

Small talk is not small: A commentary on pragmatics studies on small talk (postscript)

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Received: August 17, 2023 • Accepted: August 23, 2023

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ABSTRACT

This paper serves as the postscript to the present special issue, in which I briefly report on my impressions of reading the papers. I start with the theoretical models guiding the empirical studies in the special issue. Then, I review the contents of the papers and discuss their findings. Finally, I conclude this postscript with suggestions for future research.

KEYWORDS

small talk, speech act, social interaction, production, perception

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper serves as a postscript to the special issue “Exploring Small Talk from a Speech Act Point of View”. As we all know, despite the word ‘small’ in the term, small talk is not ‘small’ at all: small talk is central to individuals’ relational goals in social interaction, and it often links to interactants’ transactional goals as well. Small talk “enacts social cohesiveness, reduces inherent threat values of social contact, and helps to structure social interaction” (Coupland 2003, 1). Its equivalent is phatic communion (Malinowski 1972), which refers to “affect-oriented utterances used for establishing, maintaining, and enhancing rapport, which are not the transactional goal of the communication” (Ren & Liu 2021, 130). Because small talk can indicate and has direct relevance to interpersonal harmony, it is even significant in maintaining mental health (Ohashi,

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this issue). Small talk has attracted great attention in pragmatics and social interaction research, particularly after the collective works edited by [Coupland \(2000\)](#). This special issue examines small talk from a pragmatic point of view and focuses on speech acts in small talk. In the following sections, I will share what impressed me most during reading the papers of the special issue.

2. THEORETICAL MODELS ADOPTED

In addition to the introductory paper, there are five empirical studies in the special issue. They are all based on two theoretical models: Types of Talk ([Edmondson & House 1981](#)) and an interactional, definite typology of speech acts ([Edmondson & House 1981](#); [Edmondson, House & Kádár 2023](#); [House & Kádár 2021, 2023](#)). Because the introduction and the individual papers all introduce the two models, I will not repeat them here. It is sufficient to recall that 1) small talk is a type of talk in parallel with business talk in the core phase of interpersonal communication and that 2) the main speech act categories through which small talk is realized are informative, consisting of speech acts in both Phatic (including Remark and Disclose) and Business (including Tell and Opine) categories ([Edmondson, House & Kádár 2023](#)).

There are many advantages to conducting empirical research based on the above two models. First, as the editors correctly point out, speech acts allow researchers to break down the multifaceted and multifunctional small talk into components for analysis. Since speech acts are one of the key areas in pragmatics, these investigations will enhance the impact of small talk research. Second, the favorite topics for small talk may vary cross-culturally ([Senft 2009](#)). Focusing on a finite set of speech acts in small talk makes replicability and comparability possible, which are crucial for cross-cultural and contrastive comparisons.

3. CONTENTS OF THE PAPERS

The papers in this special issue investigated both the production and perception of small talk in various languages, including Persian ([Eslami et al.](#)), Spanish ([Alba-Juez](#)), Japanese ([Ohashi](#)), Chinese ([Xia et al.](#)), and comparisons between Chinese and English ([House & Kádár](#)). A common finding of the papers is that some speech acts that are not conceived as phatic in the interactional typology of speech acts ([Edmondson, House & Kádár 2023](#)) can migrate to perform phatic communication. In addition, the papers all examine the location of small talk in the whole interaction. That is, in addition to the Core Phase where small talk occurs in the framework of Types of Talk ([Edmondson & House 1981](#); [Edmondson, House & Kádár 2023](#)), the studies also examine the Opening and Closing phases to investigate how small talk emerges in these two phases of interaction. In the following, I will briefly summarize my thoughts on the papers.

[Eslami et al.](#) examine the phatic speech acts used by Persian-speaking university students in their social encounters at universities. They asked students to audio record interactional data in their daily lives and share the data voluntarily. Out of 112 participants, only 37 students fully met the criteria of quality of recording and naturalness of the interactions, indicating that recording non-elicited natural small talk is not an easy task. The results showed that opening



and closing phases have highly ritualized speech acts, while the core phatic interchanges are dynamic. Sociopragmatic factors affect the use of phatic speech acts. For example, as familiarity or intimacy increases, interlocutors seem to use less elaborate closing moves.

Alba-Juez analyzes the phatic speech acts during 70 casual encounters in the elevator at the workplace or in apartment buildings in Madrid, Spain, across three years. The author collected data by the researcher's field notes after the interaction, in which she was either a participant or an observer. Elevator encounters provide a very interesting space to investigate small talk, which has rarely been explored. Alba-Juez's analysis showed that even though the elevator encounters are short, the interaction still presents an opening, a core, and a closing phase. However, the talk in the core phase cannot be said to have 'business' content. The patterns of the phatic speech acts in the elevator encounters vary according to the relational history of the interlocutors. This is an insightful finding that adds an important variable to sociopragmatic factors often examined in pragmatics. In addition, I hypothesize from personal experience that length of time is also a crucial factor that may influence the extent of 'business' in small talk at the core phase.

Xia et al. investigate 15 instances of audio-recorded small talk conversations in Chinese taking place near a primary school in a northeastern city of China, where parents and grandparents engaged in casual phatic conversations while waiting to pick up the children. The authors noted that, interestingly, nearly all the phatic weather conversations were about bad weather, which was usually a relatively major inconvenience to pick up children, and the closing phase appeared to be marginal because (grand)parents were hurrying to greet the children when they left the school and arrived at the rendezvous. Age, or generation, also influences small talk in a specific genre in Chinese, particularly address terms in greetings. The influence of age or generation is well documented in Chinese pragmatics (e.g., [Liu, Li & Ren 2021](#)). As the authors pointed out in the conclusion section, it would be fruitful to conduct a historical pragmatic or a diachronic investigation of Chinese small talk. In addition, I assume that restrictions on time (Alba-Juez, this issue) may influence small talk in the particular context of casual communication when picking up children.

Unlike the above three studies, which either recorded or noted real communication, House and Kádár employed discourse completion tasks (DCTs) to compare small talk in English and Chinese. I agree with the authors that despite the disadvantages of DCT, such as its inability to capture data representing real-life conversation, it is still a useful data collection method for contrastive pragmatics studies (see also [Schneider & Schröder 2023](#)), particularly when the study aims to investigate participants' offline knowledge of sociopragmatics rather than online performance of what participants would actually say ([Chang & Ren 2020](#)). The authors summarized that in comparison to the English data, Chinese small talk, which was realized more often by Remarks, led to a certain 'verbosity'. My assumption is that in contrast to the American participants, the Chinese participants tended to show more involvement, even in asymmetrical power situations such as student-professor interaction, as documented in [Ren & Liu \(2021\)](#).

On the other hand, Ohashi investigates how small talk in Japanese is evaluated and conceptualized by analyzing comments in a Japanese online discussion forum. The author argues that small talk is significant in maintaining mental health. The results showed that small talk was considered by the Japanese as having relational significance. The Japanese Netizens wrote that small talk can include greetings, conversational feedback, smiling, showing interest, a remark, disclosure, and compliments, indicating balancing obligations in small talk interaction. Social media platforms or online discussion forums can provide useful data available to obtain folk



understandings of pragmatic targets, which could be a fruitful avenue for research (Bi & Ren 2023) on participants' perception of small talk.

4. FUTURE RESEARCH

The preference for small talk may vary cross-culturally, and what counts as small talk varies depending on the speech event taking place (Ren & Liu 2021). The contributions in the present special issue all adopt the speech act perspective of small talk based on the interactional, definite typology of speech acts (Edmondson & House 1981; Edmondson, House & Kádár 2023; House & Kádár 2021, 2023). The two theoretical models have been demonstrated to be useful and can serve as guidance for future research on small talk that makes replicability and comparison possible. This is important for researchers to accumulate findings on a comprehensive topic such as small talk. The empirical examinations in turn can check the hypotheses of the models and improve the corresponding theoretical framework.

The papers employed different methods to collect data suitable for their research purposes, including audio recorded real-life communication, field notes, and written DCTs. The papers showcased the difficulty of collecting authentic data on small talk, particularly involving multi-party interactants of different roles (Eslami et al.) or in situations of restricted time and space such as elevator encounters (Alba-Juez). More research methods, such as ethnography, video-taped communication, roleplays, corpus, focus group discussion, interviews, stimulated recall (Gass & Mackey 2016) and retrospective verbal reports (Ren 2014), can be adopted to triangulate the data and to explore more aspects of small talk, for example, interactants' perception (Ren & Liu 2021) and evaluation (Ren & Fukushima 2022) of small talk in interaction. Because small talk is affected by sociopragmatic factors and local contexts, it is fundamental to include such information in collecting and transcribing the data. Meanwhile, ethical issues need to be considered when collecting small talk. For example, it is important to receive all participants' consent for using and analyzing the interaction.

With respect to data analysis, the studies mostly analyzed phatic speech acts and the patterns of small talk qualitatively, with descriptive statistics showing the distribution of the speech acts. Future research may enlarge the size of the data and employ inferential statistics to enhance the generalizability of the findings.

Finally, the studies all focused on small talk in adult face-to-face communication. An increasing number of studies have investigated small talk in computer-mediated communication, for example, in email communication (Ren & Liu 2021) and on social media (Dayter 2016). In addition, it is also illuminating to examine children's small talk, which has rarely been explored (but see Thornborrow 2003). In short, I hope this special issue can inspire researchers to explore small talk in more contexts, more communicative modalities, and in more languages.

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