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What is This?

SMALL TALK, RAPPORT, AND INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

Lessons to Learn From BELF

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This article explores the notion of small talk within the context of English as a lingua franca business communication in an international setting. Until recently, the concept of small talk has been largely ignored or denigrated. However, recent studies indicate that small talk may play a key role in building relations and trust between staff in companies, which is of key importance in effective and productive business. Based on an empirical study, the article argues that small talk may be of particular value to speakers of business English as a lingua franca (BELF) in allowing them to develop solidarity, despite linguistic and cultural differences, and thus increase the likelihood of avoiding or successfully overcoming communication problems. In addition, insights into the nature of such small talk may be of value in raising awareness of aspects of effective communication in international business and the notion of international communicative competence.

Keywords: *English as a lingua franca; small talk; workplace interaction; solidarity; rapport*

In writing on the collapse of Enron, Wong (2002, p. 2) identified “social-spiritual capital” in terms of “ethics, relationships, meaning and purpose” as a key element in “Healthy corporate cultures” that “. . . create a positive work climate, which is conducive to productivity and job satisfaction . . .” (p. 7). He contrasts such cultures to “toxic corporate cultures,” which are dysfunctional in terms of relationships and adjustment to changing times. Workplace change, driven by electronic technologies underpinning global trade, and the current drive for economic efficiency, has led to the recognition

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of the value of human capital, notably in team work, often involving multicultural and multidisciplinary groups. Idema and Scheeres (2003, p. 319), writing on such changes and the role of language in the workplace also emphasize the importance of relationships: “. . . work increasingly becomes contingent upon relationships enacted with and for others . . .”

Increasingly, change in workplace cultures is leading to recognition of the importance of building trust and common ground through informal communication and the value of this for companies in sharing knowledge (Campbell, White, & Johnson, 2003; Charles, 2007; Holden, 2002; Kalla, 2006; G. Thomas, Zolin, & Hartman, 2009). A number of studies on workplace needs and employers' wishes concerning communication skills have shown that whereas the little training that is given in communication skills often focuses on areas such as formal presentations, the communication skills required in the workplace are far more varied. In particular, informal discussions have been cited by newly employed graduates as the most frequent type of communication and of importance for team work and building and fostering relations (Carnavale, Gainer, & Meltzer, 1990; Crossling & Ward, 2002; Guirdham, 1999; Palermo, 2002; Zorn & Violanti, 1996).

Increasingly, change in workplace cultures is leading to recognition of the importance of building trust and common ground through informal communication and the value of this for companies in sharing knowledge.

Of all forms of interpersonal communication, so-called “small talk” is, of course, a prime means of nurturing relations between workers. This article seeks to explore features and functions of small talk among workplace colleagues using English as a lingua franca with a view to identifying aspects of communication that could be considered important elements of international communicative competence (Charles, 2008). It is argued that one major force of small talk may be in helping to build solidarity and rapport. Rapport is an essential element in the building and maintenance of strong working relations and has been studied by both linguists and management researchers, including Campbell et al. (2003), Fletcher (1999), Holden (2002), Holmes (2000), Holmes and Stubbe (2003), Spencer-Oatey (2000, 2002, 2005), and is discussed below in relation to small talk.

Diversity, change, and relations are, of course, reflected in the use of business English as a lingua franca (BELF), which has spread in recent years on a historically unprecedented scale (Charles, 2007). The choice of English as the official language of corporate communication can undoubtedly lead to problems (Charles, 2007; Rogerson-Revell, 2008; Vollstedt, 2002), yet many studies show that communication in (B)ELF is remarkably successful (Firth, 1996, 2008; Poncini, 2003; Pullin Stark, 2007, 2009). It is, however, important to remember that there is no single use of BELF, each context of use brings together people from different backgrounds and with different social and linguistic skills. Some studies would tend to suggest that problems arise when there is a linguistic imbalance between native speakers of English and nonnative speakers (Rogerson-Revell, 2008), with native speakers dominating because of their higher linguistic proficiency, or when two cultural groups are represented that have little knowledge of cultural differences in communication schemata (Spencer-Oatey, 2002). In this study, the focus is on communication in BELF in a corporate context where no native speakers are present, which reflects the reality of up to 90% of communication taking place worldwide in English (Charles, 2007; Graddol, 2006).

Speakers of BELF may appear to have the odds stacked against them. They are intrinsically “different others,” sharing little in terms of common origins and working in a language that is not their own. Their level of language proficiency may be weak or there may be considerable differences in linguistic proficiency in any one group. Yet (B)ELF communication has been described as “interactionally robust” (Firth, 2008), its speakers being resourceful in avoiding or overcoming misunderstandings and miscommunication, “achieving” understanding despite nonstandard usage. (B)ELF communication also tends to be non-culture specific, although aspects of local or individual culture may be present at times (Meierkord, 2002; Pölzl & Seidlhofer, 2006).

Holden (2002, p. 234) refers to the importance of a “conducive, collaborative atmosphere,” which can be achieved through “social adroitness, professional competence, and by applying intelligence and tact to interactions.” These would appear to be features reflected in BELF that could be included under the term of international communicative competence. Charles (2008) has pointed to the need to reconsider linguistic and communicative competence in a world where relationships are central. She points to the need for awareness raising in terms of what features of communication constitute effective communication skills for international business. It is hoped that this study, although small in scale, can add to the knowledge in this field.

SMALL TALK AND RAPPORT

Small talk has often been regarded as peripheral or even a distraction in the workplace; it is often denigrated as not the “real stuff” and therefore of little importance, or even “women’s work” (Fletcher, 1999). Similarly, in linguistics, a general lack of interest in small talk has often been attributed to its categorization by Malinowski (1923 [reprinted in 1972], p. 150) as “mere sociabilities.” Malinowski coined the term *phatic communication* and implied that small talk was devoid of information. There has also been a tendency among linguists to focus on transactional or goal-related aspects of communication rather than interactional functions of language, which deal with interpersonal relations (G. Brown & Yule, 1983). In reality, the two are intrinsically linked as all goal-oriented talk is dependent to some extent on the establishment of relations. More recently, Coupland (2000) created new interest in small talk, concluding that “. . . small talk (. . .) cannot be segregated from the “mainstream” concerns of talk at work. It is an intrinsic part of the talk at work complex” (p. 13). Similarly, Holmes and Stubbe (2003, p. 89) note the importance of small talk in interpersonal relationships at work, stating it is “. . . a crucial function of talk with significant implications for ongoing and future interactions.” Researchers investigating the phenomenon concerning native speakers include Coupland (2000), Holmes (2000); Holmes and Marra (2004), Holmes and Stubbe (2003), Koester (2001, 2006), McCarthy (2000), and Mullany (2006). Among researchers of English as a lingua franca, there have also been a number of studies, including Cogo and Dewey (2006), Kordon (2006), Meierkord (2002), Poncini (2003), Pullin Stark (2007, 2009).

In terms of classification, small talk and social talk have been conceptualized in a number of different ways. For example, McCarthy (2000) defined small talk as “non-obligatory talk in terms of task requirements” (p. 84). In his research, he found that participants, whether consciously or unconsciously, seemed to be aware of the importance of relational talk in ensuring the achievement of goals and cementing a positive ongoing relationship.

Holmes (2000, pp. 47-48) outlines two main functions of interactional talk. First, as a discourse strategy to manage social interactions, for example to ease the transition in and out of business issues, such as at the end of meetings or filling in between different activities. Second, to serve social functions, “constructing, expressing, maintaining and reinforcing interpersonal relationships.” She relates this to both solidarity and power and to the fact that relational work can further transactional goals.

Holmes (2000, p. 38) situates interactional talk on a continuum:

| | | | |
|--------------------|-------------------|-------------|----------------------|
| Core business talk | Work-related talk | Social talk | Phatic communication |
|--------------------|-------------------|-------------|----------------------|

Holmes (2000) describes core business talk as “relevant, focused, often context-bound, on-task talk, with high information content” (pp. 36-37). Relevance in a business context would apply to core business interests. Work-related talk may relate to work in general, as opposed to a particular issue on a current agenda. The data analyzed in this study fall within the category of social talk, which covers topics such as cultural activities. Finally, phatic communication tends to have little referential content and includes utterances such as greetings. It is worth noting that small talk is dynamic in nature and shifts along the continuum, reflecting its flexibility and multifunctional nature. It is also context-dependent in that the amount and forms of small talk vary from one group to another and are often dependent on those in power (Holmes & Stubbe, 2003).

Small talk is closely related to the concept of “rapport” in building and nurturing relations and a sense of community among colleagues. Spencer-Oatey (2000, 2002, 2005) uses the term *rapport* in referring to “the relative harmony and smoothness of relations between people” and “rapport management” in connection with the management (or mismanagement) of relations between people. Similar to the concept of rapport is that of “Relational Practice,” which has been used by both linguists (Holmes & Marra, 2004) and in management studies, notably concerning team work (Fletcher, 1999). Campbell and Davis (2006, p. 43) cite Gremler and Gwinner (2000) who outlined two important facets of rapport, that is, enjoyable interactions and personal connection. Campbell and Davis noted in a study on sales that rapport can be of crucial importance in relation to the quality of relationships with customers.

RESEARCH METHOD AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The data discussed in this article are drawn from a larger study that focused on social cohesion in the workplace. This involved data analysis in three settings: a company and a public service organization in the United Kingdom and an international company based in Switzerland. The present analysis focuses on data from the Swiss context and strives to answer the following research questions:

Research Question 1: In what ways does small talk function within the context of meetings to build, maintain and reinforce rapport and solidarity.

Research Question 2: What “lessons” can be learnt from the analysis of small talk in BELF that could be helpful in raising awareness of aspects of effective communication in international business settings.

The research methodology was qualitative in nature and, to ensure scientific rigor, a multimethod approach was taken in collecting and analyzing the data. Audio recordings were made of 14 meetings. In addition, ethnographic methods were used to triangulate the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). These involved questionnaires distributed to participants after the meetings, concerning how they felt the meetings went, interviews with senior members of staff, field notes taken when in the organizations, and with staff during social events within and outside the company. Detailed notes were also taken by the researcher during the meetings. The data in this article are drawn from three meetings in the Swiss company. The official language of this company was English, although other languages were frequently used, reflecting the multilingual Swiss context. The participants in these meetings were each of different origins. They included two men and two women with an age range of 25 to 65 years (see Appendix A for details), whose first languages were Armenian, French, Romanian, and Swiss-German.

Politeness is considered to be a universal phenomenon involved in the creation and maintenance of good interactional relations, although politeness norms may vary from one community or individual to another.

The study draws on politeness theory, notably P. Brown and Levinson's (1987) model of politeness. Politeness is considered to be a universal phenomenon involved in the creation and maintenance of good interactional relations, although politeness norms may vary from one community or individual to another. In P. Brown and Levinson's (1987) model, the notion of face (Goffman, 1967) is central. P. Brown and Levinson

differentiate between positive face, which relates to the need to feel valued, and negative face, which concerns the need for autonomy and respect. Holmes and Marra (2004) link the concept of positive face with that of relational practice in the workplace, noting that this “. . . involves people’s need to feel they are valued and important components in a team or group” (p. 379). In relation to negative face and politeness strategies, Harris (2003, p. 33) states that “Negative politeness strategies (. . .) serve institutional as well as interpersonal goals (. . .) they are essential (. . .) to the avoidance of explicit confrontation and possible communication breakdown in such settings.” Harris (2003) also argues that relatively powerful institutional members make extensive use of mitigating forms of politeness strategies in nurturing solidarity. Indeed, the main focus in the article is on the notion of solidarity and the related concept of rapport (Koester, 2001, 2006; Spencer-Oatey, 2000, 2002, 2005), which derive from P. Brown and Levinson’s (1987) model. Koester (2001, p. 99) argues that: “. . . expressions of solidarity (. . .) go beyond politeness, and are indicative of an affective dimension of relational goals . . .” She identifies two main types of relational orientation, first, politeness itself as exemplified in Brown and Levinson’s model and second, solidarity, which “. . . refers to the affective dimension of interpersonal relations, and involves the expression of mutuality and common ground.” Solidarity is thus associated with a wish to nurture good working relations or to acknowledge respect for professional ability and can result in closer ties between speakers.

The main analytical tool in this study was discourse analysis, based on the precepts of interactional sociolinguistics, reflecting a concern with social order, which is considered to be accomplished interactionally in talk (Cameron, 2001; Sarangi & Roberts, 1999). Discourse analysis allows repeated and detailed examination of language in interaction, providing greater range and precision in the analysis than would be possible through simple note taking. The transcription code follows Dressler and Kreuz (2000; see Appendix B).

The multimethod approach provides a credible and trustworthy analysis of the data. However, the focus on one particular group means that the researcher cannot claim that the findings could be generalized directly to other contexts. Nevertheless, although BELF research is still a young field, the growing number of small qualitative studies on different aspects of (B)ELF communication, in addition to studies drawing on corpus linguistics, are considered to be valuable contributions to our knowledge of BELF.

DATA ANALYSIS

The focus on small talk in meetings was considered relevant to business communication for a number of reasons. First, it is in and around meetings that there is an “. . . ongoing process of constructing, developing and maintaining workplace power and rapport . . .” (Holmes, 2000, p. 64). Second, it is argued that solidarity built through small talk can help to mitigate tensions. As such, it is of direct relevance to business goals in helping maintain interpersonal relationships that are conducive to the efficient achievement of tasks in hand. Third, in analyzing the data, I argue that small talk may be of particular value to speakers of BELF in that it can help them gain insight into cultural differences, which may be sources of miscommunication.

The data also illustrate the role of company leaders in according value, time, and space for small talk. Wong (2002) notes the responsibility of leaders in building strong relationships among staff. Similarly, G. Thomas et al. (2009) emphasize the importance of communication in developing trust in organizations, noting that “. . . when employees believe that the organization is a safe place to express themselves, they are likely to see themselves are more involved in the organization’s goals” (p. 303). Relevant points mentioned by the senior members of staff I interviewed in relation to effective face-to-face communication included the following:

- empathy/building rapport
- including people in conversations both business and social
- regular opportunities for staff to come together in a social context
- demonstrating interest in staff as individuals and enquiring about their well-being, personal interests, goals, and so on
- accepting others’ points of view without necessarily agreeing with them

Of relevance here is the fact that the period in which the data were collected was particularly stressful. The participant from the Middle East was on a rare 6-day trip to Switzerland and had many problems to resolve. The other participants were involved in multiple meetings with her while also dealing with an increasing build-up of urgent day-to-day tasks. There were numerous minor disagreements and, in one case, a major clash. In addition, on a practical level, the weather was extremely hot and it was essential to have the windows open during meetings, resulting in a high-level of periphery noise, which also made communication more difficult. Despite these problems, the time devoted to small talk and the topics

Table 1. Example 1: Four Participants, Chair: Herbert

| | | |
|----|---------|---|
| 1 | Joanne | you have Paul McCartney yes {em} |
| 2 | Herbert | yeah but he's uh Clapton is not a young guy {no} |
| 3 | Joanne | he's he's uh from the sixt they were all [playing in ()] |
| 4 | Herbert | [yes but] anybody now who is twenty or thirty eh with |
| 5 | | the same calibre? in that= |
| 6 | Joanne | =twenty okay you have Lenny Crabitz it's not bad {em} |
| 7 | | he's a young guy and okay the music is changing you don't |
| 8 | | have this pop rock music uh who are who are playing |
| 9 | | who are played uh which are played by the fift {yeah} |
| 10 | | people in our age ((laughs)) |
| 11 | Herbert | this morning I heard Elvis Presley uh Heartbreak Hotel |
| 12 | | {ah yes} {yes} and I must say yes it is music because uh |
| 13 | | the melody dominates the rhythm is very subtle on {em} |
| 14 | | some bass it's it's quite uh okay you can like that kind of |
| 15 | | interpretation or not but if I look today and I sometimes |
| 16 | | hear these British girls groups singing it just sounds |
| 17 | | flat like cardboard terrible {em} |
| 18 | Joanne | okay I think= |
| 19 | Herbert | =moaning you know you hear this in the background you |
| 20 | | in a pub you go there ((mimicking the singers)) |
| 21 | | hey nyng he ah zi ah zi aaah and all kind awful |
| 22 | Joanne | it's awful |
| 23 | Herbert | awful ((they continue talking about music including their |
| | | thoughts on boy and girl bands and Joanne's son's taste |
| | | for Heavy Metal, until the missing participant arrives)) |
| | Herbert | okay Alex is just coming um do you mind if we start |

addressed appear to reflect a will to nurture good relations and maintain solidarity.

The first example (Table 1) of small talk analyzed takes place at the beginning of a meeting, when the group was waiting for one missing participant. Two days earlier, there had been what could only be described as a row during a meeting. The reestablishment of normal relations was therefore important to deal with business in hand.

Here, small talk appeared to function in helping to create a relaxed atmosphere before the beginning of the meeting and thus in nurturing rapport. Small talk also serves to mitigate power and nurture solidarity. By joining in such banter, the boss, Herbert, put himself on the same level as his staff, and the small talk helped to set the tone for what followed.

The topic, music, is also of relevance in representing common, yet "neutral" or nonconflictual ground. The topic arose spontaneously as one of the participants, Joanne, had attended a Joe Cocker concert the night before. After speaking briefly about Cocker, the group discusses popular

music, past and present. Herbert, raises the question of the quality of current pop music in comparison with that of the past (Table 1, lines 4-5). Joanne alludes to change in pop music in lines 7 to 10, noting that people of “our” age do not play the same music as younger people. In fact, she is far younger than Herbert, who is close to retirement. For Herbert, Elvis Presley is the benchmark and certainly not to be compared with modern girl bands, who sound “flat like cardboard” (Table 1, lines 11-17). There are clear generational differences here and Joanne seems to be meeting Herbert on his ground, diplomatically agreeing. She does not pursue her opinion that there are good contemporary singers, for example, referring to Lenny Crabitz, and allows herself to be overridden in line 18, agreeing with Herbert that the “moaning” girl bands he imitates are “awful.” Their mutual use of the word “awful” (Table 1, lines 22-23) reflects convergence. It is interesting to note that Joanne and Herbert had clashed several times at meetings earlier in the week and this nonthreatening, non-work-related talk gives Joanne an opportunity to adopt a more conciliatory tone with her boss, accepting his opinions and not insisting on her own views.

The next example (Table 2) is of relevance to the research focus in that it illustrates the value the company’s staff and management accorded to social activities and resulting small talk in terms of time spent on such activities, both within and after the working day. This was also supported by ethnographic data. The meeting in question included a short break to celebrate a colleague’s birthday, with cake and soft drinks. At the birthday party, the staff mentioned that the company had previously been owned by Canadians and had always had a culture of social events, which they felt reflected its Canadian roots. One person added that he felt the relaxed and friendly atmosphere, which was part of the corporate culture, came from the top.

In addition, Example 2 (Table 2) gives insight into the way small talk can function in creating understanding and affective links between staff of very different cultures and hence nurture solidarity and good working relations.

When the group returned to the meeting room after the party, the topic of food was pursued as Joanne had brought some local specialties for them to share. She explains that she had taken Marie to a local dairy the day before and bought meringues, cream and cheese (Table 2, lines 4-10). She says in line 13, “I wanted to offer it for now,” but she had not known about the party, so wanted to clarify when they could eat her food. Description of the food is met with much enthusiasm (line 11). Small talk often overlaps with humor and Herbert suggests jokingly that if Joanne is not available later, he could eat it alone (line 17).

Table 2. Example 2: Four Participants, Chair: Herbert

| | | |
|----|---------|--|
| 1 | Herbert | that was a nice break |
| 2 | Joanne | we have to eat something else afterwards but I didn't have |
| 3 | | enough, I have taken meringue and we have bought |
| 4 | | yesterday with Marie we went to a Käserai how do you |
| 5 | | say that in English |
| 6 | Marie | cheese house |
| 7 | Joanne | cheese house yes in P. it's a very little cheese house |
| 8 | | it's nothing written at the house so you really have to know |
| 9 | | that this is a cheese house and we have bought some cheese |
| 10 | | for Marie and for Mr R. [and I have bought some meringue] |
| 11 | ??? | ((several people speak at once – enthusiastic tone!)) |
| 12 | Joanne | and crème fraiche very thick cream you know and uh |
| 13 | | yes () I wanted to offer it {now} for now but we have had= |
| 14 | Herbert | =why don't we have dinner at my place tonight all who |
| 15 | | can come and eat it there |
| 16 | Joanne | um I am not here I am () |
| 17 | Herbert | then give it to me and I eat it all on my own ((laughter)) |
| 18 | Joanne | but we could eat it also at three or four o'clock |
| 19 | Herbert | Sure |

The last example (Example 2) showed that Joanne had spent time with Marie after working hours, which would have allowed the two women time to get to know each other on a more personal level and discover areas of common ground. Small talk in the next two examples (Tables 3 and 4) is based on areas of common ground, in terms of identity and interests. Koester (2001, p. 100) notes that "Solidarity strategies include claiming common ground or showing interest, approval, sympathy etc." It is clear from Example 3 that Marie has met Joanne's family and that they have areas of common ground. The value of small talk derived from such common ground can be not only in creating solidarity, but also in creating bonds between different others.

In Example 3 (Table 3), Marie is having a meeting with Joanne in her office. A colleague who shares the office is also present. Joanne's son, Chris, arrives to run an errand for her.

Marie seems pleased to see Chris, smiling and laughing when he arrives (Table 3, lines 4-6). In line 10, Joanne asks Chris if he has sufficient money for the bus and her colleague intervenes in Line 14 teasing him by saying he could take the car. Joanne then recounts an anecdote to Marie about her son's intentions to take his driving license as soon as he was old enough, but still not having it 7 months later. This causes mutual amusement and reveals the women's common identity as mothers of

Table 3. Example 3: Three Participants (One Absent Here), No Formal Chair

| | | |
|----|--------|---|
| 1 | Joanne | (..) okay (...) ((looking through papers)) okay () they are asking of the for Za |
| 2 | | |
| 3 | Chris | Hello |
| 4 | Marie | hello how are you? |
| 5 | Chris | fine and you |
| 6 | Marie | fine thank you ((laughter)) |
| 7 | Joanne | alors regard c'est ça Chris ((giving him something)) (look, this is it) |
| 8 | Chris | je () (I) |
| 9 | Joanne | oui tu prends ça avec tu attends qu'ils te le redonnent (take this with you and wait for them to give it back to you) |
| 10 | Chris | puis uh et l'argent pour payer le bus moi j'ai () c'est bon (and uh money for the bus fare I've () it's okay) |
| 11 | | |
| 12 | Joanne | t'as? sûre? (are you sure) |
| 13 | Chris | oui c'est bon okay (yes, that's fine) |
| 14 | X | tu prends tu prends la voiture ciao ((laughter—Chris leaves)) (take, take the car ciao) |
| 15 | Joanne | he has to do his driving lic uh permit you know |
| 16 | Marie | yeah ((very enthusiastically)) |
| 17 | Joanne | and uh he wanted when he was uh before he was eighteen he says okay I became eighteen two months later I have a permit and now there are seven months has gone and he still not have it ((laughter)) ((they then return to core business talk and continue discussing the orders)) |
| 18 | | |
| 19 | | |
| 20 | | |

Note: Joanne's office mate is referred to as X above.

teenagers, with all that this entails. The switching of languages also reflects the fact that English as a lingua franca is often embedded in contexts where other languages are present (Poncini, 2003).

The area of common ground discussed in the final example (Example 4) is dogs. Example 4 takes place toward the end of a meeting and at the end of the afternoon. In addition to the functions of small talk based on common ground outlined above, Example 4 (Table 4) also illustrates the resourcefulness of speakers of English as a lingua franca and the ways in which they converge linguistically. Such insights may be of value in learning more about the nature of international communicative competence.

Marie first raises the question of going to the pet shop, which had been mentioned earlier. She wants a toy for her dogs, but has forgotten the picture in her hotel room and cannot remember the name of the item. In addition, being off her usual business topics, she seems to lack the vocabulary in English for the world of dogs. Joanne seems a little exasperated

Table 4. Example 4: Two Participants (Previously Three), No Formal Chair

| | | |
|----|--------|--|
| 1 | Joanne | you know exactly what you want in the pet shop |
| 2 | Marie | yes ((enthusiastically)) that's a circle you know it's |
| 3 | | a circle like this it's a circle which there are some discs |
| 4 | | from like this ((drawing)) {emhem} and they uh uh |
| 5 | | they sound when you |
| 6 | Joanne | uh it's uh it's uh |
| 7 | Marie | something for training () it's name training discs {yeah} |
| 8 | | training discs= |
| 9 | Joanne | =and they are () has to to catch this or what has= |
| 10 | Marie | =for dogs |
| 11 | Joanne | training discs for dogs |
| 12 | Marie | I don't know I think [we don't] |
| 13 | Joanne | [we'll] I think we will find it |
| 14 | Marie | the voice with the voice of this |
| 15 | Joanne | ah with a noise |
| 16 | Marie | / \ |
| 17 | | yeah {emhem} they are made of some very slim metal |
| 18 | Joanne | {yes} maybe aluminium {em} you know what's aluminium |
| 19 | | yes I know [and uh what] they do uh they try to catch this, |
| 20 | | or they have to come back when they hear this or to |
| 21 | | {I don't} you don't know okay we'll uh we'll have a look |
| 22 | Marie | and see it's a big store we will ()= |
| 23 | Joanne | =I think I think we can find without a ()= |
| 24 | Marie | =if not she can order [()] |
| 25 | | () is like just a circle like this it's a {yeah} it's a circle and |
| 26 | | there () just like () ((drawing)) {yes} uh and this circle |
| 27 | | all together {yes} together {yes} there are about five |
| 28 | Joanne | discs together yeah |
| 29 | Marie | oh on |
| 30 | Joanne | oh each other {yes} what do you say? ((laughs)) |
| 31 | Marie | yes I I know what you mean ((laughs)) |
| 32 | Joanne | no? |
| 33 | Marie | I know what you mean [we will we will () if she] |
| 34 | Joanne | [and the name is training discs] |
| 35 | Marie | If she don't have it we can order it [then I could send it to you] |
| 36 | Joanne | [no no no no] {yes uh} but I think we will find we can find |
| 37 | Marie | this {yeah} you haven't seen such a thing= |
| 38 | Joanne | =I I never uh worked with this {em em} with my dogs (..) |
| 39 | Marie | just zwii ((makes a throwing movement)) ((laughter)) |
| 40 | Joanne | okay we will just try |
| 41 | Marie | yeah but we will find it I think |
| | | () so I will leave you |

at times, but they persevere and both seem happy with the outcome. Joanne also has dogs and the “dogginess” they have in common is probably a crucial factor in the successful outcome.

The communication involves considerable negotiation of meaning and perseverance. It is interesting to see how they use all resources available. In lines 4 and 25, Marie draws the item she is seeking. There is a lot of miming and noise making. She mentions the sound, the “voice,” and “noise,” and mimes a throwing gesture. However, the meaning is initially not clear to Joanne (Table 4, line 6). In lines 6 to 10, their speech is latched, one turn following directly from the previous, which indicates they are on the same wavelength as they construct the meaning together (Coates, 2007; Holmes, 2006), Joanne clarifying her understanding with questions in lines 9 and 18 to 19. They both laugh in lines 29 and 30 when they reach mutual understanding, perhaps reflecting the achievement, but also a sense of empathy and goodwill (Jefferson, Sacks, & Schegloff, 1987). Supportiveness is also evident in the way their utterances frequently overlap, and in the backchannels, for example {em, em}, which provide encouragement. The tenor of the whole exchange, despite linguistic limitations, is supportive and cooperative in nature, indicating involvement on an interpersonal level (Tannen, 1989).

Solidarity and supportiveness is also shown by Joanne when Marie seemed despondent at times, as in line 12, when she expresses doubts as to whether they will find the item and Joanne reassures her in line 13. In line 23, Joanne says they can order it if it is not in stock and in line 34 notes that she would then send it to Marie. However, Marie seems to see this as an imposition on Joanne and in line 35 says “no no no no.” It is interesting to note that Marie would have the “right” to request something regarding core business and Joanne an obligation (J. Thomas, 1995) to send it, but here they are outside core business, and there is perhaps a sensitivity on Marie’s part about expecting too much from her host, who has already put herself out considerably.

DISCUSSION

Fine-grained analyses of the data in context, in addition to ethnographic data, provide a number of insights into the nature, functions, and value of small talk in BELF communication. I have drawn on these in attempting to answer the research questions. Thus, in answer to Research Question 1, we can see that small talk functions in a number of ways in building, maintaining, and reinforcing rapport and solidarity. Given the context of tension in which the meetings were held, analysis of the first excerpt shows

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how small talk can help reestablish more harmonious working relations and also set a favorable tone for ensuing business talk.

The choice of topic also appeared to be of importance in the data. In Example 1, the topic was music, which is an example of a topic that lends itself to the creation of common ground. It not only transcends international borders but also allows non-face threatening discussions that may still reflect individual tastes and aspects of identity. In the data analyzed, clear differences in taste were apparent, yet the topic was such that differences could easily be accepted, thus nurturing solidarity. As such, music could be considered a “safe topic” (Meierkord, 2008; Schneider, 1987). The value of such small talk on neutral topics was also apparent in the way it allowed the tempering of earlier conflicts. In this instance, small talk provided an opportunity for Joanne to adopt a more conciliatory tone with her boss than had been the case in earlier meetings, ceding to his opinions and also nurturing solidarity through reference to tastes in music for people in “our age,” even though her boss was considerably older. In taking part in this small talk as an equal, the boss, in turn, appeared to be mitigating his power, which can help in nurturing solidarity, and in this case appeared to help release tension and nurture a return to more harmonious relations.

In Example 2, the choice of topic is again of relevance to rapport and solidarity. Food is another topic that interests most people and one where cultural differences tend to create curiosity and enjoyment rather than animosity. As such, it is again an ideal “safe” topic. Discovering food from other countries can be an interesting experience and often involves time spent together. Kalla (2006) suggests “organizations need to consider creating space and opportunities for all forms of communication, as the efficiency of their functioning significantly depends upon it” (p. 101). She emphasizes the importance of common ground and trust in knowledge sharing. In this company, the data clearly show the management and staff’s awareness of the need for social talk and the creation of opportunities for

this, for example in the break for a birthday party and the time spent talking about food and sharing food, as alluded to in Example 2.

Food thus offers not only a topic for small talk but also the opportunity to take time out together and gain insights into cultural differences. In Example 2, it was also clear that Joanne had spent considerable nonwork time with Marie, taking her to a local village dairy, which would have been particularly Swiss in character and given insight into the lives of local people, trade, and agriculture. Such time would appear to be of considerable value in building solidarity and understanding of different others. In the third and fourth examples, the topics are more personal, revealing more about the individuals' backgrounds and private lives. Marie's reaction to Joanne's son's arrival and the anecdote about his driving license reveals empathy, probably because of common ground they share in terms of nonwork roles and identities as mothers of teenagers. "Dogginess" also proved to be another area of common ground that transcends national borders and reflects strong personal involvement in nonwork activities. Again, Joanne was prepared to spend time with Marie outside the office and put herself out. This showed her generous side, which did not always appear to be evident in the meetings, where she was quick to react and often seemed to be "defending her patch" in rather direct language at times. She was, however, a person who did not appear to bear a grudge. Knowing such an individual as a multifaceted person could be very important in adopting a flexible approach to communicating with the person and avoiding unnecessary disagreements or misunderstandings. Holmes and Stubbe (2003) argue that "doing collegiality" is similar to "doing friendship" and involves making time in the workplace routine.

In attempting to answer the second research question concerning possible lessons to learn from the analysis of small talk in BELF that could help in raising awareness of aspects of effective communication in international settings, the data point to a number of findings, in addition to the choice of topics and the need to create time and space for small talk as mentioned above. First, it is apparent, particularly in Example 4, that flexibility and the need to negotiate meaning and be resourceful are important factors in effective communication between business partners with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This may be the case in particular when levels of linguistic proficiency differ. Indeed, the data would tend to indicate that effective communication depends not only on language skills, but also on individuals' ability and willingness to adapt to others. Mauranen (2006) notes the efforts in ELF discourse to prevent misunderstanding, with "unsolicited clarifications and repetitions, which appeared

to arise from a perception of the speaker in need of help" (p. 146). She also notes the joint construction of utterances and the use of direct questions and item repetitions as "straightforward signals of misunderstanding." These features are clearly apparent in Example 4.

The data are illustrative of the ways in which small talk can help build rapport, reestablish harmonious relations when necessary, and help build solidarity and understanding between different others in the corporate world. Charles (2008), in reporting on research into aspects of competent performance in BELF, underlines the importance of relationships in a changing world, while also noting the need for linguistic explicitness at a surface level, clear pronunciation, and politeness when working in English as a lingua franca. These aspects of communication are all present in the data analyzed and occur together in Example 4.

The data are illustrative of the ways in which small talk can help build rapport, reestablish harmonious relations when necessary, and help build solidarity and understanding between different others in the corporate world.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, this study, although limited in scope, has endeavored to reflect the omnipresent nature of small talk in one corporate context and the apparent value of social talk in building relations and thus furthering business goals. In the study, small talk and time spent on social activities both within and outside the company were shown not only to build solidarity but also to function in repairing and maintaining relations in times of tension, allowing politeness strategies, for example, through the acceptance of different views, and the mitigation of power. The notion of finding and building on common, nonthreatening ground was shown to be of importance in building solidarity and intercultural understanding. The data also showed the company's will to create space for social talk and social activities and its recognition of the value of these for the bottom line.

Finally, the nature of BELF, both linguistically and socially, in terms of flexibility, tolerance, and the ability to co-construct and negotiate meaning may provide useful insights for awareness raising among native and non-native speakers concerning effective business communication and the concept of international communicative competence. Despite limitations in mastery of the linguistic code, cultural differences, and some complex issues to be dealt with under pressure, the speakers in this study manage to negotiate meaning successfully and create and maintain rapport.

The interface between language, culture, social, and business skills would provide rich opportunities for further research. In addition, further research into the nature of small talk at a microlinguistic level in a wider range of professional contexts could be of value in identifying features of effective communication in multilingual and multicultural teams.

APPENDIX A

Participant Data

| <i>Name</i> | <i>Gender</i> | <i>Age Range (Years)</i> | <i>Post</i> | <i>Mother Tongue</i> | <i>Other Languages</i> |
|-------------|---------------|------------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------------|
| Herbert | Male | 60+ | Senior manager | (Swiss) German | English, French |
| Alex | Male | 21-30 | Management assistant | Rumanian | English, French |
| Joanne | Female | 41-50 | Logistics assistant | French | English, German, Italian |
| Marie | Female | 31-40 | Sales assistant Middle East | Armenian | English, Persian |

APPENDIX B

Transcription Conventions

| | |
|--------|---|
| ? | Rising intonation (final sentence) |
| . | Falling intonation (sentence-final) |
| / \ | Rising and falling intonational contours |
| , | Continuing intonation (final clause, 'more to come.' lists) |
| TEXT | Stress (syllable or word) |
| (0.6) | Pause (tenths of a second) |
| (..) | Pauses of one-half second or less |
| (...) | Pause of more than half a second |
| <text> | Spoken slowly |
| >text< | Spoken rapidly |

(continued)

APPENDIX B (continued)

| | |
|--------------|---|
| : | Lengthened syllable (ha:rd) |
| - | Word cutoff (abrupt self-termination, because speaker stops speaking or another interrupts) |
| = | Latched talk (lack of temporal gap between two speakers—typically used at end of first speaker's line and at beginning of next speaker's utterance) |
| { } | Backchannel {S:OK} |
| [] | Overlapping speech |
| | We missed the callback |
| | [again, I really am] |
| | [Oh okay,] that's all right |
| text | Text spoken softly |
| TEXT | Longer utterances spoken loudly |
| H | Clearly audible breathing (general breath sounds) |
| .h .hhh | In-breath (.h = inhalation - .hhh longer inhalation) |
| h hhh | Out-breath (as above) |
| ((behavior)) | Transcriber's comments (e.g., whispers, coughing, laughter) |
| () | Unclear or intelligible speech (unclear/questionable words appear within the parentheses) |

Source: Dressler and Kreuz (2000).

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