

Ritual Small Talk in Chinese

ZONGFENG XIA¹ , FENG GUANG LIU^{1*} , DÁNIEL Z. KÁDÁR^{1,2}  and
JULIANE HOUSE^{2,3} 

¹ Dalian University of Foreign Languages, China

² Hungarian Research Centre for Linguistics, Hungary

³ University of Hamburg, Germany

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ABSTRACT

In this study, we examine ritual Small Talk in Chinese, which is a regrettably understudied phenomenon. We investigate recurrent pragmatic features of Chinese Small Talk in an audio-recorded corpus through the lens of speech acts. We interpret the use of speech acts with the aid of interaction ritual theory and linguistic politeness. As a case study, we examine instances of Small Talk taking place in the vicinity of a Chinese primary school where parents and grandparents engaged in casual phatic conversations to kill the time while waiting for the children. The study of our corpus of Small Talk conversations allows us to unearth linguaculturally embedded patterns of language use in a complex participatory setting where parents and grandparents interact in front of a school.

KEYWORDS

Small Talk, speech act, interaction ritual, politeness, Chinese

1. INTRODUCTION

In this study, we investigate ritual Small Talk in Chinese, which is a regrettably understudied phenomenon.¹ Specifically, we examine the recurrent pragmatic features of Small Talk in

* Corresponding author. E-mail: liufengguang@dlufl.edu.cn

¹Following the convention of Edmondson & House (1981) and Edmondson, House & Kádár (2023), in this study we capitalise speech acts and types of talk.

Chinese in a bottom-up and corpus-based manner through the lens of a radically finite and interactional typology of speech acts outlined in [Edmondson \(1981\)](#), [Edmondson & House \(1981\)](#), and [Edmondson, House & Kádár \(2023\)](#). We interpret the outcomes of the analysis through the lens of interaction ritual and linguistic politeness. Our goal is to contribute to the present special issue, dedicated to the study of phatic language use in a speech act-anchored and interactional way (see Section 3). We interpret the outcomes of speech act analysis through the lens of interaction ritual and politeness (see more on this procedure in [Kádár 2017, 2023](#)). Interaction ritual encompasses recurrent communally oriented forms of behaviour through which the participants reinforce their interpersonal relationships. Interaction rituals are not necessarily related to politeness, but in our data which features phatic friendly interaction politeness is a natural concomitant of the interaction. What we will consider as part of our investigation is how and why certain manifestations of Small Talk in Chinese – which might be evaluated as impolite in other linguacultures – are not at all impolite and are part of the ritual of Small Talk in the Chinese linguaculture.

The structure of this paper is the following. In Section 2, we provide a review of literature, by first focusing on previous research on Small Talk in general and then discussing studies of Small Talk in Chinese in particular. Section 3 outlines our methodology and data. Section 4 presents our analysis, and finally in Section 5 we conclude the present study.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The study of Small Talk started with anthropological inquiries, in particular with [Malinowski's \(1934 \[1972\]\)](#) seminal work. Malinowski proposed the notion of “phatic communion”, arguing that it encompasses “language used in free, aimless, social intercourse” in order to establish human bonds of communion ([Malinowski 1934 \[1972\]](#), 149). The linguistic study of Small Talk arguably began with the work of [Robinson \(1972\)](#) and [Laver \(1975, 220–221\)](#) who proposed language-based accounts of this phenomenon. Robinson and Laver held different views on Small Talk: Robinson argued that Small Talk consists of a variety of supposedly minor, informal and non-serious modes of talk, whereas Laver proposed three social functions of Small Talk, 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.

The pragmatic study of Small Talk gained momentum 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 approached 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.

Along with the work of Edmondson and House which is basically pragmalinguistic, Small Talk also gained momentum in sociopragmatic inquiries. A representative study in this field is [Holmes \(2000, 2003\)](#) where the distribution, structural positioning and functions of Small Talk in workplace settings is discussed. 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 argued that truly idle talk seems to emerge only under conditions of low emotional involvement in the family. Blum-Kulka found that children



received important social gains from family gossip as they fully participated in multiparty and intergenerational discourse forms. Small Talk has also been examined in recent pragmatic inquiries, e.g. in research on computer-mediated communication. For example, [Barron & Black \(2015\)](#) investigated how learners and native speakers of English co-construct Small Talk in the Opening phase of a voice-based Skype telecollaboration by analysing their topic shifts, replies and use of backchannels. Barron & Black concluded 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.

As this brief review of literature illustrates, Small Talk has received significant attention in the field of pragmatics. Still, we believe that it is worth to continue studying this phenomenon through the framework of [Edmondson \(1981\)](#), [Edmondson & House \(1981\)](#) and [Edmondson, House & Kádár \(2023\)](#) because this framework provides a more systematic and replicable insight into this phenomenon than other approaches which studied Small Talk as a discourse analytic agenda. Indeed, our goal in this study is to examine Small Talk in Chinese for its own sake, without considering broader sociocultural issues, which are often out of reach for a rigorous pragmatic analysis.

In Chinese pragmatic research, Small Talk has been rather neglected. Exceptions which deserve attention here are [Jin \(2018\)](#), [Jin, Kim & Carlin \(2022\)](#), [Wei & Mao \(2023\)](#) who investigated Small Talk mainly in medical scenarios. [Jin \(2018\)](#) and [Jin, Kim & Carlin \(2022\)](#) explored Small Talk in Chinese clinical contexts by contrasting conventions of its realisation in Traditional Chinese Medicine and Western Medicine. Jin found that participants more intensively engaged in Small Talk in Traditional Chinese Medical contexts than in Western ones, which in turn indicates that the former provides a more relaxed consultation environment and more symmetrical relationship between the participants than the latter. [Wei & Mao \(2023\)](#) found that doctors of Traditional Chinese Medicine actively initiated Small Talk in online scenarios to acquire holistic information for diagnosis and boost patients' face for rapport management.

Considering that Small Talk has been relatively understudied in Chinese, we believe that our research fills an empirical knowledge gap, in particular because we do not study Small Talk in institutional discourse. While no type of discourse is more important than others, we believe that it is worth studying Small Talk in interaction where no power is involved because such a context represents Small Talk in a naturally occurring form.

3. METHODOLOGY AND DATA

In the present research, we approach the data with a strictly bottom-up methodology, in order to avoid prematurely narrowing our focus and exoticising our data, which is a bad practice that one can often witness in East Asian pragmatics (see [Kádár & Mills 2011](#)). In the following, we outline this methodology, as well as our 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 set of conventionalised speech acts. [Figure 1](#) displays the system of Types of Talk.



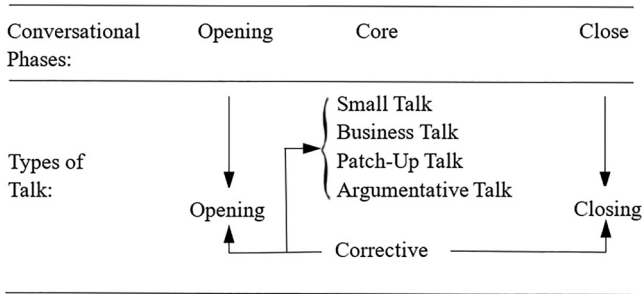


Figure 1. Types of Talk (adapted from Edmondson & House 1981, 199)

As Figure 1 shows, Small Talk does not usually occur in the Opening and Closing phases of an interaction. Although both Opening/Closing phases and Small Talk are of a ritual nature, Opening and Closing phases are typically structural rituals, 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 an interactional ritual Type of Talk,² i.e. it is realised in interaction according to conventions through which the participants work out and manage their relationships. Furthermore, as part of 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 this definition 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 an information in a matter-of-fact tone.
- Opine: An Informative speech act which states an 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'.

²In pragmatic research on ritual (see Kádár 2023), it is worth distinguishing structural and interactional types of ritual. Structural ritual encompasses 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 consists of a limited set of speech acts, the small size of this inventory does not mean that one should not consider exactly which speech acts are used in a particular corpus, and also how they tend to be realised. This is because it is exactly such realisation patterns which provide a bottom-up and replicable view on one one's data. Along with describing the relationship between speech acts in our Chinese Small Talk corpus, we also consider cases when an utterance does not indicate a particular speech act but rather something else.

Considering that the research presented in this paper is an outcome of a teamwork, we applied a principle of interrater analysis, i.e. all of our team members interpreted the data independently from one another and then we jointly reached a common interpretation.

As noted above, while our research is essentially speech act-focused, we interpret the outcomes of the analysis through the lens of interaction ritual and politeness. More specifically, whenever we encounter a pragmatic characteristic of Small Talk in Chinese which may be interpreted as 'impolite' from the point of view of a cultural outsider, we will consider why such ritualised language use is conventionalised and normative in the Chinese *linguaculture*.

3.2. Data

Our case study examines a corpus of audio-recorded interactions representing Small Talk between Chinese parents and grandparents waiting to pick up the children in front of a primary school in the Northeast of China. These parents and grandparents often engaged in casual conversations to kill the time, and so their interaction is an example par excellence for Small Talk with no power involved.

Our corpus comprises 28 interactions of around 14 h in length, recorded within a month with more than 20 parents and grandparents. Considering that these parents and grandparents met on a regular basis and to the best of our knowledge they were not related beyond the school context, we described their relationship as a scenario with an absence of power [–P] (see [Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper 1989](#)). By default, such [–P] scenarios are also devoid of social distance, i.e. they are [–SD] in scope. However, we did not interpret all these scenarios as [–SD] due to the following reason: some encounters took place between a parent and a grandparent, and in such cases a certain sense of social distance emerged due to the age variable (see more below).

We selected 15 interactions from our corpus, in order to have an interactional dataset of manageable size. We selected interactions with the longest timespan in our corpus because we decided that they are most representative in scope. The data was collected with the permission of the parents and grandparents involved. One of the authors was present in these interactions both as an observer and a participant, and she always alerted the participants that they were going to be audio-recorded and requested their consent to do so. During the transcription we removed all personal information and adhered to standard ethical conventions of pragmatic research.

We transcribed our data in a simple and accessible way, by representing our transcripts of the Chinese original conversations and their English translation in a turn-to-turn fashion. We only adopted some basic symbols from the more intricate Conversation Analytic transcription convention. A particular convention we apply in this study follows the previous work of our



research group (House et al. 2021): our transcripts include speech act annotation boxes on the right side of the interaction transcripts. We indicate the speech acts inside their interactional structural slots in these boxes.

4. ANALYSIS

We present our analysis by describing those features of our corpus which we believe are salient from a pragmatic point of view. As part of this analysis, we consider how Small Talk emerges right at the beginning of an interaction and also how it continues until the interactants take their leave. That is, apart from the Core Phase where Small Talk itself occurs we also examine the Opening and Closing phases, simply to show that the interactions studied are so much Small Talk-oriented that properly realised Opening and Closing barely take place in them.

4.1. Opening phase

As Edmondson & House (1981) pointed out, language users in the Opening Phase tend to use ritual illocutions, such as Greet, How-are-you, Welcome, as well as other speech acts which gain a ritual function in this phase, such as Disclose and Remark. As our data shows, Opening Phase is not ‘compulsory’ in Chinese Phatic interactions and various interactants open exchanges with a Remark, i.e. immediately with Small Talk. Interestingly, in our corpus such an ‘abrupt’ opening never triggers an offence, i.e. they clearly represent a convention of ritual Small Talk in Chinese. Only 7 out of the 15 interactions in our corpus start with a proper Opening Phase. Also, these 7 interactions represent social distance, i.e. a $[-P, +SD]$ scenario, because in these interactions there is some social hierarchy between the participants in terms of age as one of them is much older than the other. Thus, it transpires that it is the $[+SD]$ variable which occasions an Opening in the Small Talk scenario under investigation. In summary, we could observe the following pragmatic patterns in Openings in our corpus:

- Asymmetric use of Greet/Alerter³
- Substituting Greet with Remark

4.1.1. Asymmetric use of Greet/Alerter. In many ‘Western’ linguacultures, in the Opening phase of any interaction a symmetric realisation of Greet is necessary and failing to respond to a Greet (i.e. asymmetric Greet use) triggers offence. However, as House et al. (2022) found, this is certainly not the case in the Chinese linguaculture where Greet can conventionally be substituted with other speech acts such as Remark and How-are-You, especially in situations with the $[-P]$ and $[-SD]$ variables. Our Small Talk data also accords with such previous research: in many $[-P, -SD]$ situations in our corpus, only one of the participants realise a Greet to the other, and the lack of responding Greet does not trigger an offence, as illustrated by the following example (1):

³In the system of Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper (1989), Alerter is an Opening element preceding speech acts.



- (1) 1 A: 阿姨↑!
 2 B: 来了↑! 今天咋来这么早?
 3 A: 今天没溜达直接来的! 阿姨这个衣服挺好看的!
 4 B: 好看啥↑! 早上出去上早市穿的少, 挺冷的, 下午换上了长袖。

- 1 A: Auntie! ↑
 2 B: You arrived↑! Why are you here so early today?
 3 A: I came straight here without a stroll today! Your dress, Auntie, is so pretty!
 4 B: What pretty↑! This morning I didn't wear much when going to the morning market, and it was freezing. I changed to long sleeves in the afternoon.

1. Greet
2. Remark + Request for information
3. Tell + Remark
4. Minimise + Remark

In example (1), A opens the interaction with the form of address A'yi 阿姨 ('auntie'). Interestingly, if terms of address are used at all in our corpus, only informal terms like a'yi are used, and such terms never co-occur with formal Greet realisations such as *Ni hao* 你好 ('hello'). It may be reasonable to argue that such terms express a sense of politeness because they are always used towards interlocutors who are older (and as such higher ranking) than the speaker. This interpretation may be confirmed by B's response to A: she as a more senior participant does not reciprocate the Greet but rather utters a casual Remark *Lai le* 来了 ('You arrived'), stating the obvious. It may not be a coincidence that in both of the 2 exchanges in our corpus of 15 Small Talk interactions where A'yi occurs, it is frequently used by a younger female towards an elder one in a dyadic setting where failing to give respect to the more senior party may be more salient than in multiparty scenarios.

4.1.2. Substituting Greet with Remark. Another Opening scenario in our corpus includes cases when Small Talk is Opened with a Remark. The following examples illustrate such uses:

- (2) 1 A: 咱俩看着点儿来的↑!
 2 B: 嗯, 对呀! 呀! 你俩今儿咋一起呢?
 3 C: 今天我们要带孩子, 带她出去吃饭, 我就直接走了, 所以我就跟她来了。
 (大家一起笑)

- 1 A: We two (A and C) arrived here at the last minute↑!
 2 B: Um, ri:ght! Ah! Why did you two come together today?
 3 C: Today I am going to take my kid out for dinner, and I'll leave directly, so I came with [my friend] A.⁴
 (All laugh)

1. Remark
2. Remark + Request for information
3. Tell

⁴A and C are neighbours and their children are classmates as well. They usually take turns to pick up the two children together. Various other parents are aware of their situation. On that day of the interaction, A and C went to school to pick up their children at the same time, which aroused other parents' attention and curiosity.



- (3) 1 A: 昨天这个点儿都出来了!
2 B: 那是特殊点儿!
3 C: 5 点 33, 我看点儿了, 我寻思我来早了, 一抬头孩子出来了, 我说几点呀!
有点儿太早了!
4 A: 我姑娘说 ‘你来晚了’! 我说 ‘妈不晚, 正常点儿就是这儿啊’!

- 1 A: The children were already out of school at this time yesterday!
2 B: But that was special!
3 C: At 5:33, I checked the time. I thought I was early. When I raised my head, the children already came out. I even said what’s the time! It’s a little too early!
4 A: My girl said ‘you are late’! I says ‘mom is not late, this is the normal time’!

- | |
|-----------|
| 1. Remark |
| 2. Opine |
| 3. Tell |
| 4. Tell |

Both the above interactions start with Remarks relating to time. One could even argue that both these speech act realisations are school examples of a Remark as they state the obvious in a banal way. They show that Opening is not compulsory in Chinese Small Talk, at least as far as our corpus is concerned. Once again, Opening an interaction in such a way might be evaluated as rude both in other linguacultures and other settings in Chinese as well. However, no impolite evaluations emerge at all in our corpus. The fact that these opening Remarks are conventional in the current situation is also shown by reacting moves of the interactants. In example (2), the Remark in turn 1 is responded to with another Remark in turn 2, while in example (3) a similar Remark is responded to by a reflective Opine in turn 2. These reactions show that in both cases the interactants view the Opening Opine as normative.

4.2. Core phase

In the following, we overview what we identified as the main pragmatic features of the Core phase of Small Talk in our corpus, by presenting these features in the form of units of analysis of increasing size, i.e. expressions, speech acts and discourse (for details see [House & Kádár 2021](#)). We discuss the following pragmatic features:

- The frequency of backchannelling Uptaker (Go-on) (expressions)
- Speech act chains and mimetic escalation (speech acts)
- The frequency of weather as a topic (discourse)

4.2.1. Uptakers. In our corpus, Uptakers (in particular, Receipts) are frequented. This high frequency of Uptakers is likely to be related to the fact that the topic of Small Talk is so banal



that intensive Uptaking is needed to keep the conversational flow going. The following example (4) illustrates the intensive way in which Uptaking tends to manifest itself in our corpus:

- (4)
- 1 A: 阿姨!
- 2 B: 唉! (笑)
- 3 A: 挺冷!
- 4 B: 今天冷↑!
- 5 A: 对呀! 我今天在外面, 我出去一直穿着半截袖, 完了之后我就直接来了。
哎呀妈呀! 进岛里怎么这么冷呢?
- 6 B: (笑) (停顿 3 秒) 嗯, [这天儿!
- 7 A: [下次来都得穿个长袖!
- 8 B: 嗯, 今天一天就下雾, 早晨就开始下。
- 9 A: 是! 昨天就晴那么一天, 今天寻思晾晾衣服啥的, 晾晾被, 没法晾, 这大雾!
- 10 B: 嗯, 好像是 7 月份之前都不行。
- 11 A: 是啊, 全下雨, 不能下雨就是下雾。
- 12 B: 对! 等立秋完了以后能好点儿。
- 13 A: 嗯呐! 这一天潮死了!
- 14 B: 嗯。

- 1 A: Auntie!
- 2 B: Ah! (laughing)
- 3 A: Pretty cold!
- 4 B: It's cold↑ today!
- 5 A: [Right-oh!] I was outside today. I wore half sleeves when I went out, and then I came straight here. Oh, my god! Why is it so cold here in the island?⁵
- 6 B: (Laughing) (3) [Yeah], [such a day!
- 7 A: [(We'd better) wear long sleeves next time (when we come here)!
- 8 B: [Yeah], it's foggy all day today, starting in the morning.
- 9 A: [Yah]! Yesterday was a fine day. Today, I was thinking about drying clothes and something, drying duvets. They can't be dried in such a heavy fog!
- 10 B: [Yeah], it seems not until July.
- 11 A: [Yeah], it rains all the time. If it doesn't rain, it's foggy.
- 12 B: [Right!] It will be better after the beginning of autumn.
- 13 A: [Yup], it's very wet!
- 14 B: [Um].

1. Greet
2. Greet
3. Remark
4. Remark
5. Tell + Tell + Request for information
6. Remark
7. Resolve
8. Remark
9. Remark + Tell
10. Remark
11. Remark + Complain
12. Remark
13. Remark
14. Uptaker

⁵This conversation occurs in a residential living area called “Xiaopingdao”, which is not an island, but a part of a district in the city. However, people living in and near this area are used to replacing the whole name “Xiaopingdao” with only “dao”, so here in the interaction we just translated it to “island”, which is the literal translation of Chinese “dao”.



This dyadic interaction occurs between a young mother and a grandmother. They use Uptaking expressions intensively, i.e. in 9 out of the 14 turns. Considering that here we witness an extended weather-related conversation, the interpretation that Uptakers help the interactants to uphold the flow of the conversation seems plausible.

Considering the modest size of our data, we do not attempt to interpret the high frequency of the Uptaking in our corpus, beyond the claim that Uptaking is not only clearly important in Small Talk in [-P] scenarios but also it is ritual due to its frequency. It may be worth for future inquiries to consider whether Uptaking in general is a form of positive politeness behaviour in Chinese in the conventional [Brown & Levinsonian \(1987\)](#) sense. To the best of our knowledge, no previous study has investigated this issue in Chinese, but our data is too limited to further comment on this topic.

4.2.2. Speech act chains and mimetic escalation. Surprisingly, our data contains a large number of mimetic escalation (see [Kádár 2023](#)) in the form of Remark-chains. The ritual chaining of speech acts reveals a tendency to imitate one another and conform to patterns or group behavior ([Donald 2011](#), 15). The following example (5) shows a typical Remark chain in our data:

- (5)
- 1 A: 这雨下的↓! 今天的雨下得老奇葩了, 一会停, 一下子停了, 又来了, [下了无数次!
- 2 B: [今天
咱这里下得小, 市内下得大, [市内下得呼呼的!
- 3 C: [我们那边打雷呢!
- 4 A: = 这儿也打了! [()
- 5 B: [市内下得可大呢!
- 6 D: [这雨下得挺够意思的! 就是昨天他们高考的时候没下雨。
- 7 B: 嗯, 没下啊!
- 8 D: 完了今天正好咱早晨晚上上下学的时候还没下雨挺好!
- 9 B: =还行!
- 10 D: 对! 放学的时候要下雨可太麻烦了!
- 11 A: 下雨都是早上来的时候下, [晚上回去的时候下。
- 12 B: [未来半个月全是这样的天! 我刚才看天气预报了。多云, 有小雨啥的。



1 A: How it rains↓! It rains queerly! It stops raining for a while, then it rains again, [it rains and stops raining back and forth!	1. Remark + Opine + Complain
2 B: [It rains lightly here, and it rains cats and dogs in the downtown. [It's really heavy in the downtown!	2. Remark
3 C: [It thunders there!	3. Remark
4 A: =So does it here! [()	4. Remark
5 B: [It rains very heavily in the downtown!	5. Remark
6 D: [It rains quite properly. That is, it didn't rain yesterday when they (students) took the college entrance examination.	6. Remark + Justify
7 B: Um, it didn't rain!	7. Remark
8 D: Well, it's great that it didn't rain when we (children) go to school this morning and leave school this evening.	8. Remark
9 B: = Not bad!	9. Remark
10 D: Right! It's too troublesome to rain when leaving school!	10. Remark
11 A: It always rains when children go to school in the morning, [and go back home in the evening.	11. Remark
12 B: [It's going to be like this for the next half month! I just read the weather forecast. (It will be) Cloudy, rainy or something.	12. Remark

Example (5) has a complex participation structure with four parents Remarking on the bad weather of that day as an in-group ritual. Such chains of Remark – which we could already witness in example (4) – are noteworthy for the following reason: in previous pragmatics-based ritual research (e.g. Kádár 2017, 2023) the phenomenon of ritually-chained speech acts has been primarily studied through ‘meaningful’ speech acts, such as chain-like realisations of Requests. However, the nature of the Remark is that it can only have a social rather than actual meaning, i.e. such ritual speech act-chains are different from what has been previously observed in the literature.

4.2.3. High frequency of bad weather as a topic. Talking about the weather has, since Malinowski, been taken as an example *par excellence* phatic communion. Weather seems to provide a topic of conversation and a way to enhance rapport with each other, which falls within the generally accepted realm of Small Talk (Coupland & Ylänné-McEwen 2000). Furthermore, weather is a safe impersonal topic that can be discussed between strangers who want to be friendly but not too friendly (Romaine 1994). The occurrence of phatic weather talk among parents is highly frequent in our corpus, constituting a total of 7 out of 15 instances. It is interesting to note that nearly all the phatic weather conversations in our



corpus are about *bad weather*, which is usually a relatively major inconvenience for parents to pick up children. The following example (6) represents a typical example of such Small Talk:

- (6) 1 A: 天天骑个小车儿!
2 B: 今天骑车差点儿卡倒! 太滑了地上, 但是我出来我送不回去了, 着急↑!
(大家一起笑)
3 C: 嗯, 今天滑!
4 D: 嗯, 今天特别滑!
5 B: 豁出这条老命了!
(大家一起笑)

- 1 A: You come on scooter every day!
2 B: I almost got stuck today! The ground is too slippery, but I can't return my scooter back home when I come out. I am in a hurry↑!
(All laugh)
3 C: Well, it's slippery today!
4 D: Yeah, it's very slippery today!
5 B: I'm desperately risking my life!
(All laugh)

1. Remark
2. Remark
3. Remark
4. Remark
5. Remark

In this interaction, the participants engage in a ritual chain of Remarks. The banality of language use here is shown by the fact that even the utterance in turn 5, which in other contexts would be an Opine, is unserious and phatic in nature, as shown by the reactive laughter, i.e. it is a typical Remark. The interaction is interesting from an *emic* point of view because in many other contexts the Chinese stereotypically avoid weather as a topic (see e.g. Meek & Yan 1999), unlike for example what can be observed in the British linguaculture. The presence of this theme shows that many discursive features associated with Small Talk in a linguaculture turn out to be invalid if we look at such features in naturally occurring data, taking place in specific interpersonal situations like the [-P] setting studied in this paper.

4.3. Closing phase

As is the case with Opening phase, it can be said that language users in the Closing phase normally use ritual illocutions, such as the Extractor and the Leave-Take (see Edmondson & House 1981). As our data shows, in Small Talk taking place between parents hurrying to pick up children from the school, the Closing phase appears to be marginal and Small Talk spreads over to this phase. Parents' and grandparents' Small Talk very often ends rather abruptly, since their children walk out of the school at that moment, and they do not seem to bother with taking a formal closing of their ongoing interaction. The following extracts present typical examples of Closing structure with no Leave-Take, i.e. a case when Small Talk abruptly ends because the point of waiting, namely the children, have arrived:



(7)

- 1 A: 来了↑!
 2 B: 嗯。
 3 C: 看你好几天没来了↑!
 4 B: 嗯! 这几天小明妈帮我接滴! 我加班嘞↓!
 5 A: 住得近真好!
 6 B: 嗯呐!我俩家楼上楼下。
 7 A: 搭伴儿接多↑方便呀!
 8 C: 是呀! 谁有个事儿啥的都能帮忙!
 9 B: 嗯, 中国好邻居!
 10 C: 诶! 咱班出来了!

- 1 A: You arrived↑!
 2 B: Um.
 3 C: You haven't been here for a few days↑!
 4 B: Yeah! Xiao Ming's mom helped me to pick up
 my child these days! I worked overtime↓!
 5 A: It's awe:some to live closely!
 6 B: Yup! We live upstairs and downstairs.
 7 A: How↑ convenient it is to share the task of
 picking up children!
 8 C: Yea:h! If one has some urgency, the other can
 always help!
 9 B: Yeah, China's Model Neighbour!
 10 C: Eh, here come out our class!

1. Remark
2. Uptaker
3. Remark
4. Remark
5. Remark
6. Remark
7. Remark
8. Remark
9. Opine
10. Remark

(8)

- 1 A: 才来↑?
 2 B: 嗯, <晚了晚了!> 今天单位有点事儿。
 3 A: 最近挺忙↑?
 4 B: 忙毁了↓! 最近期末活儿多! <我不跟你说了啊! 来不及了!>
 5 A: <快走吧! 快走吧! 改天聊!>
 6 B: 改天约你吃饭啊↑! 岛里新开了一家火锅挺好。
 7 A: 好嘞↑! 快走吧!

- 1 A: Just arrived↑?
 2 B: Yeah, <I'm late, I'm late!> I was occupied
 with some work at the office today.
 3 A: Very busy lately↑?
 4 B: Extre:mely bu:sy↓! There is too:: much work
 at the end of the semester! <I can't talk with
 you anymore! It's too late (to pick up
 children)!>
 5 A: <Go! Go! Talk to you later!>
 6 B: I'll invite you to dinner someday↑! It's nice
 that there's a new hotpot restaurant on the
 island.
 7 A: OK↑! Hurry up!

1. Remark
2. Remark
3. Request for information
4. Remark + Remark
5. Extractor + Leave-take
6. Invite
7. OK + Extractor



As these examples show, the Small Talk interactions under investigation end rather abruptly, even though example (7) arguably ends in a more abrupt way than example (8) where the interlocutors gradually Extract themselves from the interaction even though they do not exchange the speech act Leave-Take in a symmetrical way. Ultimately, however, similar to Openings, no offence is taken in these Closings, i.e. the ritual of Small Talk in Chinese does not seem to necessitate a proper symmetrical Leave-Take in cases when the interaction is Small Talk oriented, at least as far as our corpus is concerned.

In summary, the present research has shown the following: Perhaps most importantly, the role-relationship between the participants of an interaction determines how Small Talk unfolds. Concretely, the absence of power in our case-study manifested itself in asymmetrical uses of Greet/Alerter and the substituting of Greet with Remark in the Opening phase. Further, in the Core phase we were able to witness the frequent use of Uptakers, the presence of speech act chains and mimetic escalation, and the high frequency of bad weather as a topic. Finally, the Closing phase turned out to be abrupt in our corpus. Importantly, any research outcome concerning Chinese should be treated with caution considering the immense size of the Chinese population and the intriguing dialectal variation in Chinese. However, we believe that various parts of our research outcome are of a replicable nature.

5. CONCLUSION

In this study, we have looked at the realisation of Small Talk in Chinese naturally occurring interaction recorded in a [-P] scenario with the aid of a replicable framework. We believe that the [-P] setting studied allows us to examine Small Talk in a possibly most 'unadulterated' form because the ritual of Small Talk in such scenarios occurs relatively freely. We used the framework of Edmondson & House (1981) and Edmondson, House & Kádár (2023) to analyse our corpus of Small Talk interaction in a replicable way, by breaking down Small Talk into speech act components and studying how such recurrent speech acts are related to each other and to the broader phases of an interaction. We contextualised our speech act-anchored and essentially pragmalinguistic research by interconnecting it with ritual and politeness. We believe that our bottom-up take on language use allowed us to avoid making cultural overgeneralisations on the basis of our data.

In future research, it would be important to continue studying Chinese Small Talk in corpora including interaction from the whole spectrum of the power and social distance variables, i.e. to study Small Talk in [-/+P] and [-/+SD] interactions in a contrastive way, in order to understand how different social variables influence realisations of Small Talk. It would also be interesting to examine switches between Small Talk and other types of talk in naturally occurring Chinese interaction, considering that this area has also been under-researched. Finally, it would be fruitful to conduct a historical pragmatic investigation of Chinese Small Talk.

We hope that in the years to come more research will be dedicated to the fascinating phenomenon of Small Talk in Chinese.

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