

Elevator small talk in Peninsular Spanish: Phatic speech acts within the ritual frame of casual encounters in the elevator

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Received: February 12, 2023 • Revised manuscript received: July 31, 2023 • Accepted: September 25, 2023

Published online: December 4, 2023

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ABSTRACT

The present study offers a speech-act analysis of the phatic interaction taking place within the ritual frame of casual encounters in the elevator. The corpus consists of 70 encounters that took place in Madrid, Spain, between 2020 and 2023. The analysis draws from Edmondson & House's (1981) originally proposed interactional typology of speech acts, also found in House & Kádár (2021a, 2023) and Edmondson, House & Kádár (2022). The main findings show, among other things, that some acts that are not conceived as phatic in the typology can migrate into the phatic slots, and that the speech-act pattern of this type of encounters can be affected by sociopragmatic variables such as the relational history of the interactants, or the co-created humorous episodes in the encounters.

KEYWORDS

elevator encounters (EE), stranger encounters (SE), acquaintance encounters (AE), ritual frame, small talk, phatic language

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on the speech acts that form part of the exchanges and moves used by Spanish speakers within the ritual frame of casual encounters in the elevator at the workplace or within residential apartment buildings. In this kind of encounters, small talk is a fundamental

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part of interaction, if not the only kind possible, due to the contextual social norms, as well as to its characteristic time and space restrictions.

Without disregarding the cardinal sociolinguistic and sociopragmatic aspects of small talk, the present study directs its main attention to the succession and patterns of the speech acts used in elevator casual encounters, based on Edmondson & House's (1981) originally proposed interactional typology of speech acts, also found in House & Kádár (2021a, 2023) and Edmondson, House & Kádár (2022). In the original typology, small talk is presented as basically a combination of two phatic speech acts, namely REMARK and DISCLOSE, which has served the present study as the point of departure to explore the phenomenon in question. However, as House & Kádár (2021b) have duly noticed, other speech acts in the system can migrate into the phatic slot of any interaction, and, in effect, this has also been observed within the elevator small talk situations analyzed in this work.

The corpus used for the analysis consists of the discourse interaction taking place in 70 elevator encounters (hereinafter EE) at the workplace or at apartment buildings in Madrid, Spain during the years 2020–2023. The main research questions that guided the analysis were steered towards exploring the types and patterns of speech acts used in these encounters, as well as towards the sociopragmatic and interpersonal variables affecting them.

For the identification of phatic language, I have mainly worked with House & Kádár's (2022) conception of phatic language, due to the conviction, stated clearly in this special issue, about the definite need to approach phatic interaction through the lens of speech acts, thus yielding a pragmalinguistic approach to the phenomenon. Nevertheless, the seminal and key sociolinguistic and/or anthropologic studies on the topic, such as Goffman (e.g., 1971), Malinowski (1934) or Coupland (2000), have not been disregarded.

The concept of *frame* is also crucial to this study (cf. Schank & Abelson 1977; Tannen 1979; Fillmore 1982; Barsalou 1992; Chafe 1994; Terkourafi 2005; Bednarek 2005), and in particular, that of *Ritual Frame* (Turner 1979; House & Kádár 2021a; House et al. 2021), for it typically represents an empirical perspective on language use, such as the one taken herein.

As could not be otherwise for phatic communication, the present research is also found within the wider field of Interpersonal Pragmatics, as defined by Haugh, Kádár & Mills (2013).

The study is mainly of the qualitative kind, with a minor quantitative analysis regarding the distribution of the encounters and the speech acts found or not found in the different phases of Opening, Core and Closing.¹

The results of the analysis show that, in the Spanish corpus of phatic encounters analyzed, we not only find a combination of REMARK and DISCLOSE speech acts (as anticipated by House & Kádár (2021b) for phatic slots in general). The encounters are much richer in several other kinds of acts that are considered necessary in the different exchanges, such as inquiring about the interlocutor's family, health or work, not only to build rapport but also because these acts are considered part of the normally polite relational work one could exploit in elevator encounters within the discourse system and linguaculture explored. These other kinds of acts (that do not consist of combinations of REMARK and DISCLOSE acts) migrate into the phatic slots and, in agreement with House & Kádár's (2022) previous observation, I have noticed that they are also prone to fulfil a phatic function within the EE analyzed.

¹See Table 1 in Section 4.



Certain differences have been found between those EE in which the interactants do not have a relational history and those in which they do have a relational history and somehow know each other. The former I have called *Stranger Encounters* (SE) and the latter, *Acquaintance Encounters* (AE). Therefore, the sociopragmatic variable of interpersonal relations vis-à-vis time (Kádár & Haugh 2013), among others such as the ritual equilibrium (Goffman 1967) established, is here taken as relevant for the characterization of the speech act patterns of this kind of phatic encounter. And for that reason, sociopragmatic variables, such as humor, politeness, or the appraisal and emotion interplay among the participants, are considered alongside the pragmalinguistic ones.

Section 2 presents the theoretical framework supporting the study, Section 3 is devoted to explaining the methodology applied and the research questions that motivated the study in the first place. Section 4 presents an analysis of the main speech-act patterns found in the EE studied, which allows us to answer the research questions within the universe of the EE in the corpus. Section 5 is devoted to present the summary and main conclusions of the study.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To my knowledge, there is no previous study concerning the ritual frame of ‘elevator talk’ in the Spanish linguaculture from a pragmalinguistic, speech-act analysis point of view.² As anticipated in the introduction, for the analysis of the speech acts in the interactional slot of elevator small talk, I have followed and relied on the interactional typology of speech acts originally proposed by Edmondson & House (1981) (also available in House & Kádár 2021a and Edmondson, House & Kádár 2022). In this approach, the most basic unit in the interactional structure is an *Exchange*, in which the interactants together co-construct an outcome through individual *Moves*. The second Move of the simplest two-part exchange complements or fulfils the first, and the simplest structural unit of an Exchange is composed of the Moves *Initiate* and *Satisfy*. If the second move does not satisfy the initiating one, we speak of a *Contra* Move.

In the analysis carried out in this work, the Moves will be examined through the prism of the illocutionary act(s) that the participants perform in them, for this perspective has allowed us to capture the recurrent pragmatic dynamics of the *Phases* (the units that are made up of Exchanges). In the 70 EE in the corpus, we find the three Phases of *Opening*, *Core* and *Closing* with a more or less recurrent succession of moves and speech acts within the exchanges, although there is a considerable number of these encounters within the SE in which the Core phase does not have a verbal content, and consequently, no speech acts, as will be shown in Section 4.1.

In Edmondson & House’s typology (1981, 169), small talk is described as being realized by default by the phatic speech acts REMARK (by which the speaker shows a good disposition to initiate a conversation with the interlocutor) and DISCLOSE (‘which essentially gives biographic information, such that through this information the hearer “knows one better”’), although later reflection and research on this issue (House & Kádár 2021b) has shown that many speech acts in the system can migrate into the phatic slot of an interaction. This is certainly the case in the

²I do not know of any other studies on the topic within the broader European culture. Within the Japanese linguaculture, however, Caesar (2000) pinpoints the elevator as a site of potential intimacy that would be unthinkable in other contexts.



elevator encounters scrutinized in the present study, as will become apparent in 4, where, as specified above, these migrated acts also become part and parcel of the phatic communication established.

As Goffman (1976, 5) explains, in our everyday face-to-face or mediated social encounters, we tend to “act out what is sometimes called a *line*” [my italics], i.e., a pattern of verbal and nonverbal acts by which we express our view of the situation and through this the evaluation of the participants. In the approach taken in the present study, I precisely examine the *line* of the phatic acts realized in elevator ritual encounters. I follow Kádár’s (2017) and House & Kádár’s (2023) characterization of phatic acts as Substantive Speech acts, but as the data make patent, other types of act, such as the ritual acts that are conventionally clustered around the opening and closing phases of an interaction, also form part of the phatic exchanges of this kind of encounters. As will be shown in Section 4, in all elevator encounters there is an opening, a core and a closing, but the talk or action taking place in the core phase cannot be said to have a business content. Instead, the core is prone to fulfil a phatic function as well, and therefore, in the cases in which the Core Phase is verbal, it continues to be a part of the small talk initiated in the Opening Phase and finished by means of the LEAVE-TAKE acts of the Closing Phase.

Even though this study emerged as an attempt to cover the definite need to approach phatic interaction by carrying out a strictly language-anchored and bottom-up pragmalinguistic empirical procedure through the lens of speech acts, the fact that the study of phatic interaction basically belongs to the fields of sociopragmatics and sociolinguistics³ (Coupland 2000; Holmes 2010; Jaworski 2014) cannot be disregarded, considering that phatic talk is undoubtedly an integral part of social interaction and therefore also should be approached from the prism of Interpersonal Pragmatics (Haugh, Kádár & Mills 2013). Thus, the sociopragmatic and interpersonal aspects of the EE examined herein are also considered as part of the equation, given their relevance and the undisputable fact that they affect the realization and interpretation of the speech acts used in the encounters. Variables related with (im)politeness or relational work, such as the use of humor or the generation of inferences having to do with the interlocutors’ relational history, are also considered in relation with the speech acts used in the encounters.

In effect, EE are situations, like many others, in which the interactants have a face to maintain and take on “the responsibility of standing guard over the flow of events as they pass before” them and they “must ensure that a particular expressive order is sustained – an order that regulates the flow of events, large or small, so that anything that appears to be expressed by them will be consistent with” their face (Goffman 1967, 9). This remark makes it apparent that the choice and order of the speech acts in the encounter are always affected and regulated by considerations of face (saving or maintenance), so these acts will ensure that – other things being equal – speakers sustain a standard of considerateness to save the feelings and the face of their interlocutors in the encounters.

An important concept for this study is that of *Frame* (e.g., Bateson 1972; Goffman 1967; Schank & Abelson 1977; Turner 1979; Tannen 1979; Fillmore 1982; Barsalou 1992; Chafe 1994; Terkourafi 2005; Bednarek 2005) as an important and useful tool to explicate how people interpret and at the same time construct their interactions coherently in specific interactional

³Goffman’s (e.g., 1971) and Malinowski’s (1934) sociological and anthropological studies were also crucial for the present understanding of the phenomenon of phatic communication as part of social interaction.



situations. Goffman explains that a frame consists of “principles of organization which govern social events ... and our subjective involvement in them”. It is worth noticing, additionally, that the concept of *Frame* has been referred to in various ways in different disciplines, such as Linguistics, Interactional Sociolinguistics, Anthropology, Artificial Intelligence, or Ethnography. In this study in particular, the concept of *Ritual Frame* (Turner 1979) has proved helpful and applicable to the corpus of EE used for the analysis:

To frame is to enclose in a border. A sacralized space has borders. These may be permanent ... or situational. ... Time also enters the framing, since rituals ... have a well-defined beginning, middle, and end. ... Ritual time is ordered by rules of procedure, written or unwritten. A ritual contains an explicit scenario or score. ... [W]hile there are fixed stereotyped sequences of symbolic action, there are also episodes given over to verbal and nonverbal improvisation. (Turner 1979, 468–469)

Turner therefore conceptualized the Ritual Frame as a physical space. Once a person enters this space, specific behavioral rules apply, rights and obligations are clearly defined, and a ritual unfolds. Obviously, the target space for analysis in this study is the very limited physical space of an elevator, where certain conversation rituals unfold and flow naturally during the elevator trip up or down. This is the reason why Turner’s concept of *flow* as “a state in which action follows action according to an inner logic which seems to need no conscious intervention on our part” (1979, 486–487) has also been useful for our analysis, considering that in Turner’s conception of the term, flow differs from everyday activities in that its framing contains explicit rules which make action and the evaluation of action unproblematic (1979, 488). This concept then also helps to explain the constraints and affordances of the generally unproblematic pragmatic realization of Exchanges and Moves in EE.

Equally relevant is Goffman’s (1967, 19) use of the term *ritual* and the imagery of equilibrium: the sequence of acts aimed at saving face maintains an equilibrium where the expressive order required to sustain it is a ritual one. He further explains that this perspective “nicely accounts, for example, for the little ceremonies of greeting and farewell which occur when people begin a conversational encounter or depart from one” (1967, 41). In effect, as we shall see in Section 4, greetings and farewells form part of the ‘pragmatic load’⁴ (House et al. 2021) attached to the speech act sequences in EE. But the acts realized in the Core Phase of these encounters also form an essential part of their phatic interaction, as will become apparent in Section 4.

Another relevant aspect to be considered in EE is related to the topics chosen by the interactants in the flow of their encounter. Chafe (2001) uses the flowing metaphor for his characterization of topics in discourse:

Language in action is better captured with the metaphor of a flowing stream. A basic challenge for discourse analysis is to identify the forces that give direction to the flow of thoughts. Important among these forces are what I will be calling *topics*. (2001, 673)

⁴“The notion of ‘pragmatic load’ refers to the way in which certain expressions frequently indicate specific speech acts in certain linguacultures, such as Chinese, but this conventional relationship between expressions and speech acts is weaker in other linguacultures, such as many Western ones. This sense of a pragmatic load relates to the notion of Ritual frame because those expressions which are strongly anchored in a particular speech act often indicate the presence of a ceremonial Ritual Frame.” (House et al. 2021, 5)



I consider it essential to also pay attention to the topics introduced and developed within the phatic language used in EE, for they are also going to affect the speech act pattern of the whole encounters. For instance, it is observed that there are some topics that could never be raised in EE, namely those topics having to do with ‘business’, in the sense that the space of a work or group meeting can never be an elevator, and therefore the topics of a meeting agenda could never be discussed within this frame. Chafe (2001) points out that people are constrained to varying degrees by the need to develop the different topics in a conversation, and that the navigation through the topics is often guided by a *schema* (see also Bartlett 1932; Chafe 1994), i.e., some familiar pattern that provides a path for a speaker to follow.

Thus, the topics in EE are also (tangentially) explored in this study. The data shows that they are always raised and developed within the Core Phase of the encounters. The maximum number of topics found in this Phase is three, but they are never discussed or elaborated to any depth, due to the time restrictions characteristic of this type of encounters.

Phatic language being a key issue in the study of Interpersonal Pragmatics, it has become useful to consider the ways in which social actors use phatic talk in EE “to shape and form relationships in situ” (Locher & Graham 2010, 1). For that reason, the three interpersonal related areas of relational, attitudinal/emotive, and evaluative aspects of embodied language use (Haugh, Kádár & Mills 2013) have been explored as ancillary to the main pragmalinguistic concern of the study, which basically focuses on the speech act patterns found in EE.

Precisely, one of the key issues in Interpersonal Pragmatics alludes to the placement of relations vis-à-vis time, i.e., how the relational history of the participants, as well as the broader relational network of which they are a part, may influence their language and behavior. These considerations have been useful in the analysis presented in this work, given that it has been observed that the pattern and scheme of speech acts used in the encounters may vary between people who know each other (and therefore share a relational history and network) and those who do not. For instance, it has been observed that in AE there are numerous occurrences of the REQUEST speech act that does not ask about the future, but about past events or aspects of the shared knowledge of the interactants, and for that reason, I have called them QASK (Questions About Shared Knowledge). These obviously do not occur in SE, because the interlocutors do not share a relational history. Therefore, the interpersonal aspects cannot be disentangled from the more hard-core pragmatic aspect of the concrete speech acts set in motion, for they are attached not only to the sociocultural norms of the groups involved, but also to their personal history and situation.

Finally, another aspect that has been deemed worthy of consideration in the analysis is the *phase-anchoredness* of some speech acts in EE, in analogy to House & Kádár’s (2021b) concept of speech-act anchoredness, but with the difference that what will be considered here is not whether certain conventionalized expressions frequently indicate one particular speech act or not,⁵ as House & Kádár (2021b) do, but whether certain speech acts are anchored to certain phases of the elevator encounters or not.

⁵For instance, House & Kádár (2021) point out that in certain cases, *Hello* and *Hallo* tend not to indicate a speech act (Greet), but are instead used as Alerters, i.e., as an opening element that functions as an attention getter.



3. CORPUS AND METHODOLOGY

The corpus used in this study contains the transcription of my immediate recollection⁶ of 70 casual encounters in the elevator at the workplace or in apartment buildings in Madrid, Spain, in which I was either a participant or an observer. It was collected during the years 2020–2023 by simply transcribing – as faithfully as possible – the dialogues and elements of the situation immediately after the encounters took place. The possibility of recording them was discarded, considering that these encounters are always unexpected (one never knows who is going to get on the elevator at the same time or while one is on an elevator trip) and therefore it would be difficult – if not impossible – to make all the participants involved sign a consent form for the recording, apart from the fact that this would break the spontaneity of the situations. It is worth noticing that an important part of these encounters took place during the Covid-19 pandemic, where sharing an elevator was discouraged or even disallowed, and therefore on many occasions the participants first move was to ask the other(s) if they minded sharing it.

In the examples shown and analyzed here, the names of the people interacting, as well as any other trace of personal identity, have been changed or removed to preserve their anonymity.

The procedure adopted was a language-anchored, bottom-up, pragmalinguistic and empirical one, aiming mainly at examining the EE in the corpus through the lens of speech acts. However, and for the sake of the representativeness of the corpus with respect of the ambient linguaculture, the approach was not devoid of the sociopragmatic or interpersonal considerations that may precisely affect the choice of speech acts.

The main research questions when examining the corpus were thus the following:

1. How do people construct and interpret their interactions coherently in the specific frame of casual EE?
2. What kind of speech acts are set in motion in the phatic exchanges and different phases of EE?
3. Is there a fixed pattern of verbal (and possibly non-verbal) speech acts in the natural flow of this kind of encounters?
4. Are some speech acts anchored to or exclusive to a given phase of the encounters?
5. What sociopragmatic or interpersonal variables (e.g., relational, attitudinal, evaluative) affect or influence the speech acts in question?
6. What are the topics most frequently chosen by the interlocutors in EE, along the succession of the speech acts involved?

The analysis in Section 4 will try to answer these questions and shed light on the dynamics, the line and schema of EE in our Peninsular Spanish corpus.

⁶I say “immediate recollection” because I transcribed the interactions immediately after coming out of the elevator in all cases. The possibility of using an existing online corpus, such as the CREA or the Davies Corpus, was explored, but no instances of ‘elevator talk’ were found in any of them.



4. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The interaction found in all the elevator encounters examined here presents an Opening, a Core, and a Closing phase, but the talk taking place in the Core Phase cannot be said to have a “business” content. Instead, the core is prone to fulfil a phatic function as well, and therefore continues to be a part of the small talk initiated and finished by the greetings and farewell, respectively.

The data analyzed shows that, phase-wise, there are two main patterns in EE, considering that: 1) Some of the EE (41.4% of all EE) contain no verbal interaction in the Core Phase, and 2) Some EE (58.6%) do contain verbal interaction in their Core Phase. The key to the difference between the two patterns is given by the sociopragmatic factor of the interactants’ relational history. Simply put, in AE, in which there is a relational history between the interactants, there is normally a sense that phatic communication is obligatory in the Core Phase as well, so as to break the ice and not experience the awkwardness of silence during the trip up or down. Therefore, we find a richer pattern of speech acts in AE than in SE, in which there is no relational history between the actors other than the one given by living or working in the same building (although in some cases that was not the case either, for the people were just visiting). AE normally include one or more topics in the Core Phase, apart from the greetings and leave-take in the opening and closing phases, respectively. SE can also contain verbal interaction in the Core Phase, but in the majority of them (29 out of 48 SE in the corpus) we only find speech acts in the Opening and Closing phases with their corresponding greetings and leave-take, but no verbal exchange whatsoever in the Core Phase of the encounter. Table 1 shows the amount of AE and SE with and without a verbal Core Phase.

Irrespective of whether the people involved have a relational history or not, the content of the interaction is always of the phatic kind, considering the characteristics of the particular Ritual Frame, involving a situation in which two or more people meet unexpectedly at the elevator, and where there are very reduced physical and time spaces: the participants suddenly find themselves face-to-face in a cubicle of no more than 4 m² and during a period of time no longer than two or three minutes, all of which makes them feel somehow obliged to “be nice” and break the ice to save face, if only by greeting their interlocutor(s) and perhaps making a remark about the weather or being humorous about some immediate incident or action. This is the reason why consideration of sociopragmatic variables, such as interpersonal relations, (im)politeness strategies or humor, were deemed also necessary for the proper pragmalinguistic analysis of the speech acts used in the encounters.

Table 1. Number of AE and SE with and without a verbal Core Phase

	Total number	Number of EE without a verbal Core Phase	EE with the three verbal phases (Opening, Core, Closing)
Acquaintance encounters (AE)	32 (45.7%)	0 (0% of AE)	32 (100% of AE)
Stranger encounters (SE)	38 (68.8%)	29 (76.3% of SE)	9 (23.7% of SE)
Total	70 (100%)	29 (41.4% of all EE)	41 (58,6% of all EE)



It must also be mentioned that on some occasions the acts performed are non-linguistic, as for instance, when people respond to a joke with laughter, the laughter being taken as the “Satisfy” move of the exchange initiated by the joke. Thus, laughter (as well as other non-linguistic social signals like smiling, sighing, or frowning) has both propositional content and illocutionary force, since it involves reference to external real-world events, has stand-alone meanings, and participates in semantic and pragmatic processes like repair, implicature, humor or irony (cf. [Ginzburg, Mazzocchi & Tian 2020](#)). The laughter in these cases (as in most cases) has an evaluative meaning, showing support and a positive acceptance of the interlocutor’s previous joke.

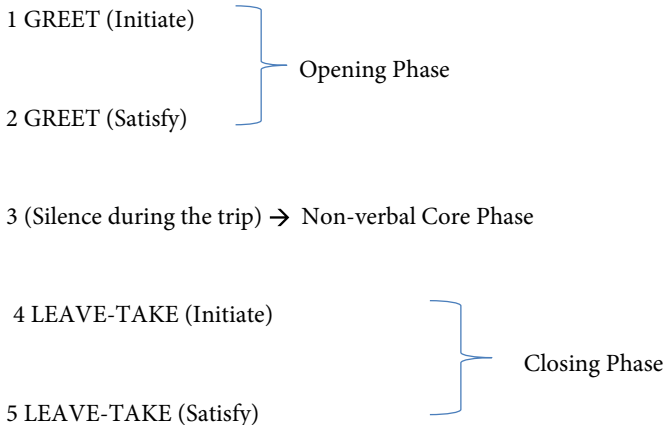
Considering that, in the corpus examined here, the main variable affecting the pattern of realization of the exchanges and phases of the encounters turns out to be the relational history of the interlocutors, I take this fact as the point of departure for the analysis, and therefore the following two subsections will explain the findings regarding the speech act patterns of SE and AE respectively, as well as their similarities and differences.

4.1. Stranger encounters (SE)

As shown in [Table 1](#), of the 70 encounters analyzed, 38 took place among people who did not have a relational history, and within these, 29 encounters (constituting 76.3% of the SE) contain minimum phatic interaction, consisting of the following speech-act pattern:

(1) GREET/GREET – (Silence) – LEAVE-TAKE/LEAVE-TAKE

which has the following arrangement within the Phases, each line corresponding to one Move:



A prototypical example of this pattern is the following:

- 1) A gets into the elevator, where B is.
A: Hola, buenos días. (*Hello, good morning*)
B: Buenos días. (*Good morning*)
(.....) (One of them looking at her phone, the other at the elevator door)
B: Adiós. (*Bye*)
A: Adiós. (*Bye*)



In these cases, the Core Phase of the encounter is non-verbal, so the phatic exchanges are reduced to the minimum, by simply greeting in the Opening Phase and leave-taking in the Closing Phase. This can be said to be a frequent schema, constituting 41.4% of the total EE in our corpus.

It is observed that the silence occurring between the Opening and Closing Phases in this pattern of EE does not appear to be considered impolite by any of the interlocutors. This is due to the fact that they do not share a relational history other than perhaps working or living in the same building, which entails that they have the option of not going to great lengths to communicate, and therefore, simply acknowledging the other person's presence by greeting and saying good-bye is considered enough in the linguaculture in question.

The SE in which there is a verbal Core Phase normally include topics such as the weather or something related to the elevator situation in itself, as is the case in example 2):

- 2) (Three people who do not know each other get into the elevator)

C: Buenos días (*Good morning*)

D: Buenos días, ¿a qué piso vais? (*Good morning. Which floor are you (plural) going to?*)

E: Yo al cuarto. (*I (am going) to the fourth (floor)*)

C: Yo al sexto; gracias. (*I (am going) to the sixth (floor)), thanks.*

(D pushes the buttons for both the fourth and the sixth floors)

E: gets out of the elevator on the fourth floor and then the elevator stops at the fifth floor, without anybody having pushed that floor's button and nobody waiting outside.

D: No sé qué pasa con este ascensor que siempre para en la quinta planta aunque nadie lo llame. (*I don't know what the matter is with this elevator; it always stops on the fifth floor even if nobody calls for it*)

C: Sí, es una lata, la verdad. (*Yes, it's annoying, really*)

D: Pues, sí, hay que aguantarse cuando para. No queda otra. (*Yes, one has to put up with it when it stops. There's no way out*)

(The elevator stops at the sixth floor)

C: Este es mi piso. ¡Adios! (*This is my floor. Bye!*)

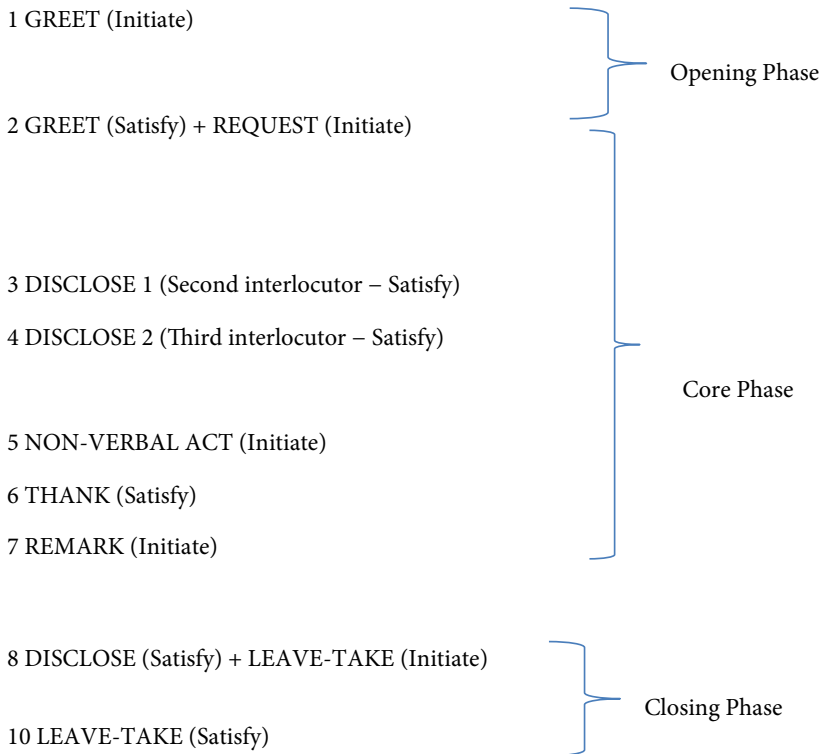
D: Adiós. (*Bye*)



The speech act pattern found in this encounter is the following:

- (2) GREET/GREET+REQUEST/DISCLOSE1/DISCLOSE2 – NV ACT/THANKING –
REMARK/DISCLOSE – LEAVE-TAKE/LEAVE-TAKE

and it has the following arrangement of Moves and Phases, each line being one move:



We see here that the initial greeting is immediately followed by a request (by D) for information about the floor C and E are going to, as a prerequisite for the subsequent polite act of selecting that floor on the elevator panel for them. The scheme in this encounter shows that, apart from the greetings, the leave-taking and the typical phatic REMARK and DISCLOSE acts, other verbal acts (such as THANK), and even non-verbal acts (such as a person pushing the floor button for another person) can form part of the phatic exchanges on an elevator and can therefore migrate from other sections of the system to the phatic slots.

In this particular encounter, the non-verbal, polite act of selecting the floor button for another is reciprocated with the polite act of thanking. It is therefore necessary to interpret the succession and scheme of the acts in the encounter as aspects of the interpersonal pragmatics of the situation: the social actors show a certain attitudinal, emotive or relational behavior that is expected according to the (tacit) moral rules of the particular linguaculture. This makes it patent that sociopragmatic variables such as facework, politeness, or the stance taken by these actors can influence and affect the speech-act pattern of the encounters.



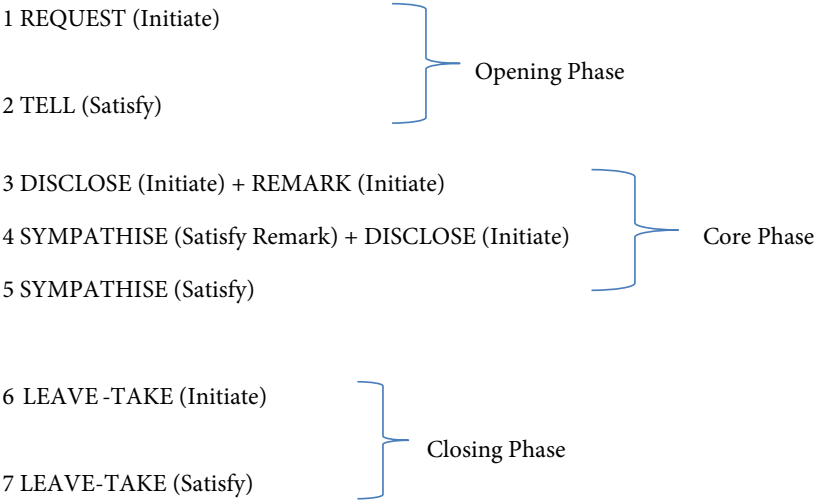
In some cases, EE present no initial greeting, this fact not being considered rude by the interactants, due to the relative urgency of the situation. Consider 3):

- 3) (F is waiting for the elevator. The elevator door opens and there is another person in it)
F: (Smiling and pointing up) ¿Sube? (*Are you going up?*)
G: Sí. (*Yes*)
F: Bien, subo con usted entonces. (*O.K. I'm going up with you, then*)
(F gets on the elevator)
Qué calor hace hoy ¿no? (*It's hot today, isn't it?*)
G: Sí, es horrible. No daban ganas de venir a trabajar
(*Yes, it's horrible. I didn't feel like coming to work*)
F: Ya lo creo... (*You bet!*)
G: ¡Hasta luego! (*Bye! Literally: Until later*)
F: ¡Adiós! (*Bye!*)

The speech-act pattern for this encounter is then the following:

- (3) REQUEST/TELL – DISCLOSE+REMARK/SYMPATHISE + DISCLOSE/SYMPATHISE –
LEAVE-TAKE/LEAVE-TAKE,

having the following arrangement of Moves and Phases:



In 3) the initial greeting is considered unnecessary because there is the more urgent need of knowing whether the person who is already in the elevator is going up or down, so that the person waiting can make the quick decision to get into it or not. Thus, the Opening Phase is constituted by F's request for information and the corresponding satisfying speech act of telling F if she is going up or down, which shows that, even though the initial greeting is prone to appear in most encounters, in some of them the urgency of knowing in which direction the person is going can replace the polite greetings without it constituting a matter of offense or



being evaluated as impolite. This also suggests that the GREET speech act is not always anchored to the first move of the Opening Phase in Spanish, and that a smile or some other non-verbal signal attached to a REQUEST can make do as the expected civil behavior in this phase. This is different from what House & Kádár (2021) claim to be the case for English, namely, that the speech act GREET cannot be substituted by other speech acts in the opening of a phatic interaction without triggering impolite evaluations.

In this EE, it is also observed that there is an initiating speech-act in the third move that is neither satisfied nor followed by a contra-move; it is simply not responded to. This is the case of the DISCLOSE act, which is followed by a REMARK, the latter being the only one of the two that is satisfied in the next move.

The encounter in 3) is also proof of the fact that prototypical phatic speech acts may attract other types of acts in the system and make them migrate to the phatic slots to act as their satisfying counterparts. This is the case of the REMARK and DISCLOSE speech acts in this encounter, whose satisfying part is the attitudinal SYMPATHISE speech-act, which is deemed necessary as a response (Re non-future event) to the comments previously made, given both F's and G's intention to show their agreement (and therefore their attitude, evaluation or stance) with their previous comments.

4.2. Acquaintance encounters (AE)

Unlike SE, 100% of the AE in the corpus contain verbal speech acts in their Core Phase, which shows the interlocutors go to greater lengths to communicate and build rapport in AEs than in SEs. Since the actors know each other and have a relational history, the topics are also richer, for they share knowledge about their respective families, their vacations, etc. But in any case, we never find more than three topics in one encounter, and the highest number of moves found in all the EE in the corpus (including both SE and AE) is 12, due to their inherent time and place restrictions.

In 4) below we find a prototypical example of AE, with the three complete verbal phases and a succession of speech acts where the speech act REQUEST plays an important part of the ritual, being mainly a request for information. Specifically, the requests for information in this encounter are not about future events, but rather about people, facts or events that belong to the shared knowledge of the interlocutors (henceforth QASK: *Questions About Shared Knowledge*). As is also the case in some of the SE examined, the interlocutors may perform more than one speech act in each of the moves or turns, giving place to complex exchanges where the *Satisfy* part of an exchange may be immediately followed by another initiating move made by the same speaker and so on.

- 4) (H and I get into the elevator)
 H: Hola Inés, ¿qué tal? (Hi Ines, how are you?)
 I: Bien, bien. (Fine, fine)
 H: ¿Qué tal las vacaciones? (How were the holidays?)
 I: ¡Cortas! Jajaja! (Short! Hahaha!)
 H: jajaja! (Hahahaha!)



(...)

I: ¿Y vosotros? ¿Qué tal? (*How about you?*)

H: Pues bien, allí en la playita, muy a gustito. Bajas en este piso, ¿no?

(*Oh, fine, there, at the beach, all very pleasant. You get out on this floor, don't you?*)

I: Sí, sí. Bueno, hasta luego, y que te sea leve la vuelta al trabajo, ¡jajaja!

(*Yes, yes. O.K. see you later, and may your return to work be mild, hahaha!*)

H: Haré lo que pueda... (jaja) ¡Adiós!

(*I'll do what I can... (giggles) Bye!!*)

As is apparent, in this encounter, apart from the GREET speech acts in the Opening Phase and the LEAVE-TAKE speech acts in the Closing Phase, there is a verbal Core Phase where the main speech-acts are of the REQUEST (QASK) type because both speakers share the knowledge relevant to the topics touched, such as the fact that they both have been on holidays or that H has a house at the beach.

The humor in Inés's response about the holidays having been short gives way to Inés's final speech act in the encounter, which is a humorous REMARK that is in turn responded to humorously by H before leave-taking. It is worth noticing that the response about the holidays being short is not only a satisfying DISCLOSE speech act responding to Inés's question, but also becomes – due to the fact that it is humorous – a REMARK speech act at the same time, whose satisfying part is in turn carried out by H's laughter and is therefore non-linguistic. This fact also shows that the implicatures worked out by the utterances used may also modify the speech-act pattern of the encounter. In this case, the answer to Inés's question about H's holidays flouted the Maxim of Relevance, for the normally expected answer to such question would be a short description about the holidays, expressing her satisfaction (or not) with the holidays (e.g., “Muy bien, gracias. Fuimos a la montaña y lo pasamos genial” – *Very well, thank you. We went to the mountains and had a great time*). Since the speaker in this case chose to be humorous, the implicature triggered by the DISCLOSE act turned it into a humorous Remark as well, to which the interlocutor in turn responded by means of the non-linguistic act of laughing. The laughter here has an evaluative character, as well as illocutionary force, for it shows H's acceptance of Inés's joke as a good one, and therefore it can be considered as a non-linguistic instance of the OPINE speech act. This is an instance of the way in which social actors use phatic talk to build rapport and camaraderie, and therefore “to shape and form relationships in situ” (Locher & Graham 2010, 1).

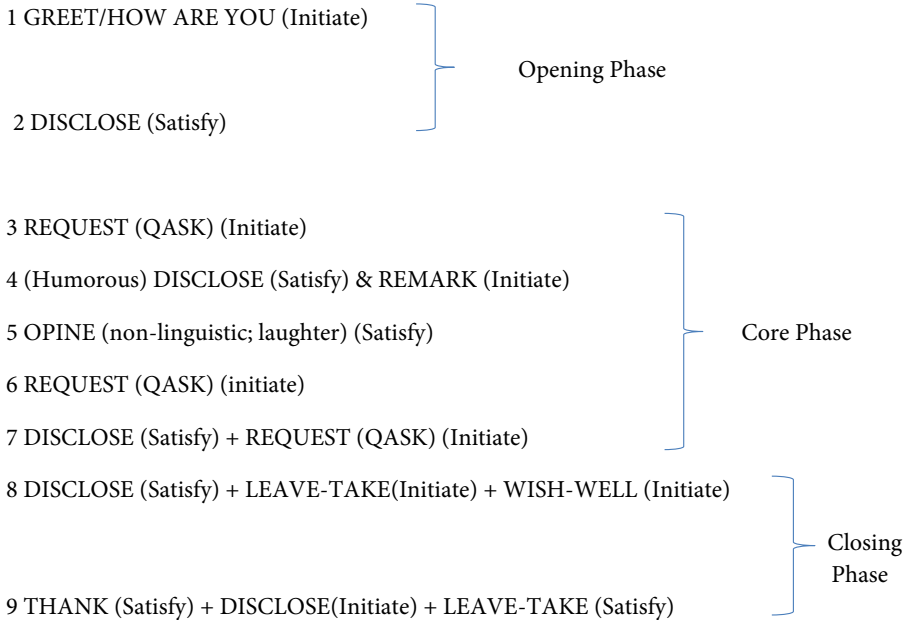
The speech-act pattern of the encounter in 4) is thus the following:

- (4) GREET-HOW ARE YOU/DISCLOSE – REQUEST (QASK)/DISCLOSE & REMARK⁷/ (non-linguistic) OPINE – REQUEST (QASK)/DISCLOSE + REQUEST/DISCLOSE + LEAVE-TAKE + WISH-WELL/THANK + DISCLOSE + LEAVE-TAKE

⁷Notice that the symbol “&” indicates that the same linguistic unit fulfils both types of act. When I use the + sign, in contrast, it means that the acts in the same move are realized by different linguistic elements.



their distribution within the Phases being as follows:



In some of the encounters the first speech act of the Opening Phase is not the prototypical greeting, but an emotional/evaluative Remark having to do with the surprise of the people meeting unexpectedly at the elevator. Therefore, the emotive variable affects the pattern by making the initial greetings unnecessary. Consider 5):

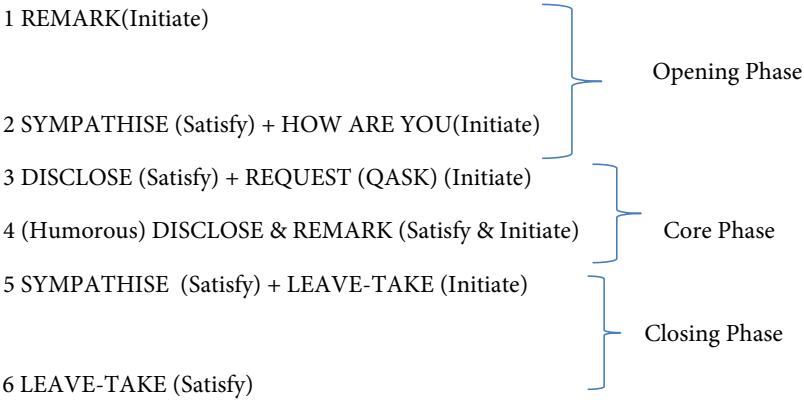
- 5) (K is in the elevator when it stops, and when the door opens, J, a colleague of hers, gets into it too)
- J: ¡Hombre! ¡Qué alegría verte! (Hey! How nice to see you!)
- K: ¡Igualmente digo! ¡Qué tal estás? (Same here! How are you?)
- J: Muy bien, ¿y tú? ¿Qué tal el verano? (Very well, and you? How was the summer?)
- K: ¡Puuuf! ¡Ya ni me acuerdo de las vacaciones!
- (Oughhh! I don't even remember the holidays by now!)
- J: ¡Jajaja! Es verdad, la vorágine del trabajo a la vuelta es abrumadora...
- (Hahaha! yes, the maelstrom of work at the return (from the holidays) is overwhelming...)
- (The elevator stops at J's floor)
- ¡Hasta luego! (See you later!)
- K: Adiós (Bye!)

The speech-act structure for this encounter is the following:

- (5) REMARK/SYMPATHISE + HOW ARE YOU/DISCLOSE + REQUEST (QASK)/
DISCLOSE & REMARK/SYMPATHISE + LEAVE-TAKE/LEAVE-TAKE



presenting the following arrangement of Moves and Phases:



As was the case in 3) above, the Opening Phase in 5) does not contain the prototypical greetings, which, once more, suggests that the GREET type of act is not necessarily anchored to the Opening Phase, and that elevator encounters may be initiated directly with a REMARK (as in this case) or a REQUEST (as in 3)). In this encounter we also see, as in some of the previous examples, that some acts that do not belong to the phatic slot in the system, such as SYMPATHISE or REQUEST, can migrate into it.

The AE in 6) is also an instance of an EE having no greetings in the Opening Phase. This time the phatic topic is different (they talk about the family), but in any case, as is typical of AE, it has to do with the shared relational history of the participants:

- 6) (Leonor is waiting for the elevator and the door opens)
 L: ¡Pero mira quién me vengo a encontrar! ¿¡Qué tal, María? ¡Tanto tiempo!!
(Look who I'm stumbling upon here! How are you, María? Such a long time!)
 M: Hombre, Leonor, ¡qué gusto verte!
(Gee, Leonor, how nice to see you!)
 L: Es curioso que trabajamos en el mismo edificio y no nos vemos casi nunca.
(It's curious that we work in the same building, and we hardly ever see each other)
 M: Sí, es verdad. ¿Qué tal tu familia, tus niños?
(Yes, that's true. How's your family, your children?)
 L: Estupendamente. No me puedo quejar. El niño ya empieza este año la universidad, y la niña es muy buena estudiante y está en 1º de Bachillerato.
(Great. I can't complain. My boy starts his university studies this year, and my girl is a very good student and is in her first year of Baccalaureate)
 M: ¡Jolín! ¡Como pasa el tiempo! ¡Si parece que fue ayer cuando nacieron!
(Gee! How time flies! It feels as if it was yesterday when they were born!)
 L: Pues sí... y nosotros cada vez más mayores...
(True... and we are (therefore) growing older and older...)
 M: Anda, ya estoy en mi piso. Me alegro de haberte visto. ¡A ver si un día nos tomamos un café!!



(Great; I'm already on my floor. Glad to have seen you. Let's see if we get together for a coffee one of these days!)

L: Sí, sí, cuando quieras. Adiós. Saludos a tu esposo e hijos.

(Yes, yes, whenever you want. Bye. Say hi to your husband and children)

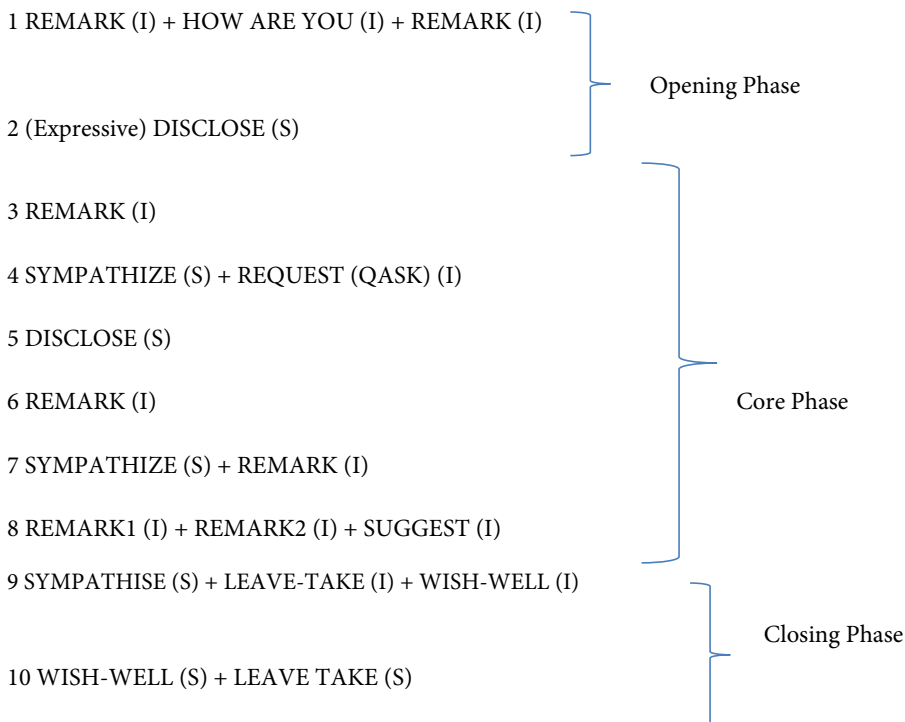
M: Igualmente para los tuyos. Hasta luego

(Same to yours. Bye!)

This is one of the EE with the highest number of moves in the corpus, whose speech-act scheme is the following:

- (6) REMARK + HOW ARE YOU + REMARK/DISCLOSE – REMARK/SYMPATHIZE + REQUEST/DISCLOSE/REMARK/SYMPATHIZE + REMARK/REMARK1 + REMARK2 + SUGGEST/SYMPATHISE + LEAVE-TAKE + WISH-WELL/WISH-WELL + LEAVE TAKE

with the following arrangement of Moves within the Phases. The initials (I) and (S) refer to the *Initiate* and *Satisfy* speech acts in the moves:



As can be observed, in this encounter there are three moves that contain three speech-acts, not all of them having a satisfying speech act in the next move or moves. Nor do we find a Contra Move to complete the exchange. Simply, one or two of the speech-acts are not satisfied. In the first move, whose speech acts are REMARK + HOW ARE YOU + REMARK, the interlocutor (M) only



satisfies the first REMARK speech-act with a DISCLOSE speech-act, but she does not respond to the HOW ARE YOU and the REMARK2 speech acts. And the two REMARKS in Move 8 are not responded to or satisfied either. The only act that is satisfied is SUGGEST, with a SYMPATHISE speech act. The speakers choose those acts they seem to consider more relevant and satisfy them, leaving the others aside. This may be due to the fact that all the interaction is composed of phatic language, and therefore the main aim is just to build rapport and pass the time with conversation until each participant arrives at their floor. Or it may simply be taken as a fact of conversation in general, where we never find perfect exchanges that fit a given theory to the letter. We are here dealing with spontaneous conversation within a ritual encounter. As such, the speakers follow some rules of the ritual, but there is also room for improvisation and free choice of response. It may be the case that these responses are avoided for the sake of the normal flow (Turner 1979) of the encounter, so that the action flows smoothly and not clumsily, but in any case, it is observed that the fact that not all speech acts are satisfied does not seem to be perceived as inappropriate or impolite by the interlocutors; there is an unproblematic realization of the exchanges and moves in the encounter. In other words, there is ritual *equilibrium* in Goffman's sense of the term, which makes the sequence of acts aimed at saving face maintain an appropriate balance in the three phases of the encounter.

Due to space restrictions, it will not be possible to analyze any more of the 70 encounters in the corpus, the main facts and variables having been analyzed above already. I will only mention and add a few facts about the other types of speech acts of the system that were found to migrate into the phatic conversation of our EE, as well as about other topics introduced by the interactants in them.

4.3. Other types of speech acts and topics found in all 70 EE

4.3.1. Speech acts. Even though this does not affect the two main speech act types of EE (SE and AE) and the patterns found in their different phases, it should be added that, in the EE not shown or discussed here, four more types of speech acts were found to be used by the interlocutors: PERMIT, JUSTIFY, INVITE and WILLING. PERMIT is used in the Opening phase of four of the encounters that took place in times of the Covid pandemic, when the first move in the interaction is not a greeting, but a request about the other person willing to get into the elevator together with the speaker or not (*¿Te importa si subo contigo en el ascensor? – Do you mind if I get into the elevator with you?*), in which cases the satisfying speech act was (in all instances) a permission (PERMIT) to get into the elevator (*Sí, ¡sin problemas! – Yes, no problem!*), on some occasions justifying their decision by alluding to the (safe) fact that they were both wearing masks (JUSTIFY).

The speech act of WILLING was found to be occasionally used as the satisfying part of a HOW ARE YOU speech act, as when, after the greeting Opening Phase of an AE, one of the interlocutors asks *¿Qué tal todo?* (How's everything?), and the satisfying reply is *Pues, la verdad, muy cansada, así que quiero tomarme mis vacaciones de este año ya mismo* (Well, actually, very tired, so I want to take my holidays for this year right now), thereby expressing her will.

Finally, the speech act of INVITE was also found in one of the EE, when one of the participants takes advantage of the casual encounter on the elevator to invite his acquaintance to the end of the year party of the company.

Table 2 shows the different kinds of acts that were found in all 70 Elevator Encounters, as they occur within the three phases of Opening, Core and Closing, in both SE and AI.



Table 2. Types of (speech) acts found in Elevator Encounters

Speech acts in stranger encounters		
	Linguistic	Non-linguistic
Opening phase	GREET REQUEST DISCLOSE PERMIT JUSTIFY	
Core Phase	REQUEST THANK REMARK DISCLOSE	Pushing the floor button for another (As an initiating act whose satisfying act is THANK)
Closing Phase	LEAVE-TAKE	
Speech acts in acquaintance encounters		
	Linguistic	Non-linguistic
Opening Phase	GREET HOW ARE YOU REQUEST TELL PERMIT JUSTIFY REMARK DISCLOSE SYMPATHISE	
Core Phase	REMARK DISCLOSE THANK TELL REQUEST REQUEST (QASK) SYMPATHISE SUGGEST INVITE WILLING	Pushing the floor button for another (As an initiating act whose satisfying act is THANK) Laughing (As a satisfying act for a humorous speech act)
Closing Phase	LEAVE-TAKE WISH-WELL DISCLOSE	

The information in Table 2 graphically shows the above-mentioned fact that, in EE, whose talk is essentially and inherently of the phatic kind, other speech acts from the system can migrate into their patterns. Thus, in SE we may also find REQUEST, PERMIT, DISCLOSE and JUSTIFY (apart from the normal GREET) in the Opening Phase and THANK and REQUEST in their Core Phase.



It can also be observed that the possibilities for migration are much richer in AE, due to the fact that the people involved have a relational history. Therefore, in the Opening Phase of AI we can also find REQUEST, TELL, PERMIT, JUSTIFY and SYMPATHISE, in their Core Phase THANK, TELL, REQUEST (QASK), SYMPATHISE, SUGGEST, INVITE, or WILLING, and in their Closing Phase instances of DISCLOSE (generally giving information about the floor in which they are going to get out of the elevator) and WISH-WELL also form part of the possible set of speech acts.

As could be expected, no LEAVE-TAKE acts have been found in the Opening and Core Phases, which is evidence of the (obvious) fact that they are anchored to the Closing Phase.

4.3.2. Topics. As anticipated in Section 2, none of the topics forming part of the exchanges in EE are developed to a greater extent, due to the time and space restrictions inherent to this particular ritual frame, which constitutes solid ground to classify them as essentially phatic in nature: other things being equal, nobody meets in an elevator to talk about business or make important decisions about any work or personal issues. Consequently, this restricts the range of possible topics chosen by the interlocutors, which, in encounters 1) to 6), are the weather, the elevator itself, the holidays, the difficulty of going back to work after the holidays, and the family. In the rest of encounters, we also find other topics, such as the traffic, the Covid-19 pandemic, a party that is being organized on the premises, or the upcoming Christmas season. As [Chafe \(2001\)](#) points out, people are constrained by the need to develop the different topics in a conversation, but in the encounters explored here, they are additionally constrained by the time and space variables, which not only constrict the variety of topics to be chosen, but also their development in any depth.

In some of the SE encounters, as shown in Section 4.1., there are no topics whatsoever, for the people involved simply chose to use the amount of speech acts necessary to cover the minimum consideration for the stranger other, i.e., greetings and leave-taking speech acts, and therefore, there is no verbal Core Phase in which topics could be raised by the interlocutors. The ubiquitous schema ([Bartlett 1932](#); [Chafe 1994](#)) guiding the topics, therefore, can be of two kinds in our EE, namely 1) (occurring only in SE) and 2), (occurring in both SE and AE):

1. Opening Phase – Core Phase without any topic slot – Closing Phase. (SE)
2. Opening Phase – Core Phase with 1–3 topic slots – Closing Phase. (SE & AE)

5. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, I have presented the results of a pragmatic analysis of 70 EE that took place in Madrid, Spain between the years 2020 and 2023. The analysis was mainly carried out from a pragmalinguistic, bottom-up approach, which nevertheless did not leave sociopragmatic and interactional variables aside, for they were considered crucial for the accurate exploration of the speech-act scheme and flow of the encounters.

The point of departure and main theoretical framework of the study has been [House & Kádár's \(2021a\)](#) and [Edmondson et al.'s \(2022\)](#) interactional typology of speech acts, also taking into consideration the theoretical background on the concept of *frame* (e.g., [Chafe 1994](#); [Ter-kourafi 2005](#)) and *ritual frame* ([Turner 1979](#)), within the general broad area of Interpersonal



Pragmatics (Haugh, Kádár & Mills 2013). EE are ritual encounters in the sense that the social actors normally use conventionalized ways to interact when they find themselves within the walls of an elevator, and consequently, these ways of interaction are recurrent, without being always identical, because there is always room for improvisation and creativity due to personal idiosyncrasies.

The findings of the study throw light on the following facts, which allow us to address the research questions posed:

- All the verbal interaction in the corpus EE consists of small talk. People don't meet in elevators to talk about business or develop topics in any depth. (Research Question (RQ) 1)
- In terms of the speech acts used by the participants, the phatic exchanges in our EE contain many more types of acts than the prototypical combination of REMARK and DISCLOSE. Other speech acts (See Table 2 above) can migrate into all three phases of the encounters (Opening, Core and Closing). (RQ 2)
- The patterns of successive speech acts in the encounters vary according to one main variable, namely the relational history of the interlocutors. If the people who unexpectedly meet in the elevator are acquaintances (or friends), the three phases of Opening, Core and Closing normally contain verbal speech acts. This is the case in 58.6% of all EE. If, however, the people in question do not have a relational history, in most of the cases (76.3% of the SE encounters, and 41.4% of all EE) there are no verbal speech acts in the Core Phase. The interactants limit themselves to the phatic greetings in the Opening Phase and the LEAVE-TAKE acts in the Closing Phase, remaining silent in the Core Phase while staring at the walls or door of the elevator, or checking their cellular phone. (RQs 3, 4 & 5)
- Within the Core Phase of both SE and AE, one can find non-verbal or non-linguistic acts (smiling, laughing, pushing the floor button for another, etc.) interspersed with the speech acts, in some instances acting as the initiating part of the exchange, and in some others as its satisfying part. (RQ 2)
- Some utterances may function as both the satisfying part of an exchange and the initiating one of the following one at the same time (e.g., when someone responds to a REMARK, but her response constitutes in itself another REMARK that the interlocutor deems worth replying to by sympathizing or giving her opinion). (RQ 2)
- The speech acts GREET and HOW ARE YOU are not always found in the Opening Phase of the encounter. In some of the EE, this phase can be realized directly by exchanges such as REMARK/DISCLOSE or REQUEST/DISCLOSE, and this does not necessarily generate an impolite evaluation on the part of the interlocutor(s). (RQ 4)
- The only speech acts that have shown to be anchored to one of the phases in EE are the LEAVE-TAKE acts, which unfailingly occur in the Closing Phase of all the EE in the corpus. (RQ 4)
- In some of the moves with more than one speech act in the AE, one or two of the speech acts may not be satisfied, the interlocutors responding to only one of them and therefore giving preference to it. (RQ 3)
- The implicatures worked out by some of the speech acts in the encounters may also modify its speech-act pattern (e.g., humorous remarks that trigger laughter, the laughter thus becoming a non-linguistic evaluative act that fulfils the satisfying part of the exchange). (RQ 5)



- While in most exchanges there are fixed stereotyped sequences of phatic action, there are also episodes where we find verbal and nonverbal improvisation, which does not follow the Initiate-Satisfy pattern to the letter, or simply does not meet the default expectations by generating implicatures and thereafter a modification of the more conventional schema and flow of speech acts in the encounter. (RQ 3)
- As for the topics chosen in the encounters, none of them are developed to a great extent due to the inherent time and space restrictions of the situation. In the core phase of the EE, some of the participants engage in general topics such as the weather, the traffic, the Covid pandemic, the elevator itself, the holidays, the difficulty of going back to work after the holidays, or the family. However, in some of the SE encounters there are no topics whatsoever, the exchange being limited to a minimum consideration for the stranger other by only performing the greeting and leave-taking speech acts in the opening and closing phases, respectively, without giving place to a core phase where some topics could be raised. (RQ 6)
- All in all, the study shows that even though EE follow a very general pattern containing an Opening, a Core and a Closing Phase, the speech act pattern within these phases is not the same in all encounters, for there are sociopragmatic variables (such as the urgency of the situation and especially, the relational history of the interlocutors) that may certainly affect not only the speech-act line of the encounter, but also the topics chosen by the participants. (RQs 1, 2, 3 & 6)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe a debt of gratitude to J. Lachlan Mackenzie for having read and commented on an earlier version of this article, as well as to the anonymous reviewers, all of whom provided very insightful and valuable comments that helped me to improve the quality of this work.

Transcription conventions:

] Simultaneous talk or action

(...) Short pause

(.....) Long pause

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