

Small Talk as a Sign of Cultural Differences

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Abstract: *This paper is based on the authors' experience as foreign language teachers, and participants to different international conferences and NGOs meetings, or just simple tourists and their intention to share this experience with their students. The observations were verified and analysed according to a theoretical frame and methodological approach, which enabled us to turn the whole material into a research program which lasted for three years and involved some of our foreign students' experience..*

Key words: *Identity, Communication, Small Talk.*

LEAD-IN

Contemporary society, characterised by globalisation and transnationalism, may be considered as having the same way of living and talking, leading to a certain uniformization of cultures and identity. This is a superficial approach, which is far from genuine reality. A simple tourist travelling from one country to another, without any special psychological or linguistic training, can observe the existing differences which encompass a large number of aspects, such as the way of addressing, greeting or entertaining people, that part of communication that we put under the name of "small talk". These differences can be noticed even in academic environments, places that are generally considered to be quite "international". If we refer to small communities, geographical or professional areas less involved in multinational organizations, their importance has to be also taken into consideration; otherwise, ignoring them can lead to communication gaps, sources of misunderstandings or sometimes even critical incidents.

Another general aspect that has to be considered when analysing the suggested research topic is the role of English as an international language and the influence of the Anglo-Saxon model upon local traditions and ways of communication. Of course this influence is stronger in business or academic environments and diminishes if colloquial conversation or writing are the subjects of the research. The way in which this influence shapes small talk in different European or Asian countries is due to the gap between the global model and the local one. In Holland, for example, this gap may be ignored, but in Turkey where people are still using their complicated formula of addressing even in large international companies, this gap has to be duly taken into consideration.

One may ask why we have focused on "small talk" and not on another communication aspect. First of all, because small talk is not simple at all and there is nothing 'small' about it. Small talk is a type of communication that cannot only help to build a meaningful bond with a person, but it is also a vital social skill that will benefit our students in the professional world. On the other hand, if it is not properly held, it may lead to an unfriendly starting point and damage the whole communication process. Overall, small talk is the prerequisite for establishing a positive contact with people in order to create and maintain a favourable personal or professional relationship across cultures. It involves awareness of cultural differences in communication e.g. the choice of 'neutral' topics of conversation or giving appropriate responses to certain questions, as well as the opportunity to build up the social skills for developing collaborative professional rapports with other professionals.

The aim of this research refers to all the above mentioned aspects. In our ESP (English for Special Purposes) seminars we face people in tertiary learning system where cultural aspects are part of the curricula as much the linguistic ones. After graduation most of our students are going to work in multinational companies, meet people from different countries and cultures and face the challenge of socializing properly with their fellow-workers or partners.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The main research question refers to the role of cultural differences in shaping small talk patterns and in establishing a real communication between and among people belonging to a variety of cultural backgrounds. Actually, it deals with the interdependence of the two concepts that are so popular in a globalized society – cultural differences and communication. The question was set as follows: *Is small talk influenced by cultural backgrounds?*

The main research question led to subsequent queries:

- a. *Is small talk influencing national identity?*
- b. *Which part of national backgrounds is shaping small talk and leads to a particular pattern?*

If we wish to answer those questions, merely empiric research is not enough. A serious theoretical approach is necessary as well as a serious methodological framework.

METHODOLOGICAL AND THEORETICAL APPROACH

From a methodological point of view, the research on which this paper is based started as an empirical one. This means that the authors gathered certain facts (observations based on their personal experience), completed them with examples offered by some of our foreign students and tried to match them with a certain pattern to find the theoretical explanations for those facts. In order to reach accurate observation the statistic method was used as well.

The theoretical approach started with the definition of the main concepts used during the research process – small talk and cultural differences. It may look as a very simple approach but it should be mentioned that both concepts, largely used in communication studies have a lot of definitions. That is why it is necessary to underline which one was taken into consideration before starting the research. According to the Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture (2010) – small talk refers to light conversation on unimportant or non-serious subjects [4, p.1275]. In other words it refers to socialization. So why do we need to study it and moreover to analyse its cultural implications? One strong reason may be what Bernstein (2002) suggests, i.e. socialization makes people safe and, as a consequence, helps building a good relationship no matter if business or friendly. Something that needs to be remembered is that small talk is not just for strangers and acquaintances [2], it is for a large variety of occasions.

In order to analyse the material it is necessary to establish which the main characteristics of a well-performed small talk are. After going through a lot of books and scientific reviews we discovered that most of them refer to USA and UK models, which offers theoretical background for one side of the gathered materials. For the other we had to consult national authors and cultural studies.

Since the research is addressed to students, the teachers' role and the way in which they can use the result is important. It represents the final stage of the experiment. A student-centred class involving questionnaires, simulation and role play is a rewarding learning strategy for both students and mentors. Students simulate a real life encounter (e.g. a small talk before a students' conference) and this exercise encourages general oral fluency [2].

EXPERIMENT DESCRIPTION

When we decided to start the research we had materials for the way in which small talk develops in the UK, to be more precise in England, Scotland and Ireland, in Greece, Turkey and Holland. We also knew something about Japan and China. Later, the list was completed, due to our foreign students with observations concerning Iraq, Yemen Lebanon, and Bulgaria and of course Romania. Therefore, we were able to cover quite a large area

which included western countries, the Balkans and the Middle East. The whole corpora was gathered after a series of questionnaires completed by students.

After gathering the material we found ourselves in front of a huge number of notices, recordings and photos, a fact that raised the question of systematizing and ranking them under certain headings in order to identify the cultural differences. Certain statistics helped us to classify the materials. Because this is just a paper and not a volume, we are going to focus on three aspects: main topics of conversation, the way of answering and the balance between silence and talk.

Successful 'small talk' mainly depends on the topic it approaches. Starting a conversation can be risky because it gives the other person the power to reject or accept you, in other words to accept to reject it. Some subjects may be "taboo" in certain countries, but perfectly appropriate in others. However, there are certain "safe" topics that people use for developing small talk. Among them, the weather is probably number one, even among friends and family. In England and among young people, sports news is a very common topic, too. Entertainment news, such as a celebrity who is in town, is another good topic. If there is something that you and the other speaker have in common, that may also be acceptable to talk about. There are also some subjects that are not considered acceptable when making small talk. Discussing personal information such as salaries or other money issue like for example how much you paid for your car is not advisable in the UK, but can be an ordinary issue in the Balkans if you are in a friendly environment. In Iraq and Yemen it is polite to ask about social matters, such as weekend or vacation plans and even a lot of personal questions about you and your family. In Scotland or the USA people are curious about where you are from, if you like their country scenery and what you know about their history (mainly their fight for independence). Family issues are accepted in the Balkans, but not very elegant in UK or Germany.

Giving answers is as important as the way we start and continue the conversation. Americans and British people prefer straight answers which are considered rude by Turkish or Arab people. In the UK a successful way to start a 'small talk' conversation is to ask open ended questions offering your partner an equal position. In Turkey and Arab speaking countries there are a lot of introductory phrases, without any practical meaning and, then after certain minutes, the real question is finally asked in an indirect way. Even if the answer is obviously negative, good manners ask for an answer, which suggests the negation in a very "symbolic" way.

As for the third item of our research, the field literature indicates that active listening and empathy are vital communication skills to small talk. The amount of silence that is perceived as right during conversation is a major aspect in developing a relationship and plays an important role in cross-cultural contacts. In the UK a fluent conversation is a target for any speaker. In Japan, however, silence is highly valued. A Japanese proverb says that "Those who know do not speak - those who speak do not know". In Japan as in many Asian countries people need time for contemplation [5]. Similarly, in Turkey silence is considered a sign of respect, people enjoy keeping silence together. Silence leads to contemplation and this attitude is valued in oriental countries. However, when you are in an English-speaking environment it is often better to make a few mistakes, if you are not a native speaker, than not to say anything at all

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

These are just the most important differences which underline the fact that small talk is different in various countries. It is obvious that the local cultural background influences the general pattern which is shaped in English speaking countries and tends to be dominant in formal and professional environments. The research proved that the small talk pattern is shaped by family relations pattern and national traditions.

As for the future the authors' intention is to extend the research to other European countries and to some African ones in order to analyse the differences. The idea of involving some of our foreign students was a good one, therefore we intend to develop this collaboration

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