

# Studying Small Talk from a pragmatic angle: An introduction

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## ABSTRACT

In this introduction to the present special issue, we first define the notion of Small Talk from a pragmatic point of view and interconnect Small Talk with interaction ritual. Following this, we point out why a speech act-based approach is particularly useful to study Small Talk in a rigorous and replicable way. We also introduce the speech act framework used by all the studies in the special issue. Finally, we introduce the contents of the special issue.

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## KEYWORDS

Small Talk, Types of Talk, speech act, interaction ritual, replicability

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In this introduction to the present special issue dedicated to the study of Small Talk in different languages, we aim to discuss why it is worth engaging in research on Small Talk from a strictly language-based pragmatic angle. We first define what the pragmatician means by Small Talk. Such a definition is needed not only because the expression ‘small talk’ is used in many different ways, but also because the English expression ‘small talk’ has many equivalents in different languages, and at the same time this concept may not even

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exist in a strict sense in certain languages. For example, in Chinese the concept *xianliao* 闲聊 literally means ‘idle talk’, and so it can be said to have different connotations than the English ‘small talk’. German and Hungarian, on the other hand, do not have exact equivalents of ‘small talk’. For instance, as [House \(2006\)](#) argued, in German there is no proper expression for the Anglophone ‘small talk’, implying that Small Talk is ultimately not very important in the German linguaculture (although this may change due to globalisation). As part of defining Small Talk, we will also discuss its relationship with interactional ritual phenomena. Following this definition, we will outline the relationship between Small Talk and speech acts, which is at the heart of the present special issue. We will argue that speech act represents a particularly useful unit of analysis through which Small Talk can be pinned down without resorting to non-linguistic approaches and related stereotyping and overgeneralisations. Finally, we will introduce the contents of the special issue.

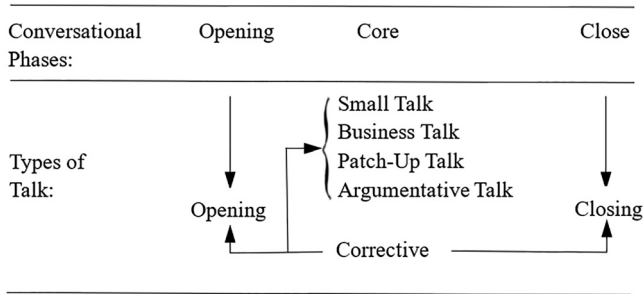
## 2. DEFINING SMALL TALK

Small Talk encompasses instances of language use in interactional situations where the participants do not aim to talk about serious issues. A key function of Small Talk is to create rapport either by ‘filling’ the time or by temporarily removing the participants from an ensuing more serious interaction. The study of Small Talk started with [Malinowski’s \(1934 \[1972\]\)](#) 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 1934 \[1972\]](#), 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 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.

In the current section, we do not aim to provide an overview of research on Small Talk in general because the individual papers in the special issue provide sufficient reviews of relevant studies. Instead, we aim to discuss how Small Talk as a Type of Talk relates to other Types of Talk and also why it can be said to be a typically ritual Type of Talk. Our definition of the concept of ‘Type of Talk’ is the following: this unit represents coherent sequences of speech acts which are highly conventionalised and as such are expected in an interaction.

In order to pin down what Small Talk as a Type of Talk means for the pragmatician, it is relevant here to refer to the model of [Edmondson & House \(1981\)](#) (see also [Edmondson, House & Kádár 2023](#)). This model shows that Type of Talk is a unit of analysis by means of which discourse can be broken down into smaller components – Types of Talk in turn can be broken down into speech acts. [Edmondson & House \(1981\)](#) and [Edmondson, House & Kádár \(2023\)](#) differentiate the following Types of Talk ([Figure 1](#)).





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

Openings and Closings frame other Types of Talk: as their names suggest, they represent the beginning and end of a discourse. The ‘Core’ part of an interaction may consist of one or more Types of Talk, including Small Talk, Business Talk, Patch-Up Talk and Argumentative Talk. Additionally, Edmondson and House distinguish Corrective or Repair, which we do not discuss here. By ‘Business’, we mean talk which is oriented towards a goal, plan or decision concerning a future course of action. By Patch-Up Talk, we mean talk consequent to an offence. The distinction between Small Talk and Argumentative Talk is largely one of weighing: Small Talk is largely Phatic and casual, while Argumentative Talk concerns the truth of an issue of substance. The goals of Small Talk are therefore social – showing oneself as agreeable, and basking in the agreeableness of one’s interlocutor. The goal of Argumentative Talk is ultimately agreement on a matter of some importance, but each participant seeks that agreement through promulgating his own view.

Due to its Phatic nature, Small Talk is typically ritual: as any interaction ritual it follows clear pragmatic conventions which often make Small Talk easy to recognise for linguaculture insiders (see Kádár 2024). For example, House & Kádár (this issue) compare Small Talk in English and Chinese, illustrated by the following examples:

- (1) Hi, how are you! Good to see you!
- (2) 兄弟你咋也来这儿了。  
Brother, you’re here as well.

The above utterances occurred in the same context – in a doctor’s waiting room – and in a comparable interpersonal situation, i.e. in an interaction between friends. They are clearly different from a pragmatic point of view: the English example (1) includes a greeting, an inquiry about the other’s well-being and an expression of positive feelings, while the Chinese example (2) includes a remark. As we will point out in the next section, speech acts provide a prime tool by means of which such manifestations of Small Talk and contrastive differences between them can be systematically captured. What is relevant for our analysis here is that while examples (1) and (2) are clearly different, for culture insiders both are banal and do not trigger much attention. This lack of attention only changes if and when somehow the speaker violates expectations as regards how they should be formulated. As Kádár (2017) argues, this is



a distinctive feature of interaction ritual behaviour, which represents a key aspect of social life, and which tends to go unnoticed until the expected order of how it should be enacted gets violated.

The fact that Small Talk is ritual is important to the pragmatician for two reasons. First, interaction rituals represent a fundamental element of interpersonal interaction: one can even argue that they are the relationally most significant aspects of pragmatic behaviour. Because of this, Small Talk as many other rituals is more important than meets the eye: while instances of Small Talk may seem to be ‘insignificant’, pragmatically they are just as important as the ritual Opening and Closing of an interaction. Second, as any interaction ritual Small Talk is highly conventionalised and mimetic – this makes it relatively easy for the pragmatician to describe its recurrent features.

This second point leads to the question as to how such a systematic description is possible. Let us now discuss the role of speech act theory in the study of Small Talk.

### 3. SMALL TALK AND SPEECH ACT

Ever since Austin and Searle, speech act has been a key analytic unit in pragmatics. While in the 2000s various discourse pragmaticians like [Eelen \(2001\)](#) heavily criticised speech act-based research, arguing that speech act represents a decontextualised and artificial unit, in the mainstream of pragmatics speech act has remained in use. In this special issue, we also promote the use of speech act theory for the study of Small Talk for the following two interrelated reasons:

1. Speech act provides a unit which is below discourse – as well as Types of Talk constituting phases of discourse – and as such it allows the researcher to break down an interactional phenomenon like Small Talk into components.
2. Speech acts closely correlate with Types of Talk. As [Edmondson & House \(1981\)](#) and [Edmondson, House & Kádár \(2023\)](#) argue, all Types of Talk tend to be realised by recurrent speech act types.

In order to conduct research by capitalising on the above-outlined two benefits of speech acts in the study of Small Talk, it is important for the researcher to rely on a finite and replicable interactional system of speech acts, which we intend to foreground in the present special issue, and which was introduced in [Edmondson & House \(1981\)](#), [Edmondson, House & Kádár \(2023\)](#) and [House & Kádár \(2023\)](#).

This system of speech acts provides an interactionally-based alternative for various speech act systems starting from the seminal works of Austin and Searle (see among others [Geis 1995](#); [Schiffrin 2005](#); [Roberts 2018](#)). More specifically, this system with a replicable set of speech act categories and a broader interpretive framework through which illocution and interaction can be fruitfully combined. [Figure 2](#) on the following page presents our speech act typology.

We believe that this typology is useful for the study of speech acts in interactional data because it is both finite and interactional. Finiteness is neither new nor uncontroversial. Ever since Austin and Searle, the idea that speech act categories need to be finite has been present in the field of pragmatics (see e.g. [Habermas 1979](#); [Vanderveken 1990](#); [Kissine 2013](#)), with



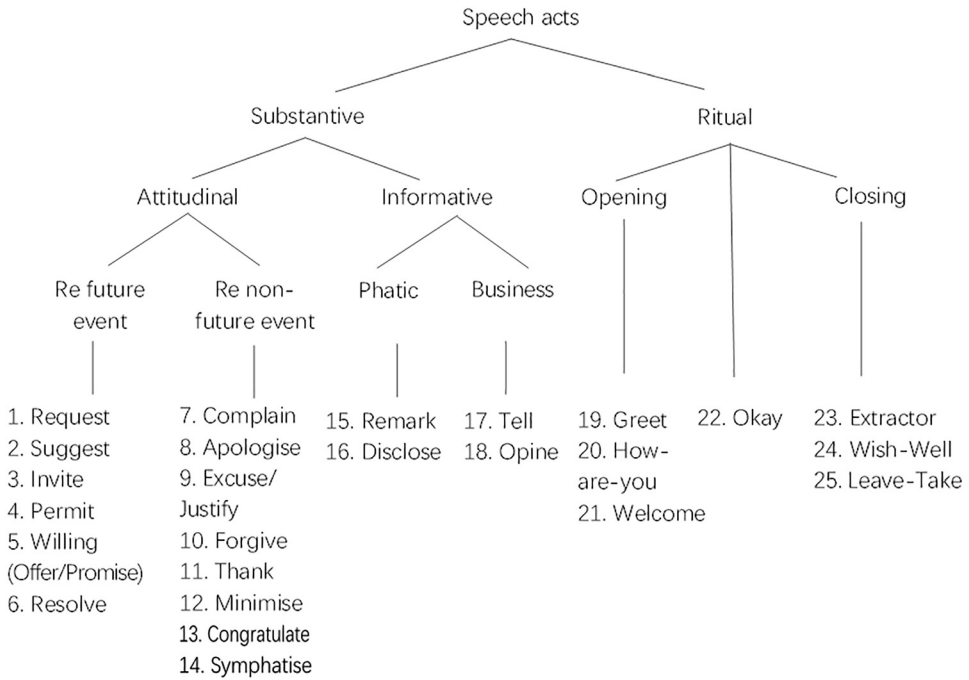


Figure 2. Our typology of speech acts

Levinson (2017) revisiting this issue recently. The reason why finiteness is potentially controversial is that with the passing of time one may ‘identify’ new speech acts. While such an addition surely has its own rationale, we ourselves adopt a different position, by arguing that we need to operate with a limited set of illocutions and consider how they are related to one another. As part of this system, we devote particular attention to how the units of illocution and interaction can be distinguished from one another, by arguing that many phenomena which are categorised by some as illocutions actually represent interactional categories. A typical example is refusal, which is in our sense an interactional move representing a case when the relationship between two speech acts is dispreferred. For instance, the speech act Invite (“Would you like to come to my party tonight?”) may either be ‘satisfied’ (“Would love to. thanks”), or not (“Can’t, I am afraid”). In our system, the second responsive speech act is not a ‘refusal’, which is an umbrella term – rather, it is a Resolve in illocutionary terms. Of course, refusal is not necessarily realised by the speech act Resolve: for example, “I am really sorry, I have a commitment” is an Apologise which can fulfil the same refusing role as a Resolve here.

The speech acts through which Small Talk is conventionally enacted are subject to linguistic-cultural variation, as we already noted above. Let us here revisit examples (1) and (2), by annotating them with the typology of speech acts outlined in Figure 2.

- (1) Hi, how are you! Good to see you!  
GREET + HOW-ARE-YOU + WELCOME



- (2) 兄弟你咋也来这儿了。  
 Brother, you're here as well.  
 REMARK

A key advantage of the above-outlined speech act approach relates to its finiteness: once one studies various linguaculturally embedded manifestations of Small Talk, it transpires that it is often the same speech acts through which such manifestations tend to be realised in interaction. For example, as [House & Kádár \(this issue\)](#) argue, speakers of Chinese prefer the speech act Remark, even though this speech act can take many different forms depending on the context, like the following one:

- (3) 老师，看您最近瘦了不少呀！  
 Teacher, I see that you have lost a lot of weight recently!  
 REMARK

This utterance occurs in the same context – a doctor's waiting room – as examples (1) and (2), but here the recipient has a power relationship with the speaker, and so the Remark is realised in the form of complimenting. Arguably, the most important advantage of finiteness is that the analyst does not have to invent speech acts *ad libitum* when encountering manifestations of Small Talk in different linguacultures, as well as different contexts in a particular linguaculture, but is rather able to use the same system of speech acts in a replicable way. To use the words of the late Willis Edmondson, through such a procedure one can avoid proliferating speech acts like a conjuror producing rabbits out of his hat!

This sense of replicability also involves a bottom-up and language-centred view on data featuring Small Talk data. As [House & Kádár \(2021\)](#) argue, it is important to look at one's data with the 'cold eye' of the linguist, without relying on presumptions. This, in our view, is particularly important when it comes to Small Talk because Small Talk can take many different forms across different contexts.

Considering the linguacultural variation of the pragmatic conventions of Small Talk, we believe that what one can do in the study of Small Talk across different languages – as in the case of this special issue – is to use a replicable model of speech acts like the one we outlined in this section to capture the pragmatic conventions of Small Talk in the various linguacultures under investigation. What one cannot do is to provide a 'grand' theory of Small Talk, by arguing that Small Talk *per se* is always realised by certain speech acts, and only these, because such a view would ignore linguacultural variation. For example, the following can be argued about Small Talk in English: The central types of illocution which characterise Small Talk are Informative in nature, i.e. Remarks, Tells and Discloses (possibly Opines), and, necessarily, the matching Requests for Illocutionary Acts. Phatic, Ritual and H-Supportive illocutions such as the Thanks, Minimise and Congratulate may occur commonly also, without, of course, being specific to this Type of Talk. These pragmatic conventions are valid only to English.

As this brief overview shows, it is worth to pragmatically 'map' Small Talk across different languages through the lens of speech acts, which is the key rationale of the present special issue. In the following final section of this introduction, let us briefly introduce the contents.



## 4. CONTENTS

Considering that all papers in this special issue use the same speech act system outlined above, in the following we only introduce the languages and data the authors of the various papers examine.

Eslami et al. study phatic clusters of speech acts conventionally preferred in Small Talk in Persian. They conducted research on Small Talk phenomena in Iran. The participants of their research include 97 Persian-speaking university students attending a state-run university located in the southwest of Iran.

Alba-Juez examines the Small Talk patterns of Spanish speakers within the ritual frame of casual encounters in the elevator at the workplace and residential apartment buildings. In such encounters, Small Talk is a fundamental part of interaction in such contexts due to time and space restrictions.

Ohashi examines data sourced from a Japanese online community where users ask and answer questions using their handle names. A specific thread was selected in which users give advice to the instigator who asks for advice on how to improve her Small Talk skills.

Xia et al. examine ritual Small Talk in Chinese, by focusing on the recurrent pragmatic features of 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.

Finally, House and Kádár present a contrastive pragmatic analysis of Small Talk in English and Chinese. They study DCTs conducted with U.S. American native speakers of English and native speakers of Chinese.

The present collection of studies, which provides insight into a cluster of Small Talk conventions worldwide, is concluded by a Postscript written by Ren Wei who is an internationally leading scholar in the field of pragmatics.

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