

Personally, I find it daunting when native people ask me where do I come from. The function of this seemingly innocuous utterance is often ambiguous. The question may serve a phatic function: a social function to keep the channel of communication open. However, countries represent power. Therefore, many immigrants, particularly those with a deviant accent, do not feel that the question does, in fact, serve a phatic function. The question is loaded with presumptions and alienates receivers of the message by directing attention to their non-nativeness. The immigrants may feel more alien the longer they live in their new country. Many would prefer more transparent enquiries permitting to give more concise responses. In this example of language in use, the sender of the message may lack socio-linguistic competence. The speaker may lack the awareness of background cultural knowledge and social rules. It is interesting to note how the interlocutors employ their strategic competence: using techniques to modify the code (text or speech) for audience and purpose; to plan and assess the effectiveness of communication and overcome language barriers. In some cases, the immigrant may use the emotive function of language: the primary purpose of the message is to communicate the emotions or the attitudes of a sender. The receiver may employ strategic competence and decode the message as it was intended by the sender (the immigrant) and simply refrain from asking the same question in the future. Alternatively, the receiver may decode the message as a face-threatening act. (Brown and Berko, 1960:67). Other functions can be considered. For example, Taiye Selasi uses language in a number of ways in her TED talk 'Don't ask me where I'm from, ask me where I'm a local' (Selasi, 2015). Selasi uses conative function: she directly addresses receivers to do something specific, i.e. to ask her 'where she is a local' instead. Selasi is an eloquent speaker and employs her linguistic and discourse competence. The referential function of her language corresponds with the context: Selasi's reality.