

# Small Talk in English and Chinese – A contrastive case study

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, we present a contrastive pragmatic analysis of Small Talk in English and Chinese. We use a radically minimal, finite and interactional system of speech acts to study DCTs conducted with U.S. American native speakers of English and native speakers of Chinese. Our analysis points to a number of important differences between Small Talk in the two linguacultures contrasted, such as a reliance on routines in English Small Talk, and an overall reliance on the speech act Remark in Chinese. The influence of the classic sociolinguistic variables Power and Social Distance for the enactment of Small Talk is also shown to be different in English and Chinese.

## KEYWORDS

Small Talk, speech acts, interaction, English, Chinese, routines

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we aim to investigate how Small Talk is enacted in two typologically distant linguacultures: English and Chinese. We believe that it is worth examining Small Talk in these

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languages from a contrastive angle for the following two reasons. First, considering that English as a global lingua franca has many different varieties and conventions, it is very difficult to talk about Small Talk (or any other pragmatic phenomenon) in English *per se* without risking oversimplifying one's object of research. This is exactly why it is fruitful to attempt to pin down conventionalised pragmatic characteristics of Small Talk in English through a contrastive pragmatic approach. Second, it is tempting to exoticise East Asian language use. In intercultural communication in particular, one could witness a tendency of using notions like 'low-/high-involvement cultures', 'collectivity/individuality' and so on when comparing East Asian languages with their 'Western' counterparts. In this paper, we are decidedly against stereotyping a particular East Asian language, such as Chinese, through such non-linguistic terms, all the more because by using such term the researcher may unavoidably decide the outcomes of the analysis at the outset of a study as she tries to verify what seems to have been clear to her right at the beginning. This is why it is useful to contrastively examine data drawn from the typologically distant Chinese and English linguacultures from a bottom-up and language-centred angle.

In our study, we use Discourse Completion Tests (DCTs), although we are duly aware of criticisms of the DCT methodology (see more below), and the related limitations on relying on this methodology. However, following the original designers of this methodology (Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper 1989), we believe that DCTs represent a useful instrument when it comes to comparing language use. Furthermore, in this study we present an experiment where speakers of English and Chinese were asked to realise utterances in increasingly out-of-the-ordinary situations. It would have been very difficult to find naturally occurring data, which represents such a contextual variation in a comparable way.

The present study has the following structure. In Section 2, we overview research with relevance for our study. Section 3 presents our methodology and data, and Section 4 includes our analysis. Finally, in Section 5 this study is concluded.

## 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

An area with a clear relevance for the present paper is research on Small Talk, starting with Malinowski's (1923 [1972]) ground-breaking work. It was Malinowski who first mentioned the notion of "phatic communion", which encompasses "language used in free, aimless, social intercourse" in order to establish human bonds of communion (Malinowski 1923 [1972], 149). To the best of our knowledge, the language-based study of Small Talk began with the studies of Robinson (1972) and Laver (1975, 220–221). Robinson and Laver held different views on Small Talk: Robinson provided a general definition of Small Talk as an informal and non-serious type of talk, while Laver approached Small Talk through a typology of three social functions, including "a propitiatory function" to defuse the potential hostility of silence, an "exploratory function" to achieve consensus among the participants, and "an initiatory function" to get the interaction under way.

Pragmatic research on Small Talk started in the early 1980s with the framework of Edmondson & House (1981), which was later adopted by Schneider (1988) in a follow-up applied study. Edmondson & House (1981) described Small Talk as part of a broader system of Types of Talk, i.e. as a ritual type of Core Talk, which triggers a set of conventionalised speech acts. They



argued that Small Talk is largely Phatic and casual, and its goals are therefore social – showing oneself as agreeable, and basking in the agreeableness of one’s interlocutor.

Along with the work of Edmondson and House, which is basically pragmalinguistic, Small Talk has also been studied in sociopragmatic research. A key researcher in this area is [Holmes \(2000\)](#) who examined the distribution, structure and functions of Small Talk in workplace settings. Holmes approached Types of Talk as a continuum, with ‘core business talk’ and ‘phatic communion’ separated from ‘work-related’ and ‘social’ talk. Small Talk also played a key role in the seminal work of [Blum-Kulka \(2000\)](#) who studied gossip in the family through socialisation. Blum-Kulka found that children received important social gains from family gossip as they fully participated in multiparty and intergenerational Small Talk. The phenomenon of Small Talk has also been examined in recent pragmatic inquiries. For example, [Barron & Black \(2015\)](#) investigated how L1 and L2 speakers of English engage in Small Talk in the opening phase of a voice-based Skype telecollaboration by analysing their topic shifts, replies and use of backchannels, concluding that Small Talk offers possibilities for developing interactive competencies. [Maíz-Arévalo \(2017\)](#) also analysed computer-mediated phatic exchanges performed by intercultural students during a collaborative assignment with English as a lingua franca. Maíz-Arévalo found that phatic talk functions essentially to build rapport and boost collaboration as a group.

Previous discussions on the validity of DCT research also bear relevance for the present inquiry. Some scholars, in linguistic politeness research in particular, have criticised DCTs, arguing that they represent artificial, de-contextualised and thus essentially ‘useless’ data (see e.g. [Eelen 2001](#); [Mills 2003](#)). However, many politeness researchers (e.g. [Lorenzo-Dus & Bou-Franch 2003](#); [Marti 2006](#); [Ogiermann 2009](#); [Félix-Brasdefer & Mugford 2018](#)) and experts of others fields such as second language pragmatics (e.g. [Bardovi-Harlig 2018](#); [Bardovi-Harlig & Su 2023](#)) have argued that the DCT remains a very useful methodology, in particular when it comes to conducting a contrastive pragmatic analysis and also when the researcher needs to control the parameters of a particular inquiry.

Another area of research with relevance to the present study is contrastive pragmatics. As [House & Kádár \(2021a\)](#) argued, examining language use in typologically distant linguacultures can be particularly rewarding because such data allows the researcher to identify instances of language use, which gain salience mainly through the lens of contrast. In the spirit of fully-fledged contrastive pragmatics, [House & Kádár \(2021a\)](#) warned strongly against relying on cultural notions because the use of such notions precludes looking at one’s data in a bottom-up fashion, i.e. through the cold eye of the linguist. Our study also follows this approach, i.e. we refrain from interpreting our data beyond what is clearly there in terms of language use, and so we will not attempt to follow-up on the relevance of our findings for the infamous ‘East–West divide’ and other intercultural binary notions.

### 3. METHODOLOGY AND DATA

#### 3.1. Methodology

In [Edmondson & House \(1981\)](#) and [Edmondson, House & Kádár \(2023\)](#), Small Talk is defined as a type of Core Talk, which triggers a cluster of conventionalised speech acts. [Figure 1](#) displays the system of Types of Talk.



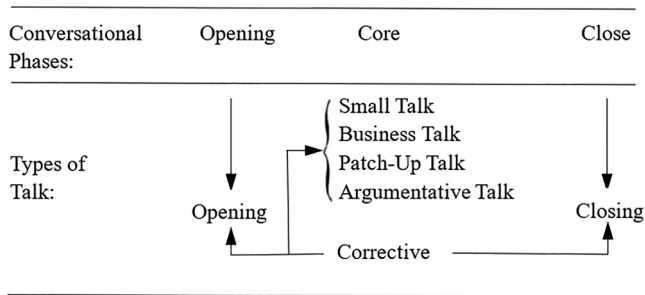


Figure 1. Types of talk (adapted from Edmondson & House 1981, 199)

As Figure 1 shows, Small Talk does not usually occur in the Opening and Closing phases of an interaction. Although both Opening and Closing, as well as Small Talk are ritual in nature, the Opening and Closing phases follow an interactional structure which triggers ritual behaviour, i.e. they tend to be realised by speech acts which are seemingly not meaningful but have an important symbolic interactional function (see more in House & Kádár 2023). Small Talk, on the other hand, is a Type of Talk which is not structurally ritual but rather gains a ritual character in interaction,<sup>1</sup> i.e. it is realised in interaction according to conventions through which the participants work out and manage their relationships. In Core Talk, switches can occur between Small Talk and other Types of Talk such as Business Talk. For example, interactants engaged in Business Talk may temporarily switch to Small Talk in order to relieve the tension of a busy meeting.

Following Edmondson, House & Kádár (2023), we define Small Talk as follows:

Small Talk is an archetype of ritual interaction, in that the pragmatic characteristics of Small Talk embody rights and obligations embedded in the context, and they vary significantly across linguacultures. The main speech act categories through which Small Talk is realised are informative in nature, that is, they consist of Remarks, Tells and Discloses (possibly Opines), and, necessarily, the matching Requests for realisations of these speech act categories. In terms of interactional structure, Small Talk can become significantly complex, despite that Small Talk is not meant to impose a threat to the other's face.

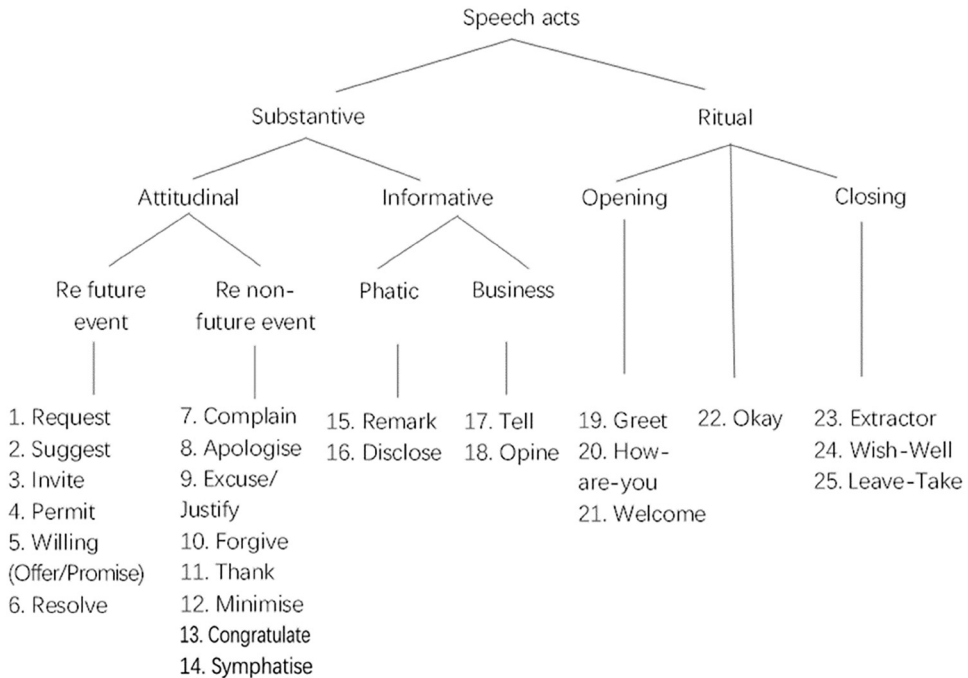
The speech acts included in the Small Talk definition above can be defined as follows:

- Remark: A typically Phatic speech act through which the speaker shows himself favourably disposed towards his addressee.
- Tell: An Informative speech act which states a piece of information in a matter-of-fact tone.
- Opine: An Informative speech act which states a piece of information as the opinion of the speaker.
- Disclose: This speech act essentially gives biographical information, such that through this information the addressee 'gets to know one better'.

<sup>1</sup>In pragmatic research on ritual (see Kádár 2024), it is worth distinguishing structural and interactional types of ritual. Structural ritual encompass expressions, speech acts and large stretches of interaction which occur in the Opening and Closing phases, which are seemingly meaningless but have an important social meaning. Functional rituals, on the other hand, are those rituals which occur in other parts of an interaction, and which encompass all forms of language use which gain a ritual function in interaction.



While Small Talk typically enacted through the above-outlined limited set of speech acts, the use of these particular speech acts only represents a default situation. That is, the speech acts through which Small Talk is realised is subject to both contextual and linguacultural variation. Edmondson & House (1981), and Edmondson, House & Kádár (2023) propose the following radically minimal, finite and interactional typology of speech acts through which we aim to investigate which speech act types are realised in our English and Chinese datasets (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Our speech act typology (Edmondson & House 1981; Edmondson, House & Kádár 2023)

This typology of speech acts is interactional in two respects. First, using this typology one always interprets an utterance as a particular speech act by considering its relationship to the previous and following turns of talk in a particular context. Second, this typology affords an interaction interpretation of a speech act in a particular interactional slot, by taking account of what we call ‘altered’ interactional uses of speech acts (see also House & Kádár 2021b). For example, Request is a typically Attitudinal speech act, which by default is not a speech act which could be assumed to characterise Small Talk. However, as our case study will show, there are situations where Requests tend to be frequented in Small Talk in order to create rapport with the interlocutor, and our system allows the analysis of such case by only setting a default function of speech acts.



### 3.2. Data

In the analysis presented in this paper, we employed DCTs with two groups of ten respondents: one group included native U.S. speakers of English and the other group native speakers of Chinese from the Northeast of China. We presented the following three DCT sets to our respondents:

#### *First DCT set*

1. You are sitting in a doctor's waiting room and your friend sits next to you. Only the two of you are in the room. You feel you should say something. What would you say? [-P,-SD]
2. You are sitting in a doctor's waiting room and your friend's friend sits next to you. Only the two of you are in the room. You feel you should say something. What would you say? [-P,+SD]
3. You are sitting in a doctor's waiting room and your teacher sits next to you. Only the two of you are in the room. You feel you should say something. What would you say? [+P,-SD]
4. You are sitting in a doctor's waiting room and a professor you distinctly know sits next to you. Only the two of you are in the room. You feel you should say something. What would you say? [+P,+SD]

#### *Second DCT set*

1. You are sitting in a bus stop, waiting for a bus, and your friend sits next to you. There are many people next to you, so what you are saying can be overheard. You feel you should say something. What would you say? [-P,-SD]
2. You are sitting in a bus stop, waiting for a bus, and your friend's friend sits next to you. There are many people next to you, so what you are saying can be overheard. You feel you should say something. What would you say? [-P,+SD]
3. You are sitting in a bus stop, waiting for a bus, and your teacher sits next to you. There are many people next to you, so what you are saying can be overheard. You feel you should say something. What would you say? [+P,-SD]
4. You are sitting in a bus stop, waiting for a bus, and a professor you distinctly know sits next to you. You feel you should say something. There are many people next to you, so what you are saying can be overheard. What would you say? [+P,+SD]

#### *Third DCT set*

1. You are participating in an English course and the foreign lecturer is not coming. Your best friend is sitting next to you and others you know are already around who may hear what you say. You feel you should say something. What would you say? [-P,-SD]
2. You are participating in an English course and the foreign lecturer is not coming. Your friend's friend is sitting next to you and others you know are already around who may hear what you say. You feel you should say something. What would you say? [-P,+SD]
3. You are participating in an English course and the foreign lecturer is not coming. Your supervisor was asked to join this event and she is sitting next to you and others you know are already around who may hear what you say. You feel you should say something because the professor looks idle and wishing you to say something. What would you say? [+P,-SD]
4. You are participating in an English course and the foreign lecturer is not coming. A professor whom you slightly know was asked to join this event and she is sitting next to you, while others you know are already around who may hear what you say. You feel you should say



something because the professor looks idle and wishing you to say something. What would you say? [+P,+SD]

In the DCTs, we used the standard sociolinguistic parameters Social Distance and Power [+/-SD,+/-P]. In pragmatics, it was the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (SSCARP) (Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper 1989) which first used the variables of [+/-SD,+/-P] on a large scale. Later on, scholars such as Cohen (2008) and McConarchy (2019) introduced other variables, and recently Nilsson et al. (2020, 2) argued that “age, gender, participant roles, medium and venue affect speakers’ choice of greeting form”. Notwithstanding the importance of such additional variables, in this study we rely on the basic [+/-SD,+/-P] variables because we are interested in the contrastive question whether these major variables trigger any replicable pragmatic differences between Small Talk in English and Chinese.

The above-outlined DCTs centre on three different scenarios with an increase sense of out of the ordinary. As part of our investigation, we pursued particular interest in how speakers of English and Chinese cope with increasingly extraordinary situations in terms of Small Talk. Arguably, DCT 1, 2 and 3 represent different degrees of the extraordinary on a pragmatic scale (Leech 1983). Further, all the above DCT scenarios feature vague situation descriptions where the interactants are already physically close to each other when Small Talk occurs, instead of meeting abruptly. By providing such vague descriptions, our goal was to prompt our respondents to provide speech acts which they associated with Small Talk rather than Opening, even though the scenarios featured in the DCTs may also involve interactional Opening. This design allowed us to investigate if and when speakers of English and Chinese engage in Opening Talk before moving to Small Talk in the settings presented to them.

## 4. ANALYSIS

The present analysis is divided into three parts. We first present the results of the English DCT conducted with English-speaking respondents, we then present the results of the Chinese DCTs, and finally a contrastive analysis of the outcomes of the above DCTs is provided.

### 4.1. English DCTs conducted with English-speaking participants

Table 1 summarises the frequency of various speech acts in our first DCT featuring a doctor’s waiting room.

**Table 1.** Speech acts (in decreasing frequency) in our first DCT (English-speaking)

	Greet	How-are-you	Remark	Welcome	Request (for information)	Disclose	Opine	Suggest
[-P,-SD]	7	6	1	2	2	2	1	1
[-P,+SD]	9	6	3	1	2	2	1	0
[+P,-SD]	8	4	5	3	0	0	0	0
[+P,+SD]	8	3	5	4	0	0	0	0
Total	32	19	14	10	4	4	2	1



As the table shows, the most frequent speech acts in our first DCT conducted with English-speaking participants are Greet and How-are-you. The frequency of these speech acts is not surprising: as we argued elsewhere (House et al. 2022), speakers of English tend to utter the speech act Greet in routinised interactions, often in combination with the speech acts How-are-you and Welcome. Considering that in our DCT scenario the interactants accidentally meet, realising *Greet + speech act* combinations is clearly in line with a broader Anglophone convention. The following examples illustrate such speech act combinations are realised in our data:

- |     |  |          |
|-----|--|----------|
| (1) | Hey, I hope you are doing well.<br>GREET + HOW-ARE-YOU             | [-P,-SD] |
| (2) | Hi, how are you! Good to see you!<br>GREET + HOW-ARE-YOU + WELCOME | [-P,+SD] |
| (3) | Hi, Mr. _____, It's nice to see you.<br>GREET + WELCOME            | [+P,-SD] |
| (4) | Hello, Professor _____. I am glad to see you.<br>GREET + WELCOME   | [+P,-SD] |

As Table 1 shows, Remark is a relatively frequent speech act in our small corpus, which gains salience in the [+P] setting. According to Edmondson & House (1981, 169–170),

Remarks are essentially phatic in nature, and H-supportive in intent. In making a Remark, a speaker shows himself favourably disposed towards his hearer. ... The topic is likely to be derived from the immediate context of the situation, which by definition both S and H share. Note that for S, H is part of the immediate context of situation, such that we include under Remarks utterances drawing attention to some features of H's person, or belongings – utterances which in everyday terms we might refer to as compliments.

From the point of view of Small Talk, the Phatic speech act Remark is of particular relevance here: according to our observation, participants tend to realise trivial Remarks – often stating the obvious – in order to achieve rapport with their interactants. The following examples illustrate the use of Remarks in the four interpersonal scenarios in our first DCT:

- |     |   |          |
|-----|---|----------|
| (5) | I didn't know you'd be here. Let's visit later this week and catch up.<br>REMARK + SUGGEST  | [-P,-SD] |
| (6) | Hello! We haven't seen each other in a while. I'm _____(name).<br>GREET + REMARK + DISCLOSE | [-P,+SD] |





- (7) Oh, hi! How are you doing? It's been a long time.  
GREET + HOW-ARE-YOU + REMARK [+P,-SD]
- (8) Hello, Professor. They seem to be running late today with appointments. I hope you don't have to wait too long.  
GREET + REMARK + REMARK [+P,+SD]

In our interpretation, the frequency of Remarks correlates with the [+P] variable. We interpret this tendency as an outcome of a greater need to overcome embarrassment when someone meets an interactant with power.

The speech act Request (for information) is frequented in the [-P] scenarios. The following examples illustrate its use:

- (9) Oh, hey, how's it going? What are you here for?  
GREET + HOW-ARE-YOU + REQUEST (FOR INFORMATION) [-P,-SD]
- (10) Hi, how are you? Do you remember me, I'm xyz.  
GREET + HOW-ARE-YOU + REQUEST (FOR INFORMATION) + DISCLOSE [-P,+SD]

As these examples show, such Requests aim to create rapport. It is interesting to note that in example (9) the Request (for information) "What are you here for" could even be interpreted as a How-are-you in the particular setting of a doctor's waiting room – i.e. such Requests tend to have a clear rapport-triggering function, as they lead to the realisation of the speech act Disclose on the recipient's part. The fact that such Requests (unlike more routinised How-are-you) here occur in the [-P] scenarios suggests that in power-relationships realising utterances like example (10) might be interpreted as intrusive and overstepping the line of Small Talk.

Disclose is another speech act which tends to be frequented in the [-P] scenarios. According to Edmondson & House (1981, 173), "[a] Disclose essentially gives biographical information, such that through this information the hearer 'knows one better'." The following example illustrates realisations of Disclose in our data:

- (11) I'm always so nervous at this office. You look calm.  
DISCLOSE + OPINE [-P,-SD]

The speech acts Opine and Suggest occur very rarely in the first DCT, so we do not discuss them here.

Table 2 summarises the frequency of various speech acts in our second DCT featuring a doctor's waiting room.



**Table 2.** Speech acts (in decreasing frequency) in our second DCT (English-speaking)

	Greet	Request (for information)	How-are- you	Welcome	Disclose	Remark	Willing (Offer)	Tell/ Opine
[-P,-SD]	8	7	4	2	0	1	0	2
[-P,+SD]	9	6	4	1	4	1	0	0
[+P,-SD]	9	2	2	6	0	0	0	0
[+P,+SD]	9	1	5	5	2	1	2	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>

The speech act Greet and its combinations with How-are-you and Welcome are similarly routinised with what we could observe in the first set of English DCTs. What slightly differs in this DCT set is that the speech act Request (for information) tends to be realised in all interpersonal relationships. The following examples illustrate its use:

- (12) Oh, Hi! How are you? What's going on?  
GREET + HOW-ARE-YOU + REQUEST (FOR INFORMATION) [-P,-SD]
- (13) Hi! Where are you off to?  
GREET + REQUEST FOR INFORMATION [-P,+SD]
- (14) Nice to see you, are you heading home?  
WELCOME + REQUEST FOR INFORMATION [+P,-SD]
- (15) Oh, hello, how are you doing? What are you doing here?  
GREET + HOW-ARE-YOU + REQUEST (FOR INFORMATION) [+P,-SD]

The reason why such Requests occur in [+P] scenarios in this DCT set may be that inquiring about the other in a bus stop is far less intrusive as doing the same in a doctor's waiting room, i.e. the Request can contribute to the enhancement of rapport also in [+P] relationships. However, the fact that such Requests are more preferred in [-P] settings shows that they may nevertheless be perceived as face-threatening.

It is also worth referring to realisations of Disclose in this dataset due to their relative frequency:

- (16) Hello, \_\_\_\_\_. I'm \_\_\_\_\_'s friend.  
GREET + DISCLOSE [-P,+SD]
- (17) Hi, Dr. \_\_\_\_\_. I have your class on Tuesdays. It's nice to see you.  
GREET + DISCLOSE + WELCOME [+P,+SD]

Reflecting on various realisations of Disclose in examples (11), (12), (17) and (18), we can argue that in [+SD] settings Disclose operates as a self-identification, while in [-SD] settings it fulfils other functions, like reflecting on the speaker's mindset.

Considering that Remark, Willing (Offer) and Tell/Opine are infrequent in this DCT set, we do not reflect on them here.

Table 3 summarises the frequency of various speech acts in our third DCT featuring a classroom.



**Table 3.** Speech acts (in decreasing frequency) in our third DCT (English-speaking)

	Request (for information)	Greet	Apologise	Opine	Tell	Remark	How- are-you	Suggest	Willing
[-P,-SD]	10	1	0	1	2	3	2	1	0
[-P,+SD]	11	2	0	1	0	1	1	1	0
[+P,-SD]	5	1	4	2	0	1	1	0	2
[+P,+SD]	7	5	3	0	2	0	0	0	0
Total	32	9	7	4	4	4	4	2	2

As the table shows, unlike in the other two scenarios, in the third DCT setting the speech act Greet – including Greet and How-are-you and/or Welcome combinations – are relatively rare. Instead, the most frequent speech act is Request (for information). The following examples show the use of this speech act in the four different interpersonal scenarios:

- (18) Where the hell is the teacher?  
REQUEST FOR INFORMATION [-P,-SD]
- (19) What's happening? Do you know?  
REQUEST (FOR INFORMATION) + REQUEST (FOR INFORMATION) [-P,+SD]
- (20) Are they going to cancel this class now, do you think?  
REQUEST FOR INFORMATION [+P,-SD]
- (21) Do you think they will reschedule this for later this week?  
REQUEST (FOR INFORMATION) [+P,-SD]

In our view, the frequency of the speech act Request (for information) can be explained through the nature of the situation where something extraordinary happens. That is, in such a scenario, many language users apparently start to relate Small Talk to the extraordinary scene. Thus, such Requests (for information) which normally belong to Business Talk are by default not Phatic in nature, i.e. they 'migrate' (House & Kádár 2021b) into a Phatic role. The reason why such a migration is not happening in the previous DCT scenario featuring a bus stop is that busses are not common to be late, i.e. the bus stop scene does not represent the realm of extraordinary from the participants' point of view.

A relevant point to note is that the out of the ordinary scene also triggers various Remarks which are realised as quasi-Requests for information, as the following examples show:

- (22) I wonder what we're supposed to do now?  
REMARK [-P,-SD]
- (23) I wonder where the teacher is.  
REMARK [-P,+SD]



The reason why we interpreted such utterances as Remarks rather than Requests (for information) is that in such cases the speaker realises rhetorical questions with a clear Phatic interactional goal. Not all Remarks are formulated in this way in our data, as the following example illustrates:

- (24) It's getting late—want to get coffee before the next class?  
REMARK + SUGGEST [-P,-SD]

The sense of the extraordinary also influences the way in which the speech acts Greet and How-are-you are realised in this setting: they are not used on their own, unlike in the other two DCT sets, but rather they co-occur with either Requests (for information) or Remarks. The following examples illustrate this tendency:

- (25) Hello! What do we do now?  
GREET + REQUEST FOR INFORMATION [-P,-SD]
- (26) How is it going? Do you know if the lecturer is going to come?  
HOW-ARE-YOU + REQUEST (FOR INFORMATION) [-P,+SD]
- (27) Hello, Ms. \_\_\_\_\_. How are you? The lecturer is not here yet.  
GREET + HOW-ARE-YOU + REMARK [-P,+SD]
- (28) Hello, Dr. Xyz. Do you know what is happening here? Will the lecturer be coming?  
GREET + REQUEST (FOR INFORMATION) + REQUEST (FOR INFORMATION) [+P,+SD]

A noteworthy speech act in the present DCT set is Apologise, which according to [Table 3](#) above is frequent in [+P] scenarios. The following examples illustrate its use:

- (29) This seems like a poor use of your time. I'm sorry.  
OPINE + APOLOGISE [-P,+SD]
- (30) Oh, hello, it's nice to see you. Apologies, but I'm not sure this class is happening.  
GREET + WELCOME + APOLOGISE + REMARK [+P,+SD]

The reason why our participants used Apologise in such settings is probably not that they felt responsible for a scenario they had no control over, but rather that apologising helped them to create a common ground with the lecturer, hence initiating Small Talk. Because of this, we believe that here once again one can witness a 'migrated' speech act: while according to [Edmondson & House \(1981\)](#) Apologise is an Attitudinal (past-related) speech act, here it gains a clear Phatic role and loses from its Apologise function.

## 4.2. DCTs conducted with Chinese-speaking participants

[Table 4](#) summarises the frequency of various speech acts in our first DCT featuring a doctor's waiting room.



**Table 4.** Speech acts (in decreasing frequency) in our first DCT (Chinese-speaking)

	Remark	Greet	How-are-you	Request (for information)	Tell	Suggest	Disclose	Willing
[-P,-SD]	9	2	4	1	0	2	0	0
[-P,+SD]	8	5	0	1	2	1	0	0
[+P,-SD]	7	6	4	1	1	0	1	2
[+P,+SD]	9	7	1	3	1	0	1	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>

As the table shows, Remark is by far the most frequently used speech act in this set of DCTs. The following examples illustrate the realisation of this speech act in the four interpersonal scenarios:

- (31) 看来医生也不好做，星期天居然只有我们两个病人。  
It seems that doctors are slow today. On Sunday, we are the only two patients.  
REMARK + REMARK [-P,-SD]
- (32) 兄弟你咋也来这儿了，你是哪儿不舒服啊，你最近在忙啥呢？  
Brother, you're here as well, what's the matter, you've been very busy lately.  
REMARK + HOW-ARE-YOU + REQUEST (FOR INFORMATION) [+P,+SD]
- (33) 老师，您也在啊？  
Teacher, you're also here?  
REMARK [+P,-SD]
- (34) 老师，看您最近瘦了不少呀！  
Teacher, I see that you have lost a lot of weight recently!  
REMARK [+P,+SD]

What these examples and the overall frequency of this speech act show is that speakers of Chinese tend to disprefer routinised solutions in this setting and rather refer the situation enveloping the participants (see also House 2006). Some of the Remarks in the present DCT set are not only banal but also border on the 'intrusive' from a culture-outsider point of view, as example (34) shows. All such 'intrusive' cases include Remarks which are very close to the speech act How-are-you, but which do not transform into a real How-are-you because they do not take the form of an inquiry about the other's wellbeing. We believe that such instances of language use are not 'intrusive' from a culture-insider perspective – rather, they are ritual utterances through which rapport is created with the interlocutor. This interpretation is also supported by the fact that in various [+P] utterances our participants realised the speech act Request (for information) in similarly 'intrusive' ritual ways, as the following example shows:



- (35) 老师您哪里不舒服呀?  
Teacher, where do you feel unhealthy?  
REQUEST (FOR INFORMATION) [+P,-SD]

While in our pragmalinguistic research we do not consider ideologies and other grand notions, it is worth here to refer to the study of Kádár (2016) where he argued that (Neo-)Confucian ideological influence may be captured in Chinese language use if one looks at pragmatic realisation patterns in data, instead of assuming that such ideologies influence language use. Indeed, what is likely to happen in such utterances is that ‘intrusive’ ritual inquiries are not only tolerated but endorsed in a student–teacher relationship where the student is supposed to ‘take care’ of the teacher like a child taking care of their parents.

The second most frequent speech in the present set of DCTs is Greet. One quantitative feature of this speech act which immediately catches one’s eye is that it is not ubiquitous unlike in English, and it rarely co-occurs with How-are-you-s, and there is not *Greet* + *Welcome* combination. The following examples illustrate uses of Greet in the present DCT set:

- (36) 嗨，你也来看病吗?  
Hai, you also wait for the doctor, aren’t you?  
GREET + REMARK [-P,-SD]
- (37) 嗨，真巧。  
Hai, what a coincidence.  
GREET + REMARK [-P,+SD]
- (38) 嗨，老师，您也来看病吗?  
Hai, teacher, are you (V pronoun) also waiting for the doctor?  
GREET + REMARK [+P,-SD]
- (39) 李教授好，没想到在这里见到您，您也不舒服吗?  
Hi Professor Li, I haven’t thought that I will meet you here. Are you also feeling unwell?  
GREET + REMARK + HOW-ARE-YOU [+P,+SD]

The to Such non-ubiquity of Greet is not surprising: in House et al. (2022) we argued that unlike in many ‘Western’ linguacultures Greet is not ‘compulsory’ in Chinese. What is more surprising, however, that apart from the [+P,+SD] scenario our participants practically always Greet the other by using code-switching, e.g. through the form *Hai* 嗨 (for ‘hi’), obviously borrowed from English. We interpret this code-switching as motivated by the need to use a routinised expression which is in-between using a formal Greet form and simply Alerting the other to one’s presence, which is shown by the following example:

- (40) \*\*教授，真巧在这里遇到您，上次听您的讲座真是太精彩了。  
Professor x, what a coincidence that we meet, I heard that you gave a wonderful lecture last time.  
REMARK + REMARK [+P,+SD]



Another relatively frequent speech act in this set of DCTs is Request (for information). As the following example shows, this speech act is realised in the form of general questions, making it close to a Remark:

- (41) 还有多久啊?  
How long do we need to wait?  
REQUEST (FOR INFORMATION) [-P,+SD]

We do not analyse the rest of the speech acts in Table 4 above due to their low frequency. Table 5 summarises the frequency of various speech acts in our second DCT featuring a bus stop.

**Table 5.** Speech acts (in decreasing frequency) in our second DCT (Chinese-speaking)

	Remark	Greet	Request (for information)	Tell	Suggest	How-are-you	Disclose
[-P,-SD]	10	1	3	1	1	0	1
[-P,+SD]	14	3	1	1	0	0	0
[+P,-SD]	12	2	0	1	2	3	0
[+P,+SD]	10	7	1	2	1	0	1
Total	34	13	5	5	4	3	2

Once again, Remark is the most frequent speech act – in fact, it is so frequent that in the [-P,+SD] setting it occurs more than one time in different utterances. The following examples show realisations of this speech act:

- (42) 这车啥时候能来呀，这么热的天，都等了这么长时间了，热死我了。  
When will this bus come? I have been waiting for such a long time on such a hot day. I feel so hot.  
REMARK + REMARK + DISCLOSE [-P,-SD]
- (43) 今天这车怎么了，这么长时间不来，大热天的，给咱们晒的这。  
What's wrong with the bus today, it hasn't come here for so long, it's a hot day, we will get sunburnt.  
REMARK + REMARK + REMARK + REMARK [-P,+SD]
- (44) 王老师，您好!您出门啊。  
Professor Wang, hello! You are also going out.  
GREET + REMARK [+P,-SD]
- (45) 李教授好，好巧在这里遇到您，要出门吗?  
Hi Professor Li, what a coincidence to meet you here. Are you also going outside?  
GREET + REMARK + REMARK [+P,+SD]



Similar to what we could witness in the previous DCT set, Remark is bound to the situation, hence the monotonous nature of the Remark realisations here. Also, similar to example (38) above, some Remarks masquerade as Requests (for information), such as the second Remark in example (45), but they are not actual Requests because they are asking the obvious. The above examples also show that the speech act Greet mainly becomes important (if at all) in [+P] settings.

As Table 5 above shows, there are some real Requests (for information) in the present dataset. They nearly all include cases which are near-Remarks but which we did not categorise as Remark because they ask for real information, as in the following case:

- (46) 你准备去哪儿啊?  
Where are you off?  
REQUEST (FOR INFORMATION) [-P,-SD]

The only exception is the following utterance:

- (47) 一会儿吃什么?  
What do you eat later?  
REQUEST (FOR INFORMATION) [-P,-SD]

The frequency of ‘near-Remark’ Requests (for information) shows that this setting tends to trigger Remark for speakers of Chinese. A related point to note is that Remark in this dataset takes many forms, such as quasi-Congratulates, as in the following utterance:

- (48) 老师，最近看您发了不少文章呀，太牛了!  
Teacher, I saw that you published a lot of articles recently, it’s amazing!  
TELL + REMARK + REMARK [+P,-SD]

While the two Remarks in this utterance seem to convey a congratulate to the recipient, in fact they are still Remarks rather than Congratulates. It is worth here referring to Edmondson & House (1981, 170) who argued as follows about Remark,

[n]ote that for S, H is part of the immediate context of situation, such that we include under Remarks utterances drawing attention to some features of H’s person, or belongings – utterances which in everyday terms we might refer to as compliments.

Such Remarks relate to the previously mentioned notion of the (Neo-)Confucian enactment of ‘intrusive’ respect and concern: the participant made a complimentary Remark to the recipient in a setting which may not require an outburst of respect from a culture-outsider point of view. It is very likely, however, that from a culture-insider point of view this repeated Remark is ritual as a quasi-Remark through which the waiting situation can be better endured.

We do not analyse the rest of the speech acts in Table 5 above due to their low frequency.

Table 6 summarises the frequency of various speech acts in our third DCT featuring a classroom.





**Table 6.** Speech acts (in decreasing frequency) in our third DCT (Chinese-speaking)

	Remark	Request (for information/to-do-x)	Tell	Greet	How-are-you	Suggest
[-P,-SD]	12	2	0	0	1	0
[-P,+SD]	11	0	0	2	1	0
[+P,-SD]	11	3	4	0	0	1
[+P,+SD]	10	4	4	3	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>

Notwithstanding the relatively surprising nature of the absence of a lecturer, there are relatively few genuine Requests (for information) in the present Chinese DCT set – rather, our participants realised many Remarks, although some of these Remarks were cloaked as Requests (for information). Consider the following examples:

- (49) 这老师咋还不来，还有多久这课开始啊，不知道咱俩能不能听懂哈哈。  
Why hasn't this lecturer come yet? How long will it take for this class to start? I don't know if the two of us can understand hahaha.  
REMARK + REMARK + REMARK [-P,-SD]
- (50) 老师咋还没来，今天不会是有事情吧，哈哈。  
Why hasn't the teacher come yet, maybe he is busy with something else today, haha.  
REMARK + REMARK [-P,+SD]
- (51) 老师，要不我问问发生了什么情况?怎么还没来呢?  
Teacher, how about if I asked what happened? Why is the teacher not here as yet?  
SUGGEST + REMARK [+P,-SD]
- (52) 好奇怪，老师怎么还不来呀?  
It's weird, why on earth has the teacher not arrived yet?  
REMARK + REMARK [+P,-SD]

As all these examples show, the extraordinary nature of the situation triggers Remarks which take the form of a Request (for information) but cannot become real Requests simply because they are rhetorical. It is worth noting that not all Remarks are formulated in this way in our DCT set, as the following examples show:

- (53) 老师，这国外老师好像还没来啊，您也需要来听听这趟课吗，看来这讲课老师讲的挺好的，一会儿我也得认真听听了哈哈。  
Teacher, it seems that the foreign teacher hasn't come yet. Do you need to come to this class too? It seems that this class is so good, and I will have to listen carefully while haha.  
REMARK + REQUEST (FOR INFORMATION) + REMARK [+P,-SD]



- (54) 老师您今天也来了呀, John (the foreign lecture)平时很准时的, 今天没准遇到什么事儿来晚啦。  
 Ah, you are here, Professor, John (the foreign lecturer) is usually on time, and there must be a reason why he is late today.  
 REMARK + REMARK + REMARK [ +P,-SD]

Along with Remark, a speech act in this dataset deserving attention is Request (for information/to-do-x), illustrated by the following examples:

- (55) 上回布置的作业你写完了吗?  
 Have you finished the homework assigned last time?  
 REQUEST FOR INFORMATION [-P,-SD]
- (56) 老师, 最近我一直在思考研究中语料的选择, 发现前人研究中新闻话语和媒体话语研究最多, 我想如果还继续研究这个领域有点难辟蹊径, 但是合适的新语料又没有发现, 想麻烦老师您给我些建议。  
 Teacher, recently I have been thinking about the choice of corpus in my research and found that news discourse and media discourse are the most researched in previous studies. I think it is a bit difficult to find a new way if we continue to study this field, and no suitable new corpus has been found. I want to trouble you, Teacher, please give me some advice.  
 TELL + TELL + OPINE + GROUNDER REQUEST (TO-DO-X) [ +P,-SD]
- (57) \*\*教授, 我上次听了您的讲座, 觉得受益匪浅, 我也想做一些相关研究, 但是不知从何入手, 您觉得我先从哪些书看起比较好?  
 Professor x, I listened to your lecture last time and felt that I benefited a lot. I also want to do research related to you field, but I don't know where to start. Which books do you think I should read first?  
 TELL + REMARK + DISCLOSE + REQUEST (FOR INFORMATION) [ +P,-SD]

What is noteworthy about all these Requests is that they do not concern the immediate (extraordinary) context, but rather they relate to other activities of the respondent.

### 4.3. Contrastive analysis

To sum up our analysis of the three English DCT sets, it is clear that by default speakers of English frequent the speech acts Greet, How-are-you and Welcome in situations that trigger Small Talk. In certain situations, English respondents may not even directly venture to 'Small Talk proper' but rather realise speech acts such as Greet, How-are-you and Welcome, representing Opening Talk, even though it is clear that such speech acts trigger Small Talk in turn. While this pragmatic tendency fits with our previous findings relating to the ubiquity of Greet in Anglophone linguacultures (House et al. 2022), our research has shown that with the increasingly extraordinary character of a situation this ubiquity of Greet – and conventional Opening Talk in a broader sense – disappears. The analysis of the third DCT scenario has shown that as soon as speakers of English engage in Small Talk in clearly extraordinary situations, they get out of their routine and tend to initiate Small Talk with Requests (for information).



Our study of the three Chinese DCT sets has shown that Remark is by far the most frequent speech act in Chinese Small Talk, and also that speakers of Chinese rarely engage in ritual Opening Talk as far as our data is concerned. The ubiquity of Remark in Chinese does not change even in extraordinary scenarios, which shows that – unlike Greet (and Greet + How-are-you/+Welcome combinations) – seems to be pragmatically ‘compulsory’ for speakers of Chinese. As our DCT data has shown, even the speech act Request (for information) is often formulated as a ‘quasi-Remark’, which further points to the linguacultural importance of Remark in Chinese Small Talk.

These contrastive pragmatic differences point to the overall routinised nature of Small Talk in English, which is in stark contrast with how Small Talk operates in Chinese. Simply put, speakers of English apparently tend to resort to a standard routinised solution in ordinary settings, which also leads to a certain sense of conciseness of Small Talk utterances in the English data (see e.g. Remarks in English). The fact that Chinese Small Talk largely resorts to the immediate situation through Remarks leads to a certain ‘verbosity’ in comparison to the English data. The routinised character of English Small Talk versus Small Talk in Chinese accords with what House (2006) has found about the differences between English and German discourse practices.

Another contrastive finding which is worth noting here is the following. As our analysis has shown, Requests (for information) tend to be frequented in the English data, but they tend to be used in [-P] settings only. This shows that speakers of English tend to shy away from inquiring about the other’s personal information in more formal relationships where they instead tend to use Remarks, Discloses and other speech acts (if at all), along with Greets. In Chinese, on the other and, the use of Requests (for information) is not confined to [-P] settings because these Requests tend to be realised as ritual ones, often in a (Neo-)Confucian way.

Let us revisit here the two areas of particular interest which we mentioned in Section 3.2 above:

- Do the [+/-SD,+/-P] trigger any replicable pragmatic differences between Small Talk in English and Chinese?
- How do speakers of English and Chinese cope with increasingly extraordinary situations in terms of Small Talk?

Regarding the first of these points of interest, our analysis has shown that the [+/-SD,+/-P] variables are important in both the English and Chinese data sets, i.e. one cannot oversimplify Small Talk in English and Chinese by resorting to intercultural arguments, such as that the Chinese is a so-called ‘power-oriented culture’. What we have been able to find, however, is that these variables influence English and Chinese Small Talk in different ways. These not only include seemingly ‘intrusive’ Chinese Requests for information in [+P] settings (see above), but also for example the presence of the speech act Remark – a ubiquitous speech act in Chinese – only in the [+P] scenario in the English DCTs. As regards the second point of interest, studying increasingly extraordinary situations has revealed the above-outlined difference between Chinese and English: while speakers of Chinese prefer Remarks irrespective of the nature of the context as far as Small Talk is concerned, speakers of English cease to follow routines of Small Talk in extraordinary contexts.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In this study, we have investigated Small Talk in the two typologically distant linguacultures of English and Chinese. Our analysis has revealed noteworthy pragmatic differences between pragmatic



conventions of Small Talk in linguacultures under investigation. Our study has also shown the advantage of relying on a bottom-up approach to speech acts, and a typology of speech acts which is radically minimal, finite and interactional in nature in the study of Small Talk. By avoiding proliferating speech acts *ad libitum* and by approaching them as interactional phenomena, we have been able to identify pragmatic differences between English and Chinese Small Talk without overinterpreting our data. Following our bottom-up approach, we do not attempt to interpret our outcomes from a cultural angle, e.g. by arguing that the English and Chinese are more or less ritualised, and so on. Rather, we contend with arguing that Small Talk is subject to significant linguacultural variation in the linguacultures studied, and such variation is worth studying for its own sake.

It is important to point to certain limitations of our research. Clearly, ours is a case study based on a small set of data. In future research, it would be important to test the validity of our findings in larger DCT corpora. Also, we elsewhere argued that contrastive pragmatic research should ideally be multimethod in nature (see House & Kádár 2021a), and it would be useful in future research to combine DCT analysis with the study of naturally occurring data in particular. It would also be relevant in future research to contrastively examine Small Talk in Chinese and English in scenarios where Small Talk is embedded in Core Talk.

We hope that future research will witness continued interest in Small Talk and its contrastive pragmatic study.

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