

ENGLISHES

TESTI E CONTESTI DELLE LINGUE INGLESI

16

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Tra le lingue occidentali, l'inglese è quello che si è maggiormente evoluto, se non trasformato, fino a divenire la lingua della globalizzazione. Oggi, quindi, non si può più parlare di "English" bensì di "Englishes", ognuno dei quali si inserisce in un ben delineato contesto geografico e storico-politico dal quale ricava e afferma nuove e originali strutture grammaticali e lessicografiche. È il caso dell'anglo-americano, dell'anglo-canadese e dell'anglo-australiano, ormai realtà consolidate e codificate, così come è il caso dell'anglo-caraibico, dell'anglo-indiano e dell'anglo-africano (nelle sue diverse accezioni) che sono tuttora realtà "in progress" e, proprio in virtù di ciò, le più interessanti e innovative.

La Collana intende, pertanto, ospitare studi filologici e linguistici, testi grammaticali e lessicografici che possano coadiuvare l'insegnamento dell'inglese moderno e aiutare la comprensione e l'insegnamento delle letterature che di questi "Englishes" sono espressione.

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LAURA DI FERRANTE

**SMALL TALK
IN THE WORKPLACE**
A CORPUS-BASED STUDY

Preface by

LUCY PICKERING





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It really takes a village. In my experience, research is not an individual endeavor. Fortunately, and rightly so. This is also true for this project, which was possible thanks to all the people I thank here, who contributed, in different ways and at different levels, to it.

The origin of the book is rooted in the Applied Linguistic Laboratory at Texas A&M University-Commerce (TAMUC). The director of the Lab, Dr. Lucy Pickering, generously involved me in her project on the AAC and non-AAC Workplace Corpus (ANAWC). Without her generosity, guidance, and scholarship, this book would have never seen light. This would also not have been possible without Dr. Salvatore Attardo, who recruited me in 2008 and has never stopped teaching me, encouraging me, helping me, and overall improving my professional life. I would like to thank my colleagues and friends at TAMUC, who started working with me on the pilot study of this work, Dr. Julie Bouchard and Dr. Shigeito Menjo: he will never read this, but will also never be forgotten.

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Naturally, all remaining flaws are totally my responsibility.

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PREFACE

When Carrie Bruce (Georgia Institute of Technology) and I conceptualized the Augmentative and Alternative Communication and Non-Augmentative and Alternative Communication Workplace Corpus (ANAWC; Pickering & Bruce, 2009), we were not certain how far and into what areas the research based on the corpus might extend. The work undertaken by Di Ferrante has shown us the breadth of the possibilities.

Di Ferrante has extracted the Small Talk at Work corpus (STW) from ANAWC, i.e., a sub-corpus of small talk in the workplace and quite possibly the first of its kind. As this is foundational work, much of this volume is rightfully dedicated to methodological issues which will serve future efforts in this direction well. A second noteworthy aspect of the book is an in-depth discussion of the very concept of small talk which is, in fact, a remarkably elusive concept. Finally, Di Ferrante presents her “mixer” model of small talk (essentially, a multi-dimensional array of continua) which is itself a significant innovation in the field.

Di Ferrante’s study is transdisciplinary and therefore transmethodological, not only combining usefully qualitative and quantitative approaches, but ranging broadly over theoretical stances. For example, Di Ferrante considers and uses both the communities of practice approach and the speech and discourse community approaches (p. 35) resulting in a textured approach that allows the data to shine through. Elsewhere, quantitative methods are strengthened by close attention to detail, and a recognition that qualitative analysis is crucial to determine what needs to be counted quantitatively: “the frequent

laugh of one of the participants, for example, was revealed listening to the recordings to be, in fact, a nervous laughter” (p. 69).

One of the most interesting findings of Di Ferrante’s study is that “most of the small talk interactions happen during the workday and that opening and closing small talk exchanges are less frequent than on-the-run talk.” (p. 109). This goes against many of the findings in the literature, but is readily explained by the fact that most small talk literature does not focus on corpus data from the same interactants working together for a whole day. After all, in a workday, we greet each other once, but we talk for eight hours!

Other findings are new for the study of conversation and humor research. For example, “as interactions have a higher number of participants, there is a tendency for the presence of humor to also increase.” (p. 154). Another finding, that humor is more prevalent in all-female and mixed groups (or to put it differently, men-only group joke less) confirms previous studies (e.g., Pollio & Swanson, 1995) but is significant because of the numerical data and the high level of significance of the difference shown in these data.

With regard to AAC users, as expected, there was less interaction when compared to non-AAC users: “the AAC speakers talk less than their non-AAC counterparts, and when they do, they use fewer words” (p. 170) but more significantly, they “exhibit limited engagement in the recorded interactions”. This points clearly to the fact that much work remains to be done on AAC devices, which despite improvements, still fall short of providing full support to their users in this context.

In conclusion, this is a strong contribution to a field in much need of research. Di Ferrante should be complimented for her solid work and for some groundbreaking findings and proposals. As is often the case, innovative work opens more questions than it answers. This is undoubtedly the case with this volume, and we look forward to further work on the subject from both Di Ferrante and others.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Talking at work

This book is about non-task-related spoken *interactions* occurring in the workplace. Also, it is about *people* doing small talk while at work. And it is about the *role* of small talk in the work context.

Within any workplace, specific cultures, practices, and also tacit, shared norms regulate what can and cannot be said, which kind of jokes are acceptable and which are not, which topics are appropriate and which should instead be avoided. Some norms are common to many workplaces across the world, norms like greetings among coworkers when they first meet or run across each other, or farewells, at the end of the workday. Some other norms are very much related to the specific country where the workplace is located: For example, a study (Salin *et al.*, 2019) on workplace bullying in 13 different countries, found that both cultural and contextual factors influence the very conceptualization and perception of bullying behaviors in the workplace. Similarly, norms, policies, and practices may vary across workplaces, even in the same geographical area; it should suffice to think of how dress codes are very specific in some contexts — ranging from *formal*, *business casual*, and *casual* — to non-existent elsewhere; moreover, there are professions where uniforms of some sort are mandatory and also identify a specific role or job type, like the military, or the hospital, or the airport.

In this respect, two anecdotes should help convey this idea. A few years ago, I coordinated a three-week intensive program of Italian language and culture for a group of American military in Rome, Italy. After a couple of days, the group leader approached me apologizing for

one of the other students wearing bermuda shorts to class and informed me that he had formally reprimanded his colleague and warned him to wear more appropriate clothes in the future. When I tried to explain that I had not noticed the outfit of the other student and that anyway it was customary for students in Italy to wear bermuda shorts in Rome's hot weather (it was a very warm April), he said that they were students of that intensive program in their military capacity, and because of this, it was not acceptable for them to represent their institution in bermuda shorts. The second anecdote refers to my very first day in Texas as a doctoral student. It was the first week of August and it was extremely hot, even at night. In the morning of another sunny day in Texas, I walked to the campus as I wanted to start familiarizing myself with my new workplace. Since the semester had not started yet, I met very few people during my walk. As I entered the building of my Department, I saw someone working in an office with an open door. I timidly knocked on the door and introduced myself. The woman in the room welcomed me with a southern, warm, happy greeting, and introduced herself as one of my soon-to-be Professors. She was wearing a pink, sleeveless t-shirt and high-waisted denim shorts. While I had not paid attention to my student's bermuda shorts, I did notice the professor's women's shorts. In my previous job at an Italian university, this attire was uncommon among professors, and my previous experiences clearly informed my perceptions and attitudes. However, it is worth mentioning that after a few months in Texas, I became accustomed to a much broader spectrum of clothing choices.

These two anecdotes should make it clear that many variables inform workplace norms and such variables include status (in my example, student vs. professor), country (and therefore culture), but also temporary and contextual conditions (e.g.: the weather), the type of institution (e.g. the military vs. the university), each individual's experience of the world, and so many more.

Workplace practices also depend on the organizational structure of the workplaces, i.e., whether or not they are primarily hierarchical. The variety of policies and procedures informs the interactions among coworkers, along continua that range from formal to familiar, from

mostly work-related interactions to mostly everyday talk, from all-day-long spoken conversations to sporadic ones, from conversations involving only coworkers to exchanges also involving customers or third parties.

Workplace talk is hence influenced by a fair amount of circumstances; coworkers engage every day in a multitude of types of discourse and topics, which depend on the aforementioned variables, but also on the specific characteristics of the speakers. In this context, small talk in the workplace is a specific type of discourse, inherently different from small talk engaged in non-workplace situations (see, for example, small talk at parties: Schneider, 1988; and at the coffee place and other types of informal settings: Ventola, 1979). The distinctive characteristics of small talk in the workplace mainly depend on its speakers, because their relationships are strictly connected to them being coworkers: their linguistic and social behaviors are influenced and shaped by the workplace culture, its rhythms, and practices; in other words, their rapport is not authentically (and solely) social as that of, say, two strangers at a bus stop: in fact it is determined by the working environment, broadly conceived as the office setting, interpersonal dynamics, power roles, etc. From sociolinguistic, socio-rhetorical, and ethnographic perspectives, the community of coworkers is very composite and their discourses are influenced by such a plethora of variables that hardly does one of the concepts of community of practice, discourse community, and speech community entirely cover the complexity of characteristics of a workplace community.¹

In this book, an investigation of small talk in workplace settings is presented to illustrate how coworkers engage in non-task related discourse, how it “infiltrates” their workdays, what discursive strategies are developed, which topics are preferred, and how gender and disability inform coworkers’ discursive routines.

The spoken interactions analyzed here are from the Small Talk at Work (STW) corpus, which is culled from the Augmentative and Alternative Communication and Non-Augmentative and Alternative

¹ For discussion on the concept of workplace community, see Ho-Beng *et al.*, 2006; Marra, 2012; Shamir, 1981.

Communication (AAC and Non-AAC) Workplace Corpus (ANAWC, Pickering and Bruce, 2009; Pickering *et al.*, 2019), an over one-million-word collection of spoken interactions from six different U.S. workplaces. For individuals who have difficulties in expressing themselves through natural speech, augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) presents a solution to facilitate their engagement with others. AAC encompasses diverse modalities, including sign language, spelling boards, and electronic tools, allowing individuals to fulfill both verbal and written communication requirements in a workplace setting. Portable speech-generating devices allow users to compose messages through the selection of pictures, letters, words, or sentences. These devices can be operated through various means such as touch, eye gaze, or switch input.

The ANAWC corpus is particularly novel and interesting as not only does it provide a wide range of workplace typology—and hence a multitude of diversified interactional situations and dynamics—but it also comprises both AAC and non-AAC speakers, who were entrusted to record their workday interactions with over 160 interlocutors.

1.2. The size of small talk

Typing *small talk* in quotation marks in the search engines of some of the major online book retailers and digital databases will result in a moderately large quantity of titles on how to become successful in relationships by learning the art of small talk. The ability to engage in small talk and keep it going is sold as the key to professional success, personal effectiveness, relationship mastery, and social comfort. But what is *small* about small talk? There seems to be consensus on the uncomplicated character of small talk: everyone can engage in it and it does not require any particular knowledge or expertise. The degree of complexity, hence, partly accounts for the smallness of small talk. In addition, the seemingly trivial nature of small talk is emphasized as a basic characteristic of the successful social being: The author of one of those books maintains that her goal was to learn small talk strategies in

order “to figure out how to keep a conversation going for more than five minutes” (Fine, 2005, p. xii); this suggests that length is not the reason why this kind of talk is small.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Arnold Bennet was one of the first to use the expression *small talk*. In his *Tales of Five Towns*, he wrote: “‘Will Harry be late at the works to-night again?’ she asked in her colder, small-talk manner, which committed her to nothing” (Bennet, 1905, p. 22). In this citation, small talk is used as a modifier for “manner”, and it seems to convey a sense of casual, unplanned talking. Along these lines, small talk seems to be connected to distance toward both the interlocutor and in regard to the topic at hand; the idea of distance is in fact embossed in the notion of *weather* as the stereotypical topic for small talk. However, interpersonal and referential distance is not a plausible defining characteristic for small talk as it occurs very often among intimates or acquaintances; therefore its smallness is not a matter of little intimacy either.

When approaching the study of gossip, Bergmann (1993) claimed that “what is familiar is not yet understood” (p. 7). In the same way, *small talk* is a commonly used phrase to refer to a pervasive mode of interaction, and yet its anatomy, contents, and mechanisms are still vague: it is often used as an umbrella term to refer to interactions in which people talk about anything with anybody, in various situations. Schneider (1989) noticed that small talk is “the art of talking about nothing” (p. 437): its undemanding nature makes it versatile and apt to be used in many situations and among different interlocutors to avoid silence, but also conflict. The ductility of small talk may have led to the equivalence between small and unimportant, meaningless talk. According to the 2023 data of the US Employment Situation Summary of the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average time spent at work by employees is 43.7 hours per week (United States, Bureau of Statistics, 2023). In other words, many people spend a very large portion of their adult lives at work, interacting with other people who are coworkers or clients and a very large number of these interactions are simply not work-related. In the last thirty years or so, research has been focusing on small talk in specific workplaces and among specific interlocutors

with different social and hierarchical roles. A conspicuous number of studies has for example investigated service and medical encounters (Coupland *et al.*, 1994; Friginal, 2009; Staples, 2016, Van De Mierop, 2016 and many more) because they are very relevant in terms of successful communication (Friginal, 2022) and of patient-centered care (Staples, 2015), but also because small talk interactions might be problematic in that they might collide negatively with the on-task talk (Benwell & McCreddie, 2016).

Small talk seems not only to be relevant to fill the silence, which might be uncomfortable. It is in fact demonstrated that social talk allows people to establish control over “emerging discourse” and “future actions” (see Ainsworth-Vaughn, 2003, p. 454 and ff.). In other words, small talk may provide power in interaction and contribute to social relationships. Thus, framing it and becoming familiar with its mechanisms and contents could prove very beneficial to communication and social interaction.

1.3. Purpose of the study

The purpose of this book is to detail the anatomy of small talk as it is used in a sample of U.S. workplaces. The aim here is to obtain a map of the structure and functions of small talk interactions and their impact on the work experience of different populations of workers.

Specifically, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the variables that define small talk, in terms of their frequency and internal hierarchy? The objective for this question is to determine a mostly quantitative, structural definition and a comprehensive description of small talk’s elements (number of the participants, topics revolved around, position with respect to work interactions, number of turns, etc.).
2. Are there recurrent discursive patterns in small talk exchanges? The objective is to focus on qualitative aspects of the interactions to identify typical routines both in terms of content (preferred topics,