

## “Hallo hoe gaandit, wat maak jy?”

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# Tilburg Papers in Culture Studies

## Paper 39

**“Hallo hoe gaandit, wat maak jy?”:  
Phatic communication, the mobile phone and  
coping strategies in a South African context**

by

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FIE VELGHE

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Imagine walking down the road in your neighbourhood and the old lady at the corner who usually greets you when you walk by suddenly not answering your friendly greeting anymore. You open your front door and your neighbour, with whom you do not exchange much more than some friendly, formalised ‘small talk’ such as ‘hello, how are you’ and ‘such bad weather today, isn’t it?’ ignores your routine interaction. You send a text message to a friend you did not hear from for a long time, just to say you are thinking of him and that you hope that everything is alright, but you do not get a text message or call back. You post a – in your opinion quite funny – status on your Facebook wall and none of your 300 friends replies with a ‘like’. Your friend, who usually posts an uncountable and sometimes irritating amount of non-interesting Tweets on his Twitter account every day, is suddenly very quiet on this medium.

All the abovementioned situations probably would make you feel uncomfortable and make you wonder: did I do something wrong? Did I upset my neighbour or the old lady in my street without realizing? Is my friend angry with me for some reason? Was my Facebook wall post maybe not so funny after all? Is my Twitter friend ok or did something happen to him? It’s only when such daily, mundane and seemingly pointless social interactions cease to take place that we realize or appreciate their actual importance. When they disappear, we suddenly are left with a feeling of worry or of being unheard and unappreciated. We probably think of the other person who infringes the reciprocity of such social interactions as impolite, rude, pretentious or egocentric. This is because such communicational exchanges that do not necessarily intend to inform or exchange any meaningful information, such as the examples of social interactions mentioned above, do have another, not less important purpose: a social one (Malinowski, 1923). With ‘phatic communication’, one aims to express some kind of sociability and to maintain social connections and bounds (Miller 2008). Even though you never exchanged many more words with the old lady in the street than ‘Hello how are you’ and know nothing more about her but the fact that she is an old lady living in your street, those simple greetings do give you the feeling of being connected with her in some way. The friendly greetings to your neighbour have made it possible for you to go and ask him, without any feeling of guilt, if you can borrow his drill when you are doing some little jobs in the house. Although you have not seen your friend for a very long time, an SMS every now and then does however give you the feeling of being in touch with him and being updated about his life.

In this article, we will look at how the mobile phone has become a means through which such phatic communication is being expressed; a text message, a short call, a short comment on someone’s Facebook wall, a chat on the very popular South African instant messaging programme MXIT, etc., all “becomes part of a mediated phatic sociability necessary to maintain a connected presence” (Miller, 2008: 395). We will see how, in an impoverished community like the research site Wesbank in South Africa, ‘phatic communication’ and ‘maintaining a connected presence’ are vital strategies of social networking. In a context of severe and desperate impoverishment, loneliness, chronic unemployment and boredom, the exchange of phatic communicational gestures is much more than merely being friendly and human. We will see how those phatic gestures form part of one of the many coping strategies that the residents in Wesbank employ to face up to the harsh conditions of a life determined by poverty and insecurity.

First we will give a brief description of the research site, to then turn to some examples of phatic communication and its socio-economic consequences, followed by a review of other literature on phatic communication in relation to poverty and coping strategies.

## 2. THE FIELD: WESBANK

Wesbank community, which has been officially occupied in 1999, 5 years after the abolishment of Apartheid, is by all accounts a peripheral township, characterized by poverty, unemployment and high crime rates (Blommaert et al. 2005). It is situated on the Cape Flats, the so called ‘dumping grounds of Apartheid’, a dry and sandy low-lying area 27 kilometres out of the centre of Cape Town and surrounded by many other apartheid townships such as Delft, Khayelitsha, Nyanga, Philippi and Mitchell’s Plain. The building of the community started in 1998 as part of the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), a national socio-economic policy framework which the first democratic government in South Africa implemented after Apartheid in 1994 to tackle the economic, racial and spatial legacies of the Apartheid era and to improve government services and basic living conditions for the poor. The housing policy that was part of the RDP stipulated the provision of one million subsidized houses before the year 2000, as a response to an ever-growing crisis in housing and the mushrooming of informal settlements on the outskirts of big South African towns, a consequence of internal migrations from rural areas into the cities after Apartheid.

The building of Wesbank was one of the first post-Apartheid housing projects in the area of Cape Town that was not segregated along racial lines, but was intended to give home to deprived people, irrespective of colour and descent. This first so-called “rainbow community” had to give home to 25.000 people in 5149 fully subsidized houses. All RDP-houses in Wesbank have been granted for free to people who were eligible for a full subsidy house, targeting families with a monthly income of less than R3500 (approximately €330). The low-cost houses have an average size of 25 square metres, are very poorly equipped and not isolated.

Due to the socio-economic instead of racial criteria in the selection of the inhabitants, the population in Wesbank is very diverse (Blommaert et al. 2005). ‘Black’, ‘coloured’ and some ‘white’ people<sup>1</sup> and a growing number of African immigrants are living in the same community, although the majority (73%) of the population is ‘coloured’ and Afrikaans-speaking (Dyers 2008). Since Wesbank was intended to relocate “maximum subsidy” (i.e. minimum income families) (Achmat and Losch 2002), poverty has been characterising the eligible population from the first days of Wesbank’s existence. Wesbank has a very low average education rate, with only about 10% of the inhabitants having finished grade 11-12 (Blommaert et al. 2005). As a consequence, many middle-aged residents are illiterate or sub-literate and unskilled, which makes it very hard to find a formal job. Recent unemployment rates for the area are not available; the latest report dates from 2001 and mentions 60% of unemployment among the active population in the area. This figure even increases when considering women (70,4%) and black people (75%) (Nina and Lomofsky 2001).

Overall basic service delivery is very limited. Although two were planned, there is only one high school in the area, insufficient for the amount of teenagers in the area. There are three primary schools, although according to the official national norm there should be five (Depypere & Velghe 2006). There is only one – quite expensive – supermarket in the community and a clinic that is only open for babies, children and Tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS patients. Since 2009 Wesbank has its own taxi-rank and a multi-purpose centre. Gangsterism and crime rates are very high, mainly due to high unemployment rates, the constant inflow of new residents, easy access to drugs, alcohol and firearms, the absence of a police station in the area and the flourishing, deeply rooted presence of two big and many small criminal gangs.

### 3. ‘PHATIC’ COMMUNICATION IN A NEW COMMUNICATIVE ENVIRONMENT

Malinowski (1923) was the first to use the term ‘phatic exchange’ in ‘describing a communicative gesture that does not inform or exchange any meaningful information or facts about the world’ but instead referring to verbal exchanges that primarily serve a social purpose, to express sociability and maintain connections or bonds (Miller, 2008: 393). According to the same author ‘phatic messages are not intended to carry information or substance to the receiver, but instead concern the *process* of

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<sup>1</sup> The term ‘coloured’ remains problematic, as it formed part of the segregation policy of the apartheid government to clearly define and divide the different sections of South African population. On the other hand it is a firmly entrenched term and the racial categorising terminology still persists in the appellation of people of mixed race (‘coloureds’) and ‘blacks’ and ‘whites’ and is still used by the South African population itself. Inverted commas are used to indicate this dilemma.

communication' (Miller, 2008: 394). According to Vetere et al. (2005) 'phatic acts ensure existing communication channels are kept open and usable'. Phatic communication leaves the door ajar, so to speak, towards further communication, sociability and, as we will see below, survival or coping strategies in a context of severe poverty.

As mentioned above, we probably think of the other person who infringes the reciprocity of a friendly greeting as being a very impolite, rude, pretentious and even egocentric person. We are also likely to make comments such as 'This guy suddenly thinks he is too good for me' or 'she is so pretentious', when the person concerned is mentioned in a conversation. Leaving out 'phatic' gestures in the meeting and greeting of other people can clearly set borders to our feeling of 'conviviality' (Blommaert, 2012). According to Blommaert 'people perform low-intensity and apparently low-salience forms of interaction tailored towards a sense of commonness' (Blommaert, 2012: 10) that leads to conviviality. If I go to the Pakistan shop a bit further down the road of where I stay and I greet the shop owner with an 'assalamu alaikum' without actually being able to say or ask much more in Urdu or Pashto, this little 'phatic' gesture will probably however create a sense of conviviality and commonness in the superdiverse environment of the Pakistan shop, where Chechenian, Turkish, Somalian, Congolese, Gambian, Afghan, and Belgian people are possibly queuing behind me. The many Congolese, Somalian, Nigerian, and Zimbabwean refugees who live in Wesbank and own informal shops and businesses are all very proudly capable of exchanging the necessary greetings with their clients in Afrikaans or isiXhosa, the two main languages spoken in the community. Although being able to say 'assalamu alaikum' or 'hallo, hoe gaan dit' (Afrikaans) or 'molo, unjani' (isiXhosa) does not carry 'real' information or real substance to the receiver and instead only concerns the *process* of communication, they do have the capacity of strengthening existing relationships in order to facilitate further communication (Vetere et al. 2005 cited in Miller, 2008: 394) and in order to sustain a feeling of conviviality and sociability. According to Miller (2008: 395) 'one should not assume that these phatic communications are 'meaningless', in fact, in many ways they are meaningful, and imply recognition, intimacy and sociability in which a strong sense of community is founded'.

According to Miller (2008: 387) phatic communication 'has become an increasingly significant part of digital media culture alongside the rise of online networking practices'. Through the emergence and high uptake of new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) we now have a multitude of channels and devices on which 'small talk' and phatic gestures can take place. In what Miller (2008) calls the 'phatic media culture', we tend to constantly 'keep in touch' in order to 'maintain a connected presence in an ever-expanding social network' (Miller, 2008: 395). We can chat, skype, tweet, email, 'poke', 'like', SMS, call, etc., in our attempts to connect with the other without physically being there. According to Laco  e et al. the mobile phone facilitates communication as being 'the perfect tool for increased levels of social grooming, i.e. letting someone know that you are thinking about them' (Laco  e et al., 2003: 206). According to the same authors, text messages can be very 'low in information' but high in 'social grooming'. Horstmanshof and Power (2005) suggest, in their research on mobile phone use and SMS texting amongst Australian youngsters, that text messaging is primarily used for making connections, affirming relationships and friendship maintenance, fulfilling phatic and social-relational functions. Since phatic interactions create expectations of reciprocation, as we mentioned in the introduction, Horstmanshof and Power (2005) are of the opinion that youngsters are able to find help with boredom and anxiety by reaching out to their friends with text messages in the confident belief that at least one of their friends will respond. As we will see below, youngsters and middle-aged women in Wesbank also seek recourse to their phones when boredom, insecurity or a feeling of depression hits them. Also here, SMS messages are not necessarily used to exchange 'content', but more for the creation of a sense of being in social (phatic) contact with others (Horstmanshof et al., 2005). According to Licoppe, the structural constraint of limited SMS length of 160 characters does not lend itself to lengthy conversations, which makes it perfectly suitable for the 'connected' mode of short, isolated communicative gestures (Licoppe, 2004: 149). As we will see further on in our research in Wesbank, and in the research of Miller and Horst (2006), making short and frequent phone calls is, next to sending off text messages, -another way in which the mobile phone lends itself perfectly as an instrument for phatic interaction. Short but frequent phone calls maintain and strengthen 'presence' in which the act of calling then counts for more than what exactly is being said (Licoppe, 2004). This is what Horst and Miller (2006) call 'link-up' in their anthropological

research on mobile phone use amongst low-income families in Jamaica. Miller (2008) states the following:

‘We see a shift from dialogue and communication between actors in a network, where the point of the network was to facilitate an exchange of substantive content, to a situation where the maintenance of a network itself has become the primary focus. Here communication has been subordinated to the role of the simple maintenance of ever expanding networks and the notion of a connected presence’ (Miller, 2008: 398)

As we will see in the next section, it is exactly the maintenance of networks and social bonds that seems to be the primary focus of a lot of online, offline and face-to-face communication in the research site Wesbank. In a context of severe poverty, phatic gestures, part and parcel of daily encounters and communicational exchanges, is one out of the many coping strategies that the residents of the impoverished community employ in order to face up to the harsh conditions of living their lives in poverty and insecurity. The mobile phone has given the residents a new medium through which they can now maintain, strengthen and extend their relationships and networks with people both from within as from outside the community.

#### 4. PHATIC COMMUNICATION AS A SURVIVAL STRATEGY

As mentioned above, the kinds of communicational exchanges that do not necessarily intend to inform or exchange any meaningful information do have another, not less important purpose: a social one (Malinowski, 1923). If I greet the old lady in the street, I never had the intention to stop and to engage in lengthy conversations with her about her private life, politics, or the financial crisis in the world. I greet her because we are both human, because ‘saying hello does not cost a thing’, because it creates a sense of conviviality and happiness and because I don’t want her to think of me as an unfriendly and rude person. With the same reasons I say ‘assalamu aleikum’ to the Pakistan shopkeeper. Also here I never had the intention - let alone the capacity – to engage in further conversations in Urdu or Pashto with the man, but my greeting in his language creates a kind of sociability and commonness that is always clearly appreciated. If I travel to other countries and learn how to greet and thank in the local language, both the local interlocutor and me know that my knowledge of the local language probably does not reach further than that, but it does however create conviviality and a sense of a ‘common’ ground and opens the channels to further communication.

Although people who disregard (the reciprocity of) phatic gestures are quickly labelled as rude, impolite, pretentious or egocentric persons, not respecting or leaving out phatic exchanges would not necessarily influence our lives in disastrous and life-threatening ways. If I had not greeted my neighbour consistently from the first time I met him, he probably would have refused to borrow me his drill when I asked for it. Or maybe I would not ask him to borrow me his drill in the first place, since I would not have the feeling that my connection with him lends itself to a request like that. But it would not have made my life unbearable. Greeting the Pakistan shop owner in his language has maybe incited him to sometimes offer me a free bread, but if I would not greet him with an ‘assalamu alaikum’ or with any greeting at all, I would still be able to go and shop in his store.

In contrast, for people who live their lives on a shoestring the importance of phatic communication is much more vital. As mentioned above, phatic communication leaves the door ajar, not only towards further conversation and sociability, but also towards survival and coping strategies (which often build on relations of sociability and conviviality). According to Horst and Miller (2006) the primary source of survival amongst low-income populations is other people and social networks. As a consequence, the mobile phone should not be seen as a mere addition to the household or as a luxury item but ‘as something that dramatically changes the fundamental conditions for survival of low-income Jamaicans, because it is the instrument of their single most important means of survival – communication with other people’ (Horst and Miller, 2006: 57). Social connectedness and ‘connected presence’ have the possibility of generating a safety network of acquaintances, neighbours, church members, friends, family members, colleagues, old school mates, etc. that can be counted and called upon when help, counselling or advice is needed. In what follows, we will look at examples of how three Wesbank

residents<sup>2</sup> employ phatic gestures and their mobile phones in order to create a ‘connected presence’ that can help them to cope with the harsh realities of poverty, unemployment and boredom.

#### 4.1. LISA

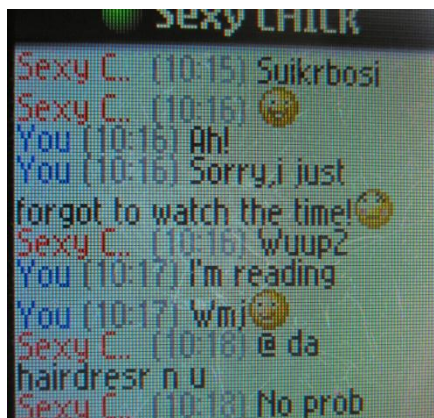
Lisa is a 45-year-old Wesbank resident and single parent of three children, of which only the smallest daughter of 13 years still lives with her in the house. She’s been living in Wesbank since the first days of its existence after growing up in Oudtshoorn, more than 400 km away from Cape Town where most of her brothers and sisters still live. As a single mother with no regular income Lisa applied for a full-subsidy house in Wesbank. Between 1999 and 2010, Lisa had always been able to survive and take care of her family without ever having a formal, fixed job. Throughout the years, she has established several informal businesses in order to just gain enough money to support her family. She has been buying meat and other groceries in bulk to then sell them with a little bit of profit to other residents. She has made and sold craftwork. She was part of a sort of ‘support’ group of women who collectively contributed a certain amount of money in a common piggy bank. Each month, the piggy bank was given to one of the group members, giving the members the opportunity to buy groceries in bulk or to cover big unexpected household costs. She has been buying ‘food stamps’ at Shoprite, one of South Africans biggest supermarkets, to then sell them in the community. But above all she has been able to survive since she has always been loved and known by many people in the community and, as a member of the New-Born Christians, is also known as a very devoted Christian, attending church meetings and Bible studies several times a week. As long as I have known her, she always has had neighbours and other community members popping in and greeting her on the street, and she has always helped others – financially, emotionally or practically - when necessary and if capable. This is in line with the research of Horst and Miller in Jamaican low-income households. According to them ‘networking is vital in understanding coping strategies, [but] the implications of cause and effect could also be reversed – people give and take not because they need to do so but also in order to facilitate connectedness’ (Horst and Miller, 2006:113). Lisa’s generosity and friendliness made her ‘connected’ to a lot of residents of Wesbank who all, in turn, have become part of her safety network during hard times.

Instigated by her daughter, Lisa started chatting on the very popular South African mobile instant messaging programme MXIT.<sup>3</sup> Very swiftly, Lisa became a fervent and daily MXIT chatter using the nickname ‘Sexy Chick’, chatting in chat rooms and on one-to-one basis mainly with men she had ‘met’ on MXIT. Lisa started to live a ‘loose’ sexual life –both virtually as well as actually - by flirting with different men from outside the community and even outside Cape Town. Regularly she also met up with men she got to know through the instant messaging program. The first actual meeting always happened outside the community, and for subsequent encounters they either met in a pub, in a hotel or, when she trusted the man concerned well enough, in her house. MXIT opened a whole new world for Lisa; the adoption of a mobile phone and her ‘phatic’ chat sessions with unknown men on MXIT have made it possible for her to transgress her own immediate life-world and both mentally and physically leave the seclusion of her house and the community. The men she has met have taken her out for dinner, have paid for a night in a hotel, have given her presents and money, etc. Next to tangible things, the chats on MXIT gave her the feeling of ‘being out there’ and the possibility to expand her networks and broaden her safety networks.

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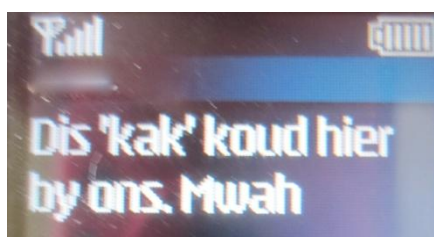
<sup>2</sup> Out of ethical considerations, no real names are used in this article. Lisa, Kristina and Linda are pseudonyms.

<sup>3</sup> MXIT can be accessed on mobile phones and is comparable to computer-based instant messaging programs such as MSN Messenger. MXIT users can chat either in chat rooms (often centred on themes, geographical locations or age groups) or on a one-to-one basis with contacts one has to invite and accept (Chigona & Chigona, 2008). The fast growth and popularity of MXIT may partly be attributed to its cheap costs; a MXIT message costs 2 South African Rand cents compared to 70 cents for an SMS message (Chigona & Chigona, 2008).

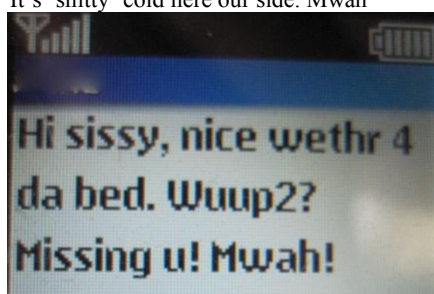


**Figure 1:** ‘Phatic’ exchanges between the author and ‘Sexy Chick’ on MXIT.  
 (“wuup2 = ‘what are you up to’, wmj= *wat maak jy* (what are you doing in Afrikaans)).

For a year now, Lisa has a boyfriend. She met him in Wesbank through mutual friends. Since he did not really have a place to stay – he was sleeping on a mattress in his shop – he moved in with her quite quickly. The relationship has had its ups and its down, predominantly because of the boyfriend’s enormous jealousy. He had immediately forced her to stop chatting on MXIT since ‘she did not need it anymore’. Every couple of weeks, they have huge fights about men and women popping in the house without a real reason, about Lisa greeting men in the street, Lisa doing favours for others or Lisa popping in and spending time in other houses with neighbours and other acquaintances in the community, again, according to him, ‘without real purpose’. Lisa is unsuccessfully and desperately trying to explain to her boyfriend that those encounters and chats are important to her, since that has been the way she has been able to survive for all these years. Her boyfriend regards those ‘phatic exchanges’ as being ‘superfluous’ and ‘too much’ and cannot understand that Lisa needs those communicational and sociable interactions in order to live a comfortable and happy life. Several times she has mentioned to me that she is afraid that her boyfriend will force her to saw off the branches she herself is sitting on and to totally lose her safety network if he keeps obliging her to renounce her strong contacts and networks in the community. Lisa realizes well enough that she has always been able to survive in the community through pursuing conviviality and by respecting and realizing the importance of phatic gestures and phatic communicational exchanges. She has told me that she is worried of the fact that, if she and her boyfriend ever would break up, she would be left alone without a safety network to call or count upon.



**Figure 2:** International text message from Lisa to the author.  
 ‘It’s ‘shitty’ cold here our side. Mwah’



**Figure 3:** Text message from Lisa to the author.  
 ‘Hi sissy, nice weather for the bed. What are you up to? Missing you! Mwah!’



Figure 1, 2 and 3 are examples of how Lisa uses her mobile phone (MXIT and text messaging respectively) to stay in contact with me by mere phatic exchanges. Figure 2 is a text message Lisa sent to me when I already had finished my fieldwork stay and left South Africa. The mobile network operator that Lisa is using charges 1,75 ZAR per international SMS, which is more than double the cost of a national SMS and 5 times more expensive than a national SMS during off peak hours. Knowing that people in Wesbank buy airtime vouchers of averagely 5 ZAR, a text message of 1,75 ZAR is very expensive. Moreover, the text message Lisa sent to me was so short that it only used 32 of the total of 160 characters available in an SMS. The moment I received the SMS I did however not wonder why Lisa would spend so much money on a text message just to tell me that it is very cold in Cape Town. This seemingly ‘empty’ SMS actually made me smile, made me realize she was thinking of me and actually prompted me to take my phone and call her, thus strengthening our bonds although we were thousands of miles apart.

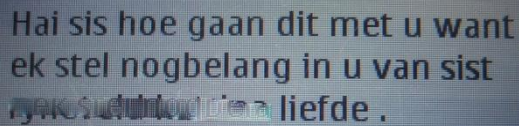
#### 4.2. KATRIENA

Katriena grew up on a farm in the countryside. Being the oldest child, she never had the chance to go to school, since she had to look after her siblings while her parents were working on the farm. Up until the age of 16 she was only capable of writing her name and surname. At the age of 16 she tried to learn how to read and write by herself, copying words she saw around her and trying to decode words and sentences from newspapers and magazines. It was only at the age of 62 that she attended school for the first time, when she started following the adult basic literacy classes in Wesbank. Very laboriously, she is now capable of reading the Bible, and occasionally reads magazines and spiritual books. Katriena had a mobile phone for a couple of years, but was only able to use the handset to answer and make calls and to send off ‘Please call me’ (PCM) messages<sup>4</sup>. After following two cell phone courses I organised together with 2 youngsters from the neighbourhood in which we taught 4 semi-literate women how to use the keypad on their phones and how to compose and send text messages, Katriena started to use this Short Message Service extensively. In the 6 days following the cell phone courses, Katriena had sent 39 text messages, an average of 6.5 messages a day. This is a lot, especially if we look at her cell phone diary filled in two months before the courses; during the course of one week, zero messages had been sent and 7 received, of which 4 were advertisement messages from the cell phone carrier, 2 were PCM messages and only one was an actual message from a church member, who wanted to find out whether Katriena was at home. Looking at the text messages that Katriena has sent during the first week after the cell phone courses, we see that the text messages were all very short and quite similar to one another. Katriena started using the new communication channel mainly to greet the addressees and to be informed about their wellbeing, clearly with the intention to open up the new channel that the use of text messages had created for her and to show the addressees that she was ‘out there’ (see Figure 4-7). In other words, the text messages must be seen as mere communicative gestures, expressing sociability and forging connections and networks through a newly discovered medium. Not so much the content but the *act of communication* here is important. Katriena is an older lady in her sixties with severe medical problems and a great anxiety to go and walk around in the gang-controlled neighbourhood of where she stays. The use of text message has become the most convenient and safe way for her to stay in touch and ‘link-up’ with friends, church members, family and even neighbours without having to leave her house.



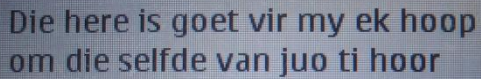
**Figure 4:** SMS from Katriena to a family member: ‘I love you’

<sup>4</sup> A PCM message or ‘Please call me’ message is a free service offered by the cell phone providers; it allows sending a free text message to any other telephone number with a request to call back when you run out of airtime in cases of emergency. Those free messages - a daily limited amount of them – read ‘please call me’ and feature the number requesting the callback, followed by an advertisement. Nowadays, one can add a very short personal message of ten characters to these PCMs and personalise the telephone number by adding one’s own name or nickname. For many middle-aged subliterate women in Wesbank, a PCM is next to calling and receiving calls the only thing they can use their handsets for.



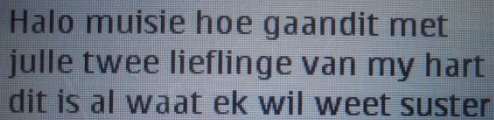
Hai sis hoe gaan dit met u want  
ek stel nog belang in u van sist  
er Katriena liefde .

**Figure 5:** SMS from Katriena to a church member: ‘Hello sis how are you because I am interested in you from sister Katriena love.’



Die here is goet vir my ek hoop  
om die selfde van juo ti hoor

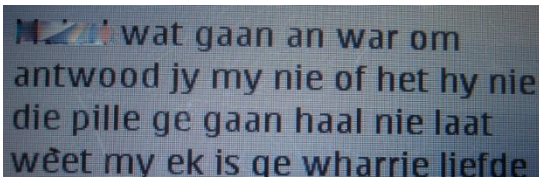
**Figure 6:** SMS from Katriena to a friend in Wesbank: ‘The lord is good I hope to hear the same from you’



Halo muisie hoe gaandit met  
julle twee lieflinge van my hart  
dit is al waat ek wil weet suster

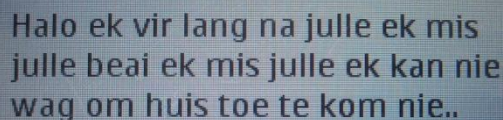
**Figure 7:** SMS from Katriena to her daughter: ‘Hello little mouse how are you two loved ones of my heart that’s all I want to know sister’

It was only after some weeks of familiarisation that Katriena’s text messages became longer and changed in content. Katriena started to also use the SMSs to exchange information, organise her life, manage her household and to ask for help when needed, as in the message in Figure 8 in which Katriena asked a friend in Wesbank if she could send her son to get her medicines. All the text messages in which Katriena asked for help (to buy electricity, to go and collect her medicines, to water her plants, to come and pick her up for the Sunday service at her church, etc.) have been preceded by text messages to the same people with mere ‘phatic’ content (see Figure 8) After first ‘linking-up’ by sending a phatic text message, Katriena probably thought she was now ‘connected’ enough to appropriate the new medium as well to ask for favours or to look for help when needed. The weeks after the cell phone courses, I received a lot of text messages from Katriena. Some to thank me for the lessons, others just to tell me that she had received my messages, that she was at home or to tell me that she loved me. Suddenly I also received a text message in which she asked me to borrow her 20 ZAR to buy electricity. She had never asked me for favours before. Apparently she was of the opinion that our constant ‘connectedness’ through SMSs had forged our relationship in such a way that it was now appropriate to ask me for such financial favours. This presumption is in line with Horst and Miller (2006), who state that the idea behind a lot of mobile phone communication is to continue to create possibilities through personal networking. According to them, the phone is not so much used in search for employment or to carry out entrepreneurial work, but as the possible creator of extensive networks and the perfect medium to engage in a large number of small conversations and contacts that ‘that cast out the net of social communication widely enough for one to hope finally to catch a big fish’ (Horst and Miller, 2006: 157).



Mzi wat gaan an war om  
antwood jy my nie of het hy nie  
die pille ge gaan haal nie laat  
wëet my ek is ge wharrie liefde

**Figure 8:** SMS from Katriena to a friend in Wesbank: ‘What is happening why don’t you answer me or did he not go and get the medicines let me know I am worried love’



Halo ek vir lang na julle ek mis  
julle beai ek mis julle ek kan nie  
wag om huis toe te kom nie..

**Figure 9:** An earlier ‘phatic’ SMS from Katriena to the same friend: ‘Hello I long to you I miss you very much I miss you I cannot wait to come back home..’

In Figure 7 one can see that Kristina expected answers on her messages and that she got irritated when people didn’t reply (‘what is happening why don’t you answer me’). Her best friend in Wesbank, who also followed the cell phone course, never replied to Katriena’s text messages after they both learned

how to compose and send them. Katriena always mentioned this when I saw her, and the reluctance of her friend to reply was the cause for a lot of discussions. As mentioned above, phatic interaction creates expectations of reciprocation. Katriena clearly regarded her ‘phatic’ exchanges as a valued form of communication, which one should not overlook or ignore. Just as one expects a greeting back when one greets a neighbour in the street, Katriena also expected an answer to her text messages. Sent messages lacking any form of meaningful information or content, only intended to greet and to ‘link-up’ with people in one’s network, are real communicative gestures with certain intentions, implications and consequences. SMS messages can create new forms of intimacy and can form and deepen relationships, “enhancing the ability to be communicatively present while being physically absent” (Wajcman et al. 2008: 648). When Katriena was away for a week, visiting her birthplace, she used the short message service to be in constant contact with her son, her neighbour, her daughter and her best friends in Wesbank (see Figure 8).

#### 4.3. LINDA

Linda is 25-year-old Afrikaans-speaking resident of Wesbank, living together with her 3-year-old daughter, her mother and her brother and her little sister. If tested, Linda would probably be diagnosed with a severe form of dyslexia. Sitting bored and jobless at home Linda does however spend most of her days and nights on MXIT, chatting with friends from outside and inside the community. Her friends introduced her to MXIT and are still assisting her with her reading and writing on the program. Since the first day she has been on MXIT, she has been copying words and sentences with pen and paper from her chat partners and when asking for advice from her friends. All over the house, papers and notebooks are scattered on and in which Linda has taken ‘textspeak’<sup>5</sup> notes, writing down status names and sentences she might copy and use in the future. This ‘corpus’ of copied words, sentences and expressions was the main instrument by means of which she was capable to sustain and extend her (virtual and real) relationships with people in her network and thus represented the backing to her social capital. When Linda engages in MXIT interactions, she copies standard ‘*passe partout*’ phrases and expressions. She can hardly improvise and innovate in her writing because her writing resources form a tightly closed package of copied and memorized words. She asks standard questions such as *wat maak jy* (‘what are you doing?’), *hoe gaan dit?* (‘how are you?’) and is able to reply to such predictable and ‘phatic’ questions by means of routine answers (*ek is bored* – ‘I am bored’ – *ek is by die werk* – ‘I’m at work’). This could go on for a while; she could appear as a competent user of MXIT and it apparently satisfied the requirements of interaction in many instances and her urge to be in touch with her social network (Blommaert and Velghe, 2012).

In the two transcribed instant chat message sessions between Linda and me underneath, the ‘phatic’ exchanges are omnipresent. Both conversations are predominantly in Afrikaans textspeak. The ‘standard’ Afrikaans spelling is written between brackets in the third column and the English translation can be found in the last column. Untranslatable items are italicized. In the first conversation, one can see that the whole conversation did not transcend mere phatic exchanges (‘how are you’, ‘I am at home’, ‘what are you doing now’, etc.). Linda’s sentences were all very short and she was clearly taking fewer turns in the conversation than me. When I tended to exceed the phatic content by using longer sentences or asking a lot of questions, she simply did not answer me. When I asked her how long she still had to work, she kept quiet until I asked her a new question 9 minutes later (see: ‘I hope everything is ok at your job’), probably because she did not understand my first two questions (‘For how many days?’ and ‘For how many nights?’).

#### Conversation 1:

17:50	Me:	Dag Linda hoe gaan dit?	Hello Linda how are you
17:50	Linda:	<b>leka en mt jo</b> (lekker en met jou)	<b>Good and you</b>
17:52	Me:	Joh ek kan die kleur van jou letters baie	Joh, I can hardly read the colour of

<sup>5</sup> ‘Textspeak’ is the name given to the global medialect or the mobile texting codes, characterized by abbreviations, acronyms, initialisms, non-standard spellings and emoticons, a consequence of the space, time and cost constraints of a text message.

17:53	Linda:	moeilik lees! <b>ohk</b>	your letters! <b>Ok</b>
17:54	Me:	Mr alles gan goed	But everything's ok
17:54	Me:	Ek is by die huis	I'm at home
17:56	Linda:	<b>O</b>	<b>O</b>
17:57	Me:	Wat het jy gemaak vandag?	What did you do today
17:57	Linda:	<b>Wmjdn</b> (wat maak jy dan nou)	<b>What are you doing now?</b>
17:58	Me:	Ek werk op my computer	I'm working on my computer
17:58	Linda:	<b>by die werk nu</b>	<b>I'm at work now</b>
17:58	Me:	Ek moet n article skryf	I have to write an article
17:58	Me:	Is jy by die werk?	Are you at your work?
17:59	Linda:	<b>k</b>	<b>Ok</b>
17:59	Linda:	<b>jip</b>	<b>Jip</b>
18:00	Me:	Vir hoeveel dae?	For how many days?
18:00	Me:	Vir hoeveel nagte?	For how many nights?
18:09	Me:	Ek hoop alles gaan goed met die werk	I hope everything is ok at your job
18:09	Linda:	<b>ja baie goed</b>	<b>Yes, very good</b>
18:10	Me:	Dit is goed om te werk	It is good to work
18:10	Me:	Wanneer gaan jy huis toe?	When are you going home?
18:10	Linda:	<b>Mre</b> (môre)	<b>Tomorrow</b>

### Conversation 2:

10:47	Me:	Alles goed?	Everything alright?
10:49	Me:	Wmj? (wat maak jy)	What are you doing?
10:50	Linda:	<b>Siu ma hier kijk tv nj</b> (... en jy)	<b>Siu but here watching tv and you</b>
10:51	Me:	Ek is by die huis	I'm at home
10:51	Me:	Ek lees vir die universiteit	I'm reading for university
10:52	Me:	Wat is <i>siu</i> ?	What is <i>siu</i> ?
10:52	Linda:	<b>ohk</b>	<b>Ohk</b>
10:52	Linda:	<b>wt?</b>	<b>What?</b>
10:53	Me:	jy skryf <i>siu</i> mar ek weetnie wat dat beteken'ie	You write <i>siu</i> but I don't know what that means
10:54	Linda:	<b>ok</b>	<b>Ok</b>
10:54	Linda:	<b>wat gaan jy vandag mk</b>	<b>What are you going to do today</b>
10:55	Me:	wat is <i>csclol</i> in jou status	What is <i>csclol</i> in your status
10:55	Me:	Ek bly by die huis om te werk	I stay at home to work
10:56	Linda:	x weetie	<b>I don't know</b>
10:57	Linda:	ohk	<b>ok</b>
10:57	Me:	jy skryf dit in jou status	You write this in your status
10:59	Linda:	ja	<b>yes</b>
10:59	Me:	En wat beteken dit? Ek is nuuskierig	And what does that mean? I'm curious
11:00		"Linda is now busy"	<i>Status message</i>
11:02	Linda	<i>g2g</i>	<b>Got to go</b>
11:02		"Linda is now offline"	<i>Status message</i>

During the second conversation, the possibilities and limitations of Linda's literacy repertoire became even clearer. I opened the conversation with two general 'phatic' questions ('alles goed?' and 'wmj?') and I receive a general, routine answer ('I'm watching tv and you?'), however starting with a word *siu* I do not understand. In the two next turns, I answer Linda's 'and you?' question by providing information about my whereabouts and activities ('I'm at home' and 'I'm reading for university') to then, in the third turn, inquire about the meaning of *siu*. Linda first answers with 'what?' after which I repeat my inquiry ('You write *siu* but I don't know what that means') but I only get an 'ohk' back. Linda tries to bring the conversation back to a mere 'phatic' exchange by immediately posting another

routine, standard question ('what are you going to do today?'). I give a routine answer to that question ('I stay at home to work'), but before I do that I ask her another informational question about her status name ('what is *csclol* in your status?'). On MXIT like on other social media platforms, members make a status profile which is often a slogan or a motto. Linda was changing her status profile almost daily, another sign of her desire to be perceived as a competent user. Probably a copy or a transcription from a dictation by one of her friends, Linda's status update that day read: 'WU RUN THE WORLD GALZ ... WU FOK THE GALZ BOYS ... LMJ NW HOE NOW::op=csclol=@'. Linda probably accurately copied part of the phrase into her status profile, but the end of the status name is very unclear and looks rather like a random compilation of signs. As an ethnographer in the field I had been deeply immersed in informal learning practices of textspeak (see Velghe 2011) and was thus used to constantly inquire into the meaning of what I received and perceived. By asking Linda what *csclol* meant, I forced her again to transcend the mere phatic exchange of routine, standard questions and answers. Linda first answers with 'I don't know' after which I tell her that she however wrote *csclol* in her status, implying that she should know what she has written. She answered with a 'yes' two minutes afterwards (a marked pause in an instant messaging environment) after which I again clarify my question ('what does it mean? I am curious'). Suddenly after that, however, the status message 'Linda is now busy' appeared on my screen, followed by Linda writing a standardized 'g2g' (textspeak for 'got to go') and effectively going offline (see Blommaert and Velghe, 2012 for a more extensive discussion).

In the two transcribed instant messaging conversations it is clear that Linda is quite fluent in asking and answering routine, phatic questions ('how are you?' 'What are you doing?' 'I am at work.' 'I am watching television and you?', etc.). She seems however to quickly reach her literacy limit when different questions are being asked that require creative, non-routine answers that exceed mere phatic content. In order to avoid exposure to her limited skills caused by her dyslexia, my insistence forced her to withdraw from the conversation (see Blommaert and Velghe, 2012).

Sitting bored and jobless at home, MXIT chatting is one of the most important (social) activities in Linda's life. Through a limited set of interactional practices Linda manages somehow to be seen as a competent MXIT chatter by her network of MXIT friends. The reason that she manages to be seen as a 'fully competent' member is because 'her messages are less seen as *linguistic* objects than as *indexical* ones, not as carriers of intricate denotational meanings but as phatic messages that support Linda's role as a group member and define her relations with her peers as agreeable and friendly' (Blommaert & Velghe, 2012:20). Moreover, 'Linda's use of textspeak is not primarily a use of 'language', it is a *deployment of voice* – of a sign system that opens channels of peer-group communication and conviviality, and establishes and confirms Linda's place in her network of friends' (Blommaert & Velghe, 2012:20). In other words, Linda does not put so much time and effort in the learning and writing of those signs because these signs 'enable her to express denotational meaning (we have seen the limits of her generative writing and reading skills) but because they are a crucial and essential social instrument for her, one of the few very valuable instruments she possesses to make herself recognized and respected as a human being' (Blommaert & Velghe, 2012:21). Through the support of her friends and her amassed 'corpus of textspeak' Linda is able to apply the mere phatic exchanges in order to be 'out there', be in constant social contact with others from within the four walls of her little house and build a sense of conviviality by almost 'saying nothing'. As mentioned above, Miller states the same thing when he claimed that 'one should not assume that these phatic communications are meaningful. In many ways they are, and they imply recognition, intimacy and sociability in which a strong sense of community is founded' (Miller 2008: 395). Because of her disability phatic exchanges are for Linda the only possible way to be in touch and connect with the world around her.

## 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Most of what has been discussed here is in line with the research of Heather Horst and Daniel Miller on low-income families in Jamaica. More focussed on calling with the mobile phone, Horst and Miller have introduced the term 'link-up' to refer to the extensive networking practices of very short 'link-up' phone calls to a lot of different contacts in people's networks. Those 'link-up calls' often have a mere phatic content, consisting of questions such as 'Hi how is everything?' or 'wa gwaan?' (Jamaican

Creole for ‘what is going on?’) and a reply such as ‘Oh, I’m ok, I’m just enjoying summer’ (Horst and Miller, 2006:96). According to them, the link-up usage of the phones is characterised by a high number of contacts called every couple of weeks through very short calls, in order to keep the contacts lists constantly active (Horst & Miller 2005:760). According to the main cell phone carrier of Jamaica, the average cell phone call in Jamaica lasts a mere nineteen seconds (Horst and Miller 2006:96). The most important element of those phone calls is not the content of the conversations but ‘their use to maintain connections over time’, all of those interactions ‘representing potential connections that were usually operationalized only at the time of a specific need’ (Horst and Miller 2005: 760). According to the authors those link-up calls are ‘extensively used for economic development and coping but it is not particular to times of need’ (Horst and Miller 2006: 96). Horst and Miller see these link-up calls as a consequence of the characteristic of Jamaican communication, in which the desire to forge links and to be in touch about ‘nothing in particular’ becomes important in its own right (Horst and Miller 2006:96). Just as when Lisa pops in on a regular basis at friends’ and neighbours’ houses in Wesbank, just as when Katriena uses her text messages to set doors ajar to sociability with people in her (mobile phone) network or just as when Linda has routine conversations on MXIT, the predominantly phatic link-up calls observed by Horst and Miller in low-income settings in rural and urban Jamaica tend to create safety networks that eventually can be activated in relation to monetary, emotional, practical or sexual needs. According to Horst and Miller, link-up has become the foundation to communication as well the basis to networking. It can be built upon ‘to create relationships, realize projects and gain support, whether emotionally, practically or financially’ (Horst and Miller 2006: 97). Just as in the case of Wesbank residents and the example of Lisa who realizes how important her social networks are for mere survival, Horst and Miller state that:

‘What the poorest individuals really lack is not so much food, but these critical social networks. The cell phone, and its ability to record and recall upon 400 numbers, is therefore the ideal tool for a Jamaican trying to create the ever-changing social networks that Jamaicans feel are ultimately more reliable than a company, employer or even a parent or spouse alone. This feature, perhaps more than any other, represents the critical economic impact of the cell phone in Jamaica’ (Horst and Miller 2006: 111)

In other words, the difference between being destitute and not being destitute is, according to Miller (2006), not having or having friends or family that you can call upon in times of need. Since more than 60% of Wesbank residents are (chronically) unemployed (Nina and Lomofsky 2001) and thus have to survive mainly by means of the generous support that comes from family, boyfriends, husbands, fellow church members, friends and neighbours, small and temporary informal sector employment such as the ones that Lisa had been involved in or by applying for social security systems such as child care, disability grants or old age pensions. Horst and Miller found that in their rural research site, only 10% of the population were formally employed in reliable, regularly paid jobs. More than half the household incomes in their survey came from social networking rather than any kind of labour or sales (Horst and Miller 2005: 761). In his comment on the issue of *The Economist* in which it was claimed that the uptake of mobile phones in the developing world would generate an increased GDP, a general increase of income for the poorest of the poor and close the so called digital divide that exists between the developed and developing countries with regards to access to Information and Communication technologies, Miller (2006) correctly states that the vast majority of low income individuals in Jamaica – just like in Wesbank – do not use their phone for entrepreneurial activities or to obtain formal employment. The critical economic impact of the mobile phone in Jamaica - and to my opinion more generally in the underdeveloped or developing parts of the world - is not its ability to generate income or to ‘make money’ (Miller 2008) but its ability to ‘get money’ or, in other words, in order to immediately ameliorate – financial or emotional - ‘suffering’ (Miller 2008) through connectedness and sociability. Used as a means to this kind of ‘conviviality’, the mobile phone should thus not be seen as a luxury item that places even a higher burden on the household’s expenses, but as a necessity that is vital to mere survival and as ‘an effective instrument for assisting in low level redistribution of money from those who have little to those who have least’ (Horst and Miller 2006: 114). Just as observed by Horst and Miller in Jamaican low-income households, residents of Wesbank realize the importance of ‘casting out their safety nets’ (Horst and Miller 2006:157) through social networking and conviviality.

The more people in one's individual network, the more shock resistant one becomes. Being known and loved in the community as a friendly, caring and benevolent person proved to be extremely helpful in coping with harsh conditions of poverty, insecurity, boredom and loneliness. As mentioned above, the exchange of phatic gestures, whether face-to-face or 'virtually', has a clear influence on our perception of others. As a communication tool, the mobile phone has proven to be the perfect instrument for such phatic exchanges and thus to extend and strengthen one's networks, making it possible to 'link-up' through short phone calls, text messages and PCM messages in which the 10 free characters offered through the PCM service can even be used to exchange phatic gestures concerning intimacy, romance or a maintenance of presence. Examples such as 'Please Call ME.N.U.4EVER' or 'Please call GODBLESS' are just two out of many phatic uses of PCM messages that Bidwell et al. (2011) have found in their research in rural communities in South Africa.

Vincent Miller, in his paper on new media and phatic culture, states that a flattening of social bonds and a flattening of communication in people's networks towards the non-dialogic and non-informational can be a problematic consequence of on-going cultural and technological processes (Miller 2008: 388). Contrary to that however, the research in both Jamaica as well as South Africa has shown us that phatic use of the cell phone does not flatten but instead strengthens social bonds between people and that non-dialogic and non-informational exchanges are often the foundation for sociability, conviviality and even survival. Miller (2008) states that current communicative practices on Facebook and other social networking sites 'are largely motivated less by having something in particular to say (i.e. communicating some kind of information), as it is by the obligation or encouragement to say 'something' to maintain connections or audiences, to let one's network know that one is still 'there'' (Miller, 2008:393). For people in Wesbank making sure that people know that you are still 'there' is a vital act and can influence the fact whether or not one will have bread on the table at the end of the day. The exchange of phatic gestures is not a new phenomenon, and neither is the exchange of phatic gestures as a coping strategy in impoverished communities like Wesbank. The high uptake of the mobile phone has given the people just another means through which they can now 'cast out their nets' and create extensive networks through extensive rather than intensive calling and texting. It has given the people a new instrument for communication and networking that can be used from within the safe environment of their homes and forever increasing circles of acquaintances and distances.

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