

MANAGING SOCIAL TALK AT WORK: WHAT DOES THE NESB WORKER NEED TO KNOW?

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Abstract

Social talk is an essential component of every workplace interaction, and using it appropriately can be crucial to the successful achievement of workplace goals. Using data collected by the Victoria University Language in the Workplace Project team, this paper provides an analysis of some of the features of small talk in New Zealand workplaces. Common topics of small talk are identified, as well as features of the way small talk is distributed during the working day and through workplace interactions. The varied functions of small talk at work are explored. Finally the implications of the research for ESOL teachers are discussed, with some suggestions for practical exercises which may be of benefit to learners from non-English-speaking backgrounds.

Introduction¹

Learning how to manage talk at work involves a wide range of communication skills, not least of which are skills in managing the social aspects of workplace interaction. Many workers from non-English-speaking backgrounds (NESB) are very skilled at their jobs, but they do not always know how to manage the social and interpersonal aspects of workplace interaction.

Employers, on the other hand, are very aware that it is often lack of social proficiency that lets these workers down, rather than weaknesses in their formal linguistic skills. They comment that workers have all the skills necessary to do the job, but that they seem unfriendly or uncomfortable at work; they don't seem to fit in smoothly. It is sociolinguistic and pragmatic skills which determine whether people are perceived as good workmates and even as good workers.

We acquire sociolinguistic and pragmatic skills in our native language(s) from years of immersion in a culture, mixing and working with others, but they present real challenges for second language learners (eg. Thomas 1983). As Michael Clyne points out on the basis of his study of eight varied workplaces in Melbourne, typically,

"inter-cultural communication breakdown occurs at the discourse and pragmatic levels, rather than being caused by phonological, lexical and morphosyntactic questions" (1994: 211).

Clearly courses which prepare new immigrants to operate in the workplace need to pay attention to pragmatic and sociolinguistic skills. Yet many textbooks which deal with "Business English" or "Business Communication" give little or no attention to the importance of managing social relationships at work. Social talk is assumed to be too basic to deserve serious attention in such textbooks. Yet our research demonstrates that social talk is an essential component of every workplace interaction, and using it appropriately, getting the content, placing, amount, and tone "right" can be a crucial and complex aspect of achieving workplace goals.

The Wellington Language in the Workplace Project

Effective communication with clients and colleagues is clearly crucial to the smooth and productive running of an organisation or business, as many training programmes recognise. But there is remarkably little research which examines in detail how people actually communicate verbally with their colleagues at work on a daily basis, and how they use language to manage the inevitable tensions between their various social and professional roles. The Language in the Workplace Project was begun in 1996 with the following goals:

- (1) to analyse the features of effective interpersonal communication in a variety of workplaces from a sociolinguistic perspective; and
- (2) to explore the practical implications of the results of the research for a range of New Zealand workplaces.

During the last three years, the Language in the Workplace team has collected workplace interactions in a wide range of New Zealand workplaces, including government departments, commercial corporations and private organisations, factories in Wellington and Auckland, and small businesses in the Hawkes Bay area. Altogether, more than 300 people have recorded their everyday workplace interactions for us, including many different types of workplace meetings and discussions, as well as social talk and telephone calls.

Our analyses to date have encompassed a wide range of pragmatic aspects of workplace talk, including directives (Holmes, 1998a), social talk (Holmes, in press), humour (Holmes, 1998b, forthcoming), problem-solving (Stubbe, forthcoming) and management styles (Holmes, Stubbe and Vine, 1998). Here I focus on what we have learned about the importance of small talk at work, and its implications for those teaching workers from non-English-speaking backgrounds.

Small Talk in the Workplace

Example 1 (All names are pseudonyms.)

Context: Diana, a manager of a government department, enters the office of her administrative assistant, Sally, at the beginning of the day to collect mail

- 1 D: good morning Sally lovely day
- 2 S: yes don't know what we're doing here we should be out in the sun
- 3 D: mm pity about the work really
- 4 S: how are your kids?
- 5 D: much better thank goodness any mail?

This is a typical example of small talk at work. It covers standard small talk topics – the weather, complaints about work, mention of family, health; it occurs as two people meet for the first time that day; and its main function is to oil the social wheels, to maintain good relations between Diana and Sally. I will discuss each of these aspects in turn: the topics or content of small talk, the distribution of small talk, and the functions of small talk at work.

Topics of small talk at work

Small talk in New Zealand workplaces typically focuses on non-controversial topics: the weather (eg. *cold eh, lovely day*), ritualised enquiries about health (eg. *how are you?*), out-of-work social activities (eg. *wonderful concert last night*), sport (eg. *great match on Saturday, eh*), generalised complaints about the economy (eg. *stock market's crashed again I see*), positive comments on appearance (eg. *wow you're looking great*) work (eg. *how's it going?*), and so on. There is some skill involved in selecting appropriate topics for a particular workplace. In some workplaces, for example, sport was a perennial and safe topic of small talk.

Example 2

- 1 A: great match on Saturday eh
- 2 B: yeah awesome

In others it was not so successful.

Example 3

- 1 A: great match on Saturday eh
- 2 B: what match?

In example 3, the speaker has wrongly assumed shared background knowledge. Common ground in the form of shared background knowledge, experience and/or attitudes is an important basis for successful small talk. Clearly there is ample scope for miscommunication involving second language learners in this area. There are many well-

known and well-documented cultural differences in terms of acceptable topics of small talk.

Compliments, for example, constitute common currency of small talk but they are fraught with potential problems (see, for example, Holmes and Brown, 1987). Cultures differ in terms of what merits a compliment. Large families, for example, are regarded more positively in Asian and Polynesian cultures than in Pakeha culture.

Example 4

Context: showing family photographs at tea break

- 1 Recent Chinese immigrant: Such a big family!
- 2 Pakeha New Zealander: Yes, but it has advantages too

The New Zealander's defensive response indicates that he misinterpreted the compliment as a polite but critical comment.

Social factors, such as gender and how well you know someone, also influence the choice of possible topics of small talk. Appearance compliments between women are common small talk tokens (eg. *what a lovely suit! you're looking very smart today!*) while between New Zealand males they are very rare indeed in New Zealand (Holmes, 1988), and are almost non-existent in our workplace data. Relative status is also a relevant factor. Nessa Wolfson noted that in her American data, compliments from a woman on a man's appearance occurred only when the man was much younger than the woman, and in general she says

"there seems to be a rather strong if not categorical constraint against the giving of appearance-related compliments to higher-status males, especially in work-related settings" (1983: 93).

Equally, there are more and less acceptable ways of responding to compliments. Many Asian cultures prescribe overt modesty, including denials and disagreements as appropriate responses to compliments, whereas western cultures tend to prescribe a gracious acceptance of some kind (Holmes, 1986, Chen, 1993).

Responding appropriately to workplace small talk may thus require some skill. In the workplaces we studied, responses to ritualistic or routine small talk questions would frequently elicit equally ritualistic comments about work.

Example 5

Context: Joan and Elizabeth pass in the corridor

- 1 E: hi Joan
- 2 J: hi how are you?
- 3 K: oh busy busy busy
- 4 J: mm terrible isn't it

Reference to how busy one is serves in the workplace as an ideal small talk token – a perfect topic for small talk at work (see also example 8 below). It indicates an orientation to the “proper” goals of the workplace, while also providing an acceptable account of why social relationships receive less attention than might be expected of good colleagues.

What is also noticeable in such examples is the considerable skill involved in selecting the appropriate level of detail for the discussion of small talk topics. In most cases, especially when they take place in passing, such interactions are very short. Just as we don’t expect a blow-by-blow account of a colleague’s gall bladder operation in response to *how are you*, it is equally inappropriate to respond in the workplace with a detailed analysis of why one considers that one’s workload is unreasonably high. More extensive social talk may occur, however, when people are beginning or ending a meeting.

Distribution of small talk

Small talk is typically, but not exclusively, found at the boundaries of interaction, as well as at the boundaries of the working day. It is almost mandatory to exchange small talk when people who work together first arrive at work, or meet for the first time in the working day, as example 1 demonstrates. An emergency or urgent task can displace it, but generally in the workplace, the first encounter of the day between work colleagues could be considered an obligatory site for small talk. The omission of small talk at such points will appear marked and is likely to be interpreted as evidence of bad manners or bad humour.

The beginning and end of work meetings is another typical site for small talk (see example 7 below). At the beginning of a meeting, small talk provides a gentle means of transition to the main business. Small talk warms people up socially, oils the interpersonal wheels, and gets talk started on a positive note. This is particularly important in Polynesian and Japanese culture where, in some contexts, reducing preliminary social talk to a minimum, or attempting to dispense with it entirely can cause offence (Metge and Kinloch, 1978, Metge, 1995, Clyne, 1994). On the other hand, Clyne (1991: 21) comments that people from eastern and south-east Asia, especially Vietnamese, and northern Europe, especially Finns, do not expect small talk to occur at all within work domains.

Clyne provides an example from the Melbourne factory data where a Vietnamese woman, Giao, was puzzled because when she arrived with a request for help with a broken part, her shop steward, Liesl, responded by engaging her in small talk.

Example 6 from Clyne (1994: 148-9). I have edited this example for ease of reading.

Context: Vietnamese woman Giao shows her Austrian shop steward Liesl some broken parts

[Parallel sections between slant lines / \ involve overlapping speech;
(.....) indicates untranscribable or missing words; + indicates a 1 second pause]

- 1 Giao: [shows broken parts to Anna]
 - 2 Liesl: hallo Giao
 - 3 Giao: /hallo Liesl\
 - 4 Liesl: /I haven't seen you\ for ages ++ what's wrong? ++
 - 5 Giao: (.....) so like this
 - 6 Liesl: ooh they're breaking?
 - 7 Giao: yeah see ++ I beg your pardon what you want?
 - 8 Liesl: I haven't seen you for a long time
- People from India, Croatia and the Philippines, however, handled the mixing of social and work routines more easily.

In some work contexts, small talk may develop beyond a couple of ritualistic utterances into more extended social talk, as illustrated by example 7.

Example 7

Context: Manager (i.e. the head of department) Hana, with her administrative assistant, Beth, who has just returned after a holiday

- 1 H: well it's nice to have you back welcome back
- 2 B: yes had a very good holiday
- 3 H: and feel well rested? so where did you go
- 4 B: no [laughs]
- 5 H: oh well
- 6 B: it's just just been busy with my mum and then she had me
- 7 take her here and take her there and [laughs]
- 8 H: oh
- 9 B: so no it was good I didn't have to worry about meals I didn't
- 10 have to worry about bills or kids or um work or anything just
- 11 (just) a holiday for you
- 12 B: yeah + it was UNREAL [laughs]
- 13 H: now listen are you going to be wanting to take time off during
- 14 the school holidays

Despite what is suggested by the occurrence of *welcome back*, this interaction occurred at the end of the meeting between Hana and Beth. Urgent business had displaced it from the beginning of the encounter. Small talk develops or expands in this way for a number of possible reasons: the participants may know each other well, or the period since they last had contact may be considerable, or they may be aware that there is nothing urgent awaiting the immediate attention of either, or the meeting they have just had (or are anticipating) may have been very long or problematic. In all these cases, a brief ritual-

istic small talk exchange at the boundaries of the speech event is likely to be experienced as inadequate. In example 7, Beth and Hana had not seen each other for a while and they are doing some obligatory “catching up”. Knowing **how much** small talk to use and whether to extend it into more personal or social talk is a sophisticated sociolinguistic skill which is very evident in our workplace data. The ability to move smoothly and pleasantly between social talk and work talk is obviously a valuable skill for workers from different cultural backgrounds. Learning how to identify the relevant contextual clues is crucial.

Another aspect of the boundary-marking function of small talk is its role as a transitional device or “time-filler” between different activities. At work, just as at social events, a silence sometimes needs filling; there are times when it would be socially embarrassing or gauche not to talk. Because of its elasticity, flexibility and adaptability, small talk is ideally suited to such contexts. Like knitting, it can be picked up and dropped with minimal effort to fill “dead” time in the workplace, or to fill a gap between planned activities. In our data, small talk occurred in the workplace between people waiting for a meeting to start, between a policy analyst and a manager’s administrative assistant while the analyst was waiting to see the manager, and between people waiting for a xeroxing or scanning job to be completed. In all these cases, small talk filled a time gap with acceptable, and indeed valuable, relationship-maintaining social interaction, while also avoiding problematic disengagement issues when the “main activity” could be commenced or resumed. Because it is undemanding in terms of topic and intellectual content, and infinitely flexible in terms of length, small talk is ideally suited for these varied functions. It is therefore an invaluable tool for ESL workers from different cultural backgrounds.

Social function of small talk

Clearly, as the discussion and examples have illustrated, the most obvious function of small talk is its social function of constructing, expressing, maintaining and reinforcing interpersonal relationships between those who work together. Small talk is an indispensable component of “doing collegiality”. For this reason, it is very important that new immigrants learn to manage small talk competently.

Example 8

Context: Jon and May pass on the stairs

- 1 J: hello hello /haven’t seen you for a while\
- 2 M: /hi \
- 3 well I’ve been a bit busy
- 4 J: must have lunch sometime
- 5 M: yea good idea give me a ring

Jon and May indicate mutual good intentions as they do maintenance work on their collegial relationship. Jon's use of "sometime" in his invitation, is an indication of the largely symbolic status of the interchange, and this is ratified by May's equally non-specific suggestion that he ring her; no precise time or date is mentioned. These are crucial clues that those from different cultural backgrounds sometimes miss. Pressing for a precise date and time would generally be considered an inappropriate response.

As mentioned above, the end of a workplace interaction is another important position for small talk which is attending to social needs. Small talk mitigates a possible sense of rejection and "consolidates" the relationship (Laver 1975: 232), as illustrated in example 7. Keeping the small talk to an appropriate length and avoiding specific future social commitments are the obvious challenges for those from other cultures.

In more overtly sanctioned social contexts such as *smoko*, the challenges are different. In such contexts, small talk is an appropriate bridge to more extended social talk, as in the following example from a nursery where Hal is a "sheltered" worker.

Example 9

Context: tea break in a garden centre

- 1 Ros: cold eh
- 2 Sha: chilly
- 3 Ros: I know it's like that all over the area
- 4 Sha: need my morning cuppa to warm me up
- 5 Ros: would you like a biscuit Hal?
- 6 Hal: no
- 7 Des: they eat nice cake don't they
- 9 you on a diet Hal?
- 10 Hal: yeah
- 11 Des: are you? gotta lose weight do you
- you're getting a bit of a pot there

The kind of teasing banter illustrated in lines 9 and 11-12 is common at sanctioned social breaks, but it is one of the most difficult aspects of work for some new immigrants. It is important to be able to participate in order to signal that you "belong" to the work team. Yet getting the tone right and keeping contributions appropriately short are real challenges for would-be participants.

How can the teacher help?

Native speakers clearly know a great deal about managing small talk in their native language(s). Our analyses of language use in different New Zealand workplaces help highlight the many potential problem areas for those who do not share the same socio-linguistic and pragmatic rules concerning the appropriate topics, distribution and functions of small talk at work.

How can such skills be acquired? Natural exposure to an adequate range of workplace interactions is most unlikely. The ESOL teacher needs to demonstrate some ingenuity in providing opportunities for learners to observe, study, and acquire the sociolinguistic and pragmatic skills involved in advantageously managing small talk in the workplace. Here I discuss what is offered by two complementary methods of approaching this challenge.

Using the soaps

One method that has been successfully used for teaching English to New Zealand immigrants makes use of local television "soap operas" (Grant and Devlin, 1996). These also offer possibilities for teaching ways of managing small talk to NESB workers. Realistic soap operas set in workplaces such as hospitals, police stations, and offices provide ideal material focussing on interactions at work. Using such materials as resources, teachers and students can usefully explore the following issues.

Topics

- what are considered appropriate topics for use as small talk?

Students can observe small talk interactions between different people in the programme and note the range of topics that occur: eg. weather, sport, family, work.

- how much detail should be provided?

Students can observe how long each topic is discussed, and note the level of generality and the degree of detail with which topics such as health, weather, sport, weekend activities etc. are discussed.

Distribution

- where is small talk placed in the speech event?

Students can observe where in an interaction the small talk occurs: eg. at the beginning on first encounter, at the end before people part, in between other topics. They can also note how long small talk lasts.

- when is small talk required/optional/prohibited

Teachers can draw students' attention to situations where small talk is dispensed with: eg. in an emergency situation, compared to where it is normally regarded as obligatory eg. on first meeting for the day.

- how frequently does small talk occur in the course of the working day?

Teachers can use the TV programmes to stimulate reflection on the frequency with which small talk occurs in different work contexts: eg. when and how often does it occur after the first meeting of the day?

- how long does it last in different contexts?

Teachers can draw students' attention to the fact that small talk is brief in some contexts and longer in others: eg. longer at morning tea break, shorter in passing someone when engaged in a work task.

Functions

- how to use small talk to express positive feelings to another

Students can observe in soap operas that small talk lasts longer between those who know each other well, who are friends etc. They can note when it is brief and discuss why.

- how to use small talk to oil the wheels in a tricky encounter

Teachers may be able to find examples of people using small talk to smooth the way in a tricky encounter, or to make their peace after relations have been difficult, or to lead into a request for a favour. This may encourage more able students to take note of the usefulness of small talk in maintaining good relations.

Role playing small talk at work

A second very important method of developing sociolinguistic skills for the workplace for NESB workers is role play. Role play provides the opportunity to simulate a much wider range of workplace interactions than an NESB worker will typically encounter in their normal everyday experience. Exercises which encourage students to develop automaticity with small talk should be the goal. (see also Holmes and Brown, 1987) The following three exercises have proved particularly useful in developing very basic skills in managing small talk in a variety of workplaces.

(i) Practising automatic and brief responses

In this exercise the students are greeted and farewelled by others playing the role of manager, cashier, co-worker, tea-lady, and so on. The students learn to provide brief, appropriate responses without delay and without elaboration, no matter what the "feeder" line. So, for example, students provide short responses such as *fine* or *great* to "how" feeders as varied as *how are you today?*, *how's things?*, *how are you doing?*, *how are you going?*, *how was your weekend?* *how was your holiday*, and *how was your meal?* And with *not much* to "what" feeders such as *what have you been up to?*, *what's new*, and *what's the latest gossip then?*

(ii) Practising extending small talk

This exercise is aimed at developing the student's ability to maintain small talk beyond a single exchange. At morning tea, smoko or lunch, it is appropriate for co-workers to engage in more extensive small talk. This is where NESB workers may be left out and feel isolated. The role-play exercise involves students practising making a simple response and then adding a question to that response. They add questions such as *how about you?*, *what about you?* or *what have you been doing?* in order to extend the interaction.

Example 10

Manager role: hi Tom how are you?

Student worker role: fine, how about you?

Cashier role: hi Sally how was your weekend?

Student worker role: great what have you been doing?

Co-worker role: giddy Ron what have you been up to?

Student worker role: not much, what about you?

These simple devices provide the student worker with sociolinguistically acceptable ways of extending the small talk in appropriate contexts. This takes the pressure off the other person to "carry" the conversation by asking questions, and makes the interchange far more of a shared enterprise.

(iii) Spotting the errors

A third exercise which can work well with more advanced student workers is to role play interchanges between people involving sociolinguistic errors or gaffes. The student's task is to "spot the error" and correct it in a subsequent role play. The features listed above, in relation to using soap operas in skills training, can provide ideas for possible errors. So errors may involve such behaviours as

- the use of an inappropriate topic in small talk
- inappropriately long responses, or no response where one is clearly required
- inappropriately detailed responses
- the insertion of a small talk formula at an inappropriate point within an exchange

In discussing errors, students become aware of the importance of such factors as status differences as well as length of acquaintance, and degree of friendship in determining what can be said, and how, and what is inappropriate in different contexts.

There are obviously many more ways in which an innovative teacher can use the information on the features of small talk provided in this paper to develop the skills of NESB workers. We have stressed here the importance of keeping things simple and developing automaticity initially, while offering more able students the possibility of further understanding the factors involved in the good management of small talk at work.

Conclusion

The data from the Victoria University Language in the Workplace project provides invaluable information on the way New Zealanders actually interact in a number of real New Zealand workplaces. In this paper, I have illustrated ways in which this data can be used to identify the sociolinguistic and pragmatic skills needed to function effectively in the workplace. The skills described provide a basis for developing a range of materials which may be used to better prepare new arrivals for the kinds of interaction they will encounter once they start work.

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NOTES

- ¹ This paper has been developed from my Plenary presentation at the Sixth CLESOL Conference held in Palmerston North, New Zealand in September 1998. An earlier version is being published in the *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*. The research described is based on data collected by the Language in the Workplace (LWP) Project team. This paper benefited especially from discussion with Maria Stubbe, Bernadette Vine and Rose Fillary. The LWP Project is funded by the New Zealand Foundation for Research, Science and Technology.