as the normative model.

The aim of this article is to develop a comparative pragmatic analysis of phatic speech acts within the broader architecture of speech act theory as applied to English and Uzbek. The objectives are to clarify how phatic acts can be defined in illocutionary terms; to describe their main functional domains in English and Uzbek interaction; to identify recurrent linguistic realizations and sequential patterns in both languages; and to show how phatic moves interact with politeness strategies, turn-taking, and stance management. The study contributes to speech act theory by arguing that phatic acts are best treated not as marginal conversational “noise” but as conventional interactional actions with stable communicative purposes, whose cross-linguistic comparison reveals both universal interactional needs and language-specific pragmatic grammars.

#### Methods

The research adopts a qualitative, comparative-pragmatic methodology combining theoretical synthesis with context-sensitive discourse analysis. The theoretical basis draws on classic speech act theory and subsequent pragmatic refinements that emphasize illocutionary force, felicity conditions, and the conventional character of many everyday utterances [1; 2]. This framework is complemented by interactional perspectives that treat meaning as emergent from sequential organization, particularly for routinized adjacency pairs such as greeting-greeting, inquiry-response, and pre-closings in conversation [3]. For the Uzbek material, the analysis also relies on established descriptions of Uzbek linguistic etiquette, address practices, and functional stylistics, which provide linguistically grounded accounts of conventional formulas and their social distribution [6; 7; 8].

The study employs a purposive collection of authentic and near-authentic conversational fragments in both languages for empirical purposes. These fragments are chosen to represent everyday situations where phatic communication is common, such as first encounters, repeated encounters, service interactions, workplace openings, home hospitality, and leave-taking. The data were compiled from publicly available interview transcripts, recorded dialogues used in educational corpora, and naturally occurring conversational examples documented in pragmatic descriptions, with each fragment analyzed in its local context rather than as decontextualized sentences. The unit of analysis is the phatic move understood as an utterance or short sequence whose primary illocutionary goal is contact management: opening a channel, maintaining it, smoothing transitions, or closing it. Each candidate example was tested



against contextual criteria: the proportional weight of relational management relative to propositional informativeness, the conventionality of the expression, and its sequential position in an interaction.

Analytically, the study proceeds in three stages. First, it establishes an operational definition of phatic speech acts compatible with illocutionary theory, distinguishing them from merely polite versions of other acts such as requests or apologies. Second, it performs within-language categorization to identify recurrent phatic subtypes and typical linguistic realizations in English and Uzbek. Third, it applies a contrastive analysis to identify correspondences and divergences in functional load, formulaicity, and sequencing. The choice of qualitative methods is appropriate because phatic actions are sensitive to situational nuance, participant roles, and sequential placement, and therefore cannot be validly captured through isolated frequency counts without risking category distortion. Reliability is supported through consistent coding principles and repeated re-analysis of ambiguous cases, especially those where a formula can shift between phatic and propositional readings depending on context, such as inquiries about well-being or household matters.

### Results

The analysis shows first that phatic speech acts in both English and Uzbek can be described as conventional illocutionary actions whose felicity depends less on truth conditions and more on appropriate relational positioning. In both languages, a phatic move is successful when it is recognized as a socially relevant contact-management action and when it aligns with participant expectations about role relations, distance, and the current activity frame. This recognition explains why phatic utterances often resist literal interpretation: English *How are you?* and Uzbek equivalents used in routine openings are not designed primarily to elicit detailed health reports, but to initiate a mutually ratified interactional channel. The finding is that phaticity is not defined by absence of meaning but by the type of meaning prioritized: alignment, accessibility, and social continuity.

Second, the study identifies four functional domains of phatic speech acts that recur across both languages, though with different degrees of elaboration: channel opening, channel maintenance, transition management, and channel closure. Channel opening includes greetings and initial inquiries that establish mutual attention. In English, openings frequently rely on brief greeting tokens and a standardized well-being inquiry, sometimes with a first-name address or a term like *Hi, Hello, Good morning*, followed by *How are you?* In Uzbek, openings often display greater sequence expansion, including greeting formulas, respectful address choices, and ritual inquiries extending to family or work, reflecting a stronger expectation of relational anchoring at the start of interaction. Channel maintenance includes backchannels and minimal responses that signal continued attention. English frequently uses *yeah, right, mm-hm*, and short supportive assessments; Uzbek uses comparable attention signals but also shows a tendency toward relationally loaded acknowledgments that index respect or



solidarity through lexical choice and honorific patterns. Transition management includes pre-sequences that soften shifts into requests, business, or departures; in both languages, speakers use phatic buffers that reduce abruptness. Channel closure includes leave-taking and pre-closings; English often employs brief tokens like *Anyway, I should go, Take care*, while Uzbek closures more commonly include extended exchanges of wishes, blessings-like secular good wishes, and repeated farewell tokens that jointly ratify the end of contact.

Third, the results demonstrate that many phatic speech acts in English and Uzbek map onto each other functionally but differ in their pragmatic “density,” meaning the amount of relational work expected per move. Uzbek phatic openings and closings often carry heavier obligations of acknowledgment and reciprocal wishing than their English counterparts in comparable informal settings. This density is realized linguistically through formulaic sequences, address terms, and culturally stabilized inquiries. English phatic routines can be expanded, but expansion is more optional and more dependent on personal style and situational warmth, whereas in Uzbek certain expansions are more strongly normed in settings involving age asymmetry, guest–host relations, or respect marking. The comparative result is that the same illocutionary family exists in both languages, yet the default minimal adequate performance differs.

Fourth, the study finds that phatic speech acts interact systematically with politeness strategies and face management, but they do so in different configurations. In English data, phatic moves often function as mitigators that reduce imposition before requests and as devices that preserve a friendly tone in transactional contexts, consistent with politeness models emphasizing mitigation and optionality [4]. In Uzbek data, phatic moves more frequently operate as required displays of deference or solidarity that maintain social equilibrium; omission can be interpreted not simply as brevity but as relational neglect. This is observable in service encounters and institutional contexts where Uzbek speakers may include additional greeting and inquiry sequences even when the transactional goal is clear, thereby aligning with etiquette norms described in Uzbek linguistic scholarship [6; 7]. The result is that phatic acts are not merely ornaments but are part of the pragmatic grammar that licenses subsequent directive or commissive acts.

Fifth, the analysis reveals that the boundary between phatic acts and other illocutionary types is gradient in both languages, but the gradients are patterned.

Certain utterances serve as phatic when used at boundaries of interaction and as genuine information-seeking acts when used mid-topic. For example, inquiries about health, work, or family can function phatically in openings and closings but shift toward assertive or directive sequences in ongoing conversation. In Uzbek, formulaic inquiries about household and well-being show a particularly strong tendency toward phatic readings at openings, while English *How are you?* is strongly conventionalized in many settings. The patterned gradient supports treating phaticity as a contextualized illocutionary orientation rather than a fixed lexical class.



## Discussion

The results support a view of speech act theory in which phatic communication is integrated rather than peripheral. Classic accounts of illocution emphasize conventional force and felicity conditions, and phatic acts fit this model once felicity is defined in interactional rather than propositional terms. Austin's distinction between locutionary content and illocutionary action helps explain why phatic utterances can be semantically simple yet pragmatically decisive: their force lies in what they do to the interactional relationship [1]. Searle's classification, while influential, tends to foreground assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations, leaving phatic routines dispersed across categories, often treated as expressives or as mere social rituals [2]. The present findings argue that phatic acts deserve explicit recognition as an interaction-organizing family that cross-cuts Searle's types, because their defining feature is not psychological state expression alone but channel management and alignment work. This does not require abandoning established categories; rather, it implies adding a pragmatic layer that tracks contact-management force as a recurrent dimension of illocution.

From an interactional perspective, the identified domains of opening, maintenance, transition, and closure align with conversation-analytic observations that talk is structurally organized through adjacency pairs and sequence expansions [3]. The comparative evidence from English and Uzbek strengthens this position by showing that sequence organization is a locus where language-specific norms become visible. The greater expansion typical of Uzbek openings and closings is not simply a cultural stereotype but a pragmatic regularity that manifests in repeated placement of formulaic inquiries and wishes, and in the expectation of reciprocity. Such reciprocity can be interpreted through politeness theory: Brown and Levinson emphasize strategies for mitigating face threats, but their framework has been criticized for underrepresenting communities where relational work is not optional mitigation but a normative obligation [4]. The Uzbek patterns in the data illustrate precisely this point: phatic acts sometimes function less as strategic redress and more as conventional duties tied to respect and social positioning, making their omission pragmatically salient.

The comparison also resonates with cross-cultural pragmatics research showing that formulaic routines often differ in their default interpretation and in the degree to which literal content is activated [5]. In English, the routinization of *How are you?* in many contexts produces a conventional expectation of brief, positive alignment responses, whereas in Uzbek, inquiries about well-being and household may invite slightly more elaboration depending on intimacy and role relations, even when still operating primarily phatically. This suggests that phatic routines are not uniformly "empty" across languages; they vary in how much propositional uptake is permitted without reclassifying the act. The scientific implication is that phatic speech acts



provide a sensitive diagnostic for how communities calibrate the interface between conventional form and contextual inference.

At the same time, the study also highlights its limitations and offers some cautions. First, any cross-linguistic mapping risks flattening internal variation. English phatic practices differ across regions and registers, and Uzbek shows variation across urban and rural settings, age groups, and degrees of Russian bilingual influence. Second, the notion of “phatic” can easily become a catch-all category. The operational definition used here attempts to avoid that by requiring primacy of contact-management function and by considering sequential position. Third, the analysis underscores that phatic routines are tied to moral expectations of attentiveness; however, scholarly neutrality requires treating these expectations descriptively rather than evaluatively. Nonetheless, the usefulness for translation, language instruction, and cross-cultural communication is evident: miscommunications frequently result from either overperforming or underperforming phatic responsibilities, such as closing too quickly or neglecting to return inquiries, rather than from poor grammar.

#### Conclusion

This article has shown that speech act theory provides a productive framework for comparing English and Uzbek pragmatics when phatic speech acts are treated as systematic illocutionary actions rather than marginal conversational fillers. The study showed that Uzbek conversations have some similarities and differences with others in terms of how people chat and share information. In social situations Uzbek people often talk more and respond to each other in a special way. This helps build relationships.

The study helps us understand that how we chat is very important and should be considered when teaching languages or translating texts. It also shows where people, from cultures might get misunderstood. More research can be done to see how people chat in situations and areas. We can also study how people judge if someone is chatting correctly and how technology changes the way we talk. This will help us learn more about conversations and how to talk better. We can do research to make the dataset bigger covering different ways of speaking and areas. It would also be good to see how people think conversations are going well or not. Also we should look at how talk changes when we talk online or on the phone. Conversations and small talk are important so we should keep studying them. More research, on conversations will help us understand them better.

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