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SELF-PRESENTATION STRATEGY IN SMALL TALK: EVIDENCE FROM ENGLISH-LANGUAGE FICTION

У статті досліджується феномен світської бесіди (small talk) у сучасному британському та американському художньому дискурсі з точки зору способів реалізації комунікативної стратегії самопрезентації. Метою роботи є визначення комунікативних стратегій світської бесіди, зокрема стратегії самопрезентації. До завдань дослідження входило: 1) визначити стратегічні настанови мовців, які визначають перебіг світської бесіди; 2) встановити комунікативні тактики, що реалізують стратегію самопрезентації; 3) проаналізувати мовні засоби, які вербалізують ці тактики.

Для досягнення поставлених завдань застосовані *методи* конверсаційного та контекстуального аналізу, які дозволили схарактеризувати певні комунікативні ситуації світської бесіди, а також стилістичний та герменевтичний методи дослідження художнього тексту. Емпіричний матеріал становлять 340 епізодів із сучасних англомовних романів і фільмів.

Результати дослідження доводять, що учасники світської бесіди постійно маневрують між двома стратегічними орієнтирами: 1) стратегією ввічливості, спрямованою на підтримку «позитивного обличчя» співрозмовника, та 2) стратегією самопрезентації, щоб гідно репрезентувати себе. Було ідентифіковано десять тактик, що реалізують стратегію самопрезентації: вираження думки, вираження сентенції, порада, самовихвалення, шпилька, жарт, ухилення від прямої відповіді, зміна теми, повідомлення новин та чуток, пліткування. Кожна з них характеризується певними мовленнєвими маркерами: висловлення думки ґрунтується на оцінній лексиці, хеджах і риторичних питаннях; сентенція реалізується короткими узагальненнями та формулами; порада виражається за допомогою імперативів, модальних дієслів та питальних конструкцій; самовихвалення втілюється через гіперболи та інтенсифікатори; жарт ґрунтується на алогізмі, іронії, перифразі; шпилька базується на сарказмі, емфатичних конструкціях та риторичних питаннях; ухилення базується на розмитості й хеджах; зміна теми маркується вставними словами (*anyway, anyhow*) та імперативами; повідомлення новин і чуток здебільшого включає дієслово *hear* у загальних питальних реченнях; плітка реалізується через кліше (*If you ask me, Have you heard*), оцінну лексику та підкреслення групової належності.

Проведений конверсаційний аналіз свідчить про те, що ці тактики реалізують стратегію самопрезентації: одні підкреслюють індивідуальність та компетентність (думка, порада, жарт, самовихвалення, шпилька), інші – солідарність й співпрацю (сентенція, пліткування, поширення новин та чуток), ще інші – тактовність і гармонізацію комунікації (ухилення, зміна теми). Таким чином, світська бесіда постає як стратегічна форма комунікації, у якій мовці вибудовують ідентичність, проєктують соціальні ролі та узгоджують індивідуальність із ввічливістю.

Ключові слова: фатична комунікація, світська бесіда, ввічливість, комунікативна стратегія, комунікативна тактика.

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Introduction

The present paper is concerned with the properties of small talk as a phatic genre. Phatic speech is contrived to ensure empathy and solidarity among communicants [Coupland, 2003; Gonzalez, 2014; Holmes, 2003, 2014; Pavlyk, 2015]. Humans come into contact with other humans when brought together by common social activities, such as waiting in a queue, sharing a compartment on a train, etc. In other cases, acquaintances meet at social events where they have to lead a polite conversation on certain topics. On no account should such light insignificant communication be regarded useless, it is now treated as a crucial regulator of social life, a way of getting closer to other humans, introducing them into one's circle. Furthermore, such a communication is determined by the norms of politeness accepted in a certain culture.

Phatic speech is viewed as a social interaction between speaker and listener [Malinowski, 1974; Coupland, 2000; Alqinai, 2010; Banda, 2005; Holba, 2008; Holmes, 2003], as a type of indirect communication [Dementyev, 2010; Miller, 2008; Placencia, Lower, 2013]; as ritualized communication [Benveniste, 1971; Firth, 1972; Drew, Chilton, 2014; Shevchenko, Matyukhina, Drazdauskienė, 2021], as a component of speech etiquette [Formanovskaya, 2006; Laver, 1975; McCarthy, 2010; Padilla Cruz, 2013].

Phatic speech is studied in the context of various discourses: fictional [Pavlyk, 2018; Zhuikova, 2020], mass media [Kosenko, 2011], internet [Povaliaieva, 2014; Placencia, Lower, 2013] and on the samples of different languages: Ukrainian [Zhovnir, 2016; Pavlyk, 2018], English [Hrabovska, 2018; Coupland, 2003; Holmes, 2003 та ін.] and others.

Social encounters between individuals who have never met before or know each other a little are usually initiated by a type of phatic speech called *small talk* in which "light" conversation is made about neutral topics (e.g., weather, aspects of the interlocutor's physical environment) or in which personal experiences, preferences, and opinions are shared [Laver, 1981]. The purpose of small talk is primarily to build rapport and credibility among the interlocutors, provide time for them to "size each other up," establish an interactional style, and to allow them to establish their reputations [Dunbar, 1996].

P. Brown and S. Levinson refer small talk to the strategies of "positive politeness," they believe it is mainly about showing interest in the interlocutor and finding common interests with them [Brown, Levinson 1978]. Phatic communion is closely related to the notion of "face"; "positive face" is the desire of all speakers to be approved by their listeners, while "negative face" is the desire of all speakers to be unobstructed in their autonomy [Goffman, 1983]. Small talk mitigates positive face threats by providing an interactional style which enables all interlocutors to lead a conversation and achieve some degree of camaraderie. T. Bickmore and J. Cassell claim that it can also be used to mitigate negative face threats by establishing that one's interlocutors are non-hostile (e.g., as used to break uneasy silences in waiting rooms) [Bickmore, Cassell 1999].

The German linguist K.P. Schneider defined two functions of small talk: *ice-breaking* and *silence-filling*. The ice-breaking function is used in interactions among strangers. It helps to start a conversation on a positive note, warms people socially, oils interpersonal bonds. K.P. Schneider associated the first function of small talk with the tact maxim and saving the "negative face", and the second function with the sympathy maxim and saving the "positive face"; these maxims also dictate the choice of the topic in particular situations [Schneider, 1988].

Sociolinguists see the main purpose of small talk in ensuring social and interpersonal relationships. In particular, J. Holmes approaches small talk from the perspective of gaining social status in a team [Holmes, 2003]. K. Tracy and J. Naughton claim that small talk is useful in "helping individuals accomplish social goals such as managing impressions, putting people at ease, building connection, winning approval and predisposing a listener to one's perspective" [Tracy, Naughton, 2014, p. 143].

Another issue that has been thoroughly examined by the linguists is the topics of small talk. It is widely believed that the English talk about the weather all the time, that it is a national obsession or fixation, but K. Fox believes "this is sloppy observation: in fact, there are three quite specific contexts in which weather-speak is prescribed" [Fox, 2005, p. 11]. According to the researcher, a conversation about the weather is used: 1) "as a simple greeting, 2) as an ice-breaker leading to conversation on other matters, 3) as a 'default', 'filler' or 'displacement' subject, when conversation on other matters falters, and there is an awkward or uncomfortable lull" [ibid.].

I.I. Morozova claims that in order to avoid awkward silence, the interlocutors are forced to turn to trivial topics, avoiding sensitive ones. Apart from the weather, the researcher identifies

the following favourable topics for small talk: “social pastimes, health, walks/trips, nature, art, behavior of others, food, household items, religion, clothing” [Morozova, 2019, p. 14].

However, several questions relating to the nature of small talk are still to be discussed. The strategic aspect of small talk, in particular the communicative strategies and tactics that participants in small talk make use of, are still on the periphery of researchers’ attention.

There is good evidence that any communicative exchange is preceded by cognitive processes. Communicators’ behaviour is regulated by an intention (a general plan), communicative / speech strategies and communicative / speech tactics [Bigunova, Kosovets, 2024].

A speech strategy is traditionally viewed as the optimal realization of the intention of the speaker to achieve the specific purpose of communication, which involves the choice of effective communicative means, adaptation and modification of communication in a particular situation. While strategy is seen as a general scheme, tactic is a speech technique used to realize a certain strategy. It is seen as a line of behaviour at a certain stage of communicative interaction aimed at obtaining the desired effect or preventing an undesirable result. Tactic involves the use of speech techniques that allow achieving the communicative aim.

Strategies and tactics implemented by characters of fictional discourse involved in phatic speech has not yet served as the object of comprehensive research.

At present, there is a clear need to systematize and generalize numerous empirical data proving the fact that the choice of models of communicative behavior is determined by certain types of communicative strategies. In particular, attention should be called to the communicative intentions and strategies of discourse characters involved in phatic communication. Traditional linguistic analysis, aimed at studying an isolated language form, ignores the context, situational conditions of implementation and socially determined features, and also does not allow determining the communicative and pragmatic meaning of the object of research in interpersonal communication.

It is with the feeling of this need that these brief studies have been prepared. The aim of the work is to put forward and interpret a taxonomy of communicative strategies and tactics used by participants in small talk and to analyse the linguistic means of their implementation in English-language fictional literary discourse and film discourse.

Taking into account the above-mentioned linguistic gaps, the relevance of our research is determined by the clear need to deepen knowledge about the strategic regularities of phatic communication as a whole and small talk in particular; the urgent necessity to determine the speech features of small talk in English-language fictional discourse.

Methodology

This study explores small talk in modern British and American fictional discourse, focusing on the ways in which communicative strategies and tactics shape the interaction of characters. *The aim* of the research is to identify the communicative strategies of fictional small talk. To achieve this aim, the following objectives have been addressed: to determine the strategic guidelines that govern small talk; to identify the communicative tactics employed by characters to implement the strategy of self-presentation; and to describe the linguistic resources that verbalize these tactics.

To meet these objectives, conversational and contextual analysis were employed, which made it possible to determine intentions of fictional characters engaged in small talk. In addition, stylistic and hermeneutic methods were used to examine the literary text.

The *empirical data* used for the study have been taken from modern British and American fictional discourse, namely episodes of small talk. The total corpus of the factual data includes 340 episodes.

The choice of fictional literary discourse and film discourse as the data for a case study allows us to identify the communicative strategies and tactics of participants in phatic communication, depicted by the author / film maker and reflected in the inner speech of the characters and in their non-verbal behaviour.

The study contributes a novel methodology of analyzing the speech devices used to manifest certain intentions, strategies and tactics. It underscores how lexical, syntactic, and stylistic mechanisms interact to realize strategic guidelines of the speaker. These findings are relevant to fields such as pragmatics, discourse analysis, conversational analysis and may serve as a foundation for further studies of speech manifestation of communicative strategies and tactics.

Results and Discussion

Within the framework of fictional communication, L.V. Sinyavskaya defines a communicative strategy as a vector of speech behaviour of a particular author, manifested by pre-planned speech actions that lead to understanding between the author and the reader; “this mode of speech behaviour is determined by the speaker’s awareness of the communicative situation in general and is aimed at achieving the effect of successful, seemingly synchronous communication with the reader” [Synjavskaja, 2019, c. 185]. The researcher defines communicative tactics as a specific speech step that corresponds to a certain stage of implementing the author’s communicative strategy, aimed at solving a specific communicative task [ibid.].

This paper presents a case study of small talk depicted in personage speech in modern British and American fiction.

In our opinion, small talk participants maneuver between two main strategic guidelines: to be polite and to portray oneself in a positive or favourable light. The first one is conditioned by positive politeness, focused on supporting and satisfying the the addressee’s “positive face” and their positive image (in terms of P. Brown and S. Levinson), expression of positive feelings that indicate similarity in communicants’ views, the demonstration of closeness and reciprocity, participation in the interests / needs / desires of the addressee, an optimistic mood and the desire to avoid disagreements. The second strategic guideline is conditioned by negative politeness, aimed at creating and keeping a communicative distance between the interlocutors, since the “negative face” means “the want of every ‘competent adult member’ that his actions be unimpeded by others” [Brown, Levinson, 1978].

These two intentions (to be polite and to portray oneself in a positive or favourable light) have given rise to singling out two major strategies used by small talk participants: the strategy of showing interest in the interlocutor and the strategy of self-presentation.

In our view, the first strategy – **the strategy of showing interest in the interlocutor** – is manifested by *the tactics* of approval of meeting the interlocutor, inquiring about the interlocutor’s affairs, inquiring about the interlocutor’s opinion, agreeing with the interlocutor’s opinion, complimenting the interlocutor, sympathizing with the interlocutor, the tactics of congratulation and gratitude. The second strategy – **the strategy of self-presentation** – is manifested by *the tactics* of expressing opinion, platitude, advice, bragging, quip, joke, evasion, changing the subject, reporting news and rumours, gossiping.

In this article we will solely address the second of the outlined strategies: the communicative strategy of **self-presentation**, which is known to be aimed at creating a favourable impression on others and maintaining the speaker’s positive image (see Diagram 1).



Diagram 1. The strategy of self-presentation and the tactics that implement it in small talk

I. Goffman conceptualizes self-presentation as individuals' efforts to control, shape, and modify the impressions others form of them in a given setting. In his view, "performance is socialised, moulded, and modified to fit into the understanding and expectations of the society in which it is presented" [Goffman, 1959, p. 44]. This process involves not only impression management but also self-expression, the articulation of one's own values, experiences, and character. T.A. van Dijk and W. Kintsch similarly emphasize that the purpose of self-presentation is to ensure that "no matter what I say, the listener should not think badly of me" [Dijk, Kintsch, 1983, p. 397].

Let us consider how the strategy of self-presentation is manifested in small talk depicted in English-language fictional discourse.

The tactic of expressing opinion

English conversational norms encourage restraint and hedging in judgments as a sign of respect for the interlocutor, who is entitled to hold a different perspective. As T. Vrabel contends, when expressing opinions, "communicants, who may be experts or may not have specialized knowledge in a certain field, express their own point of view or assumptions based on a common fund of knowledge in a certain communicative situation" [Vrabel, 2020, c. 74].

Small talk is marked by an informal and relaxed style, reliance on "light" topics, deliberate avoidance of excessive detail, vagueness, and a preference for elegant form over substantive content. There is also an unspoken taboo on "bookishness" or overtly scientific style, as the phatic function of communication outweighs the informative one. Consequently, when participants express opinions in small talk, they typically do so in a superficial manner, often accompanied by humour.

Participants in small talk prefer to choose safe topics (weather, worldly news). More cautious and non-categorical expression is typically found when discussing art, literature, sport, holidays, rumors, forecasts, other people's behaviour, professional issues, future projects, studies, travel, or health matters.

Small talk participants often dwell on the theme of the work, as it is in the following example from our data: two friends, Helen and Dana Sue, discuss upcoming changes at a restaurant owned by Dana Sue:

Helen: It's a good deal. A great one, actually, and you'll be protected every step of the way.

Dana Sue: But...

Helen: It fixes your financial problem [Anderson, 2020].

Helen expresses her supportive stance with **evaluative adjectives** (*good, great*) and **idioms** (*every step of the way, fix a problem*). The shift from *good* to *great* forms a rhetorical climax, enhancing persuasion and projecting her as both supportive and competent.

A similar use of informal evaluative language can be observed in *Notting Hill*, when Bernie expresses his opinion on his friends' financial status:

Bernie: I see friends from university – clever chaps – been in the business longer than you – they're scraping by on seven, eight thousand a year. It's no life [Michell, 1999].

Here, Bernie frames his opinion with colloquial vocabulary (*chaps*), idiomatic phrasing (*scraping by*), and ellipsis (*It's no life*), which adds conciseness and emphasis.

Reflections on holidays are also common:

Elizabeth: Well, isn't this nice?

John: Bloody marvelous. I love Christmas.

Elizabeth: Mm-hmm.

John: Should happen more often [Martinez, 2021].

John's opinion is conveyed through positive evaluative language (*marvelous, love*), elliptical constructions, and irony (*Should happen more often*), which underscores his enthusiasm while

maintaining a humorous tone. Irony here also functions as a tool of self-presentation, signaling wit and communicative engagement.

Exaggeration and intensification appear in Tessa's reflection on London street names:

Tessa: I got completely lost — it's real difficult, isn't it? Everything's got the word 'Kensington' in it — Kensington Park Road, Kensington Gardens, Kensington bloody Park Gardens... [Michell, 1999].

Her opinion is framed by repetition and parallelism, intensified by adverbs (*completely, real*), a generalizing pronoun (*everything*), and the *expletive bloody*. These devices create a climax, presenting her as lively, expressive, and socially engaging.

Sometimes, opinions are more categorical. In Waugh's novel, the publisher Sam Benfleet critiques a manuscript:

He was a competent young man, with a restrained elegance of appearance (the stenographer always trembled slightly when she brought him his cup of tea).

'No, she can't print that,' he kept saying, endorsing one after another of the printer's protests. 'No, damn it, she can't print that. She'll have us all in prison.' For it was one of his most exacting duties to 'ginger up' the more reticent of the manuscripts submitted and 'tone down' the more 'outspoken' until he had reduced them all to the acceptable moral standard of his day [Waugh, 2012, p. 19].

Benfleet's repetition of *she can't print that*, coupled with the expletive *damn* and the exaggerated threat of prison, conveys categorical disapproval. Linguistically, repetition, negation, and hyperbole frame him as authoritative and uncompromising.

Elsewhere in *Notting Hill*, Bernie reflects on acting:

Bernie: I'm actually in the stockmarket, so not really similar fields, though I have done some amateur stuff — P.G. Wodehouse, you know — farce, all that. Always imagined it's a pretty tough job, though, acting. I mean the wages are a scandal, aren't they? [Michell, 1999].

His opinion combines hedges (*not really*), intensifiers (*pretty*), generalizers (*all that*), and parenthetical detachment (*P.G. Wodehouse, you know*). The rhetorical question framed by the hyperbolic noun phrase (*the wages are a scandal*) strengthens his stance. The layering of detachment, correction (*I mean*), and exaggeration projects him as sociable, informed, and verbally resourceful.

Opinions on youth in Waugh's *Vile Bodies* show a balance of hedging and expressiveness:

'But there's something wanton about these young people to-day. That stepson of yours, Metroland, and that girl of poor old Chasm's and young Throbbing's brother.'

'Don't you think,' said Father Rothschild gently, 'that perhaps it is all in some way historical? I don't think people ever want to lose their faith either in religion or anything else. I know very few young people, but it seems to me that they are all possessed with an almost fatal hunger for permanence. I think all these divorces show that. People aren't content just to muddle along nowadays.... [Waugh, 2012, p. 92].

Here, the interlocutors attempt to articulate their views tactfully. Hedges such as *perhaps, in some way, and it seems* mitigate the force of their assertions, while the rhetorical question *Don't you think ... ?* further reduces categoricity and invites collaboration. The author's narrative comment (*said gently*) also underscores the deliberately mild tone of delivery. At the same time, the speaker's stance is reinforced through strong evaluative adjective *fatal*, generalizing words (*all, ever, anything*), idiomatic expressions (*poor old, muddle along*), and metaphorical language (*lose their faith, possessed with, hunger for*). Together, these devices construct the image of the speaker as a reflective and rhetorically sophisticated participant in small talk, balancing tactful hedging with expressive force.

In sum, the tactic of expressing opinion in small talk is realized through evaluative and informal language – idioms, intensifiers, expletives, and elliptical phrasing – as well as stylistic devices such as repetition, climax, hyperbole, irony, and metaphor. Hedges, rhetorical questions,

detachment, and self-correction mitigate categoricity. These language devices allow speakers to present themselves as supportive, witty, expressive, reflective, or authoritative, depending on context. Thus, opinion-giving in small talk is not primarily about conveying information but about projecting a socially desirable image of oneself as competent, entertaining, and attuned to conversational norms.

The tactic of platitude

The tactic of platitude involves generalizing what has just been said in an aphoristic or proverbial form. In such cases, the speaker does not present a personal stance but instead voices a culturally shared truth, a piece of folk wisdom, or a cliché. Platitudes are typically banal, reducing diverse experiences to simple, normative statements rooted in cultural tradition. As a tactic of small talk, they sustain contact, minimize tension, and provide conversational scaffolding when speakers lack more substantive contributions.

In *Miss Pym Disposes* by Josephine Tey, Lucy responds with a platitude after Miss Maurice confides in her about a potentially compromising situation:

"Did you get George back safely?" she called after her.

"Yes, thank you," beamed little Miss Morris, pausing to dance on one toe, "but I think I'm in a different sort of trouble now. You see, I had my arm round George's waist, sort of steadying him after hanging him up, when Miss Lux came in. I'll never be able to explain away that, I'm afraid."

"Life is difficult," agreed Lucy.

"However, I think I really do know my insertions now," called little Miss Morris, speeding away over the grass [Tey, 2023, p. 10].

Here, the platitude *Life is difficult* avoids personal evaluation and minimizes the awkwardness. Linguistically, the statement relies on generalization and abstraction, shifting attention away from the immediate embarrassment to a universal truth. Pragmatically, Lucy presents herself as supportive and empathetic without engaging in detail.

In Hannah's List (D. Macomber), the platitude illustrates the topic-restricting and sometimes forced character of small talk. When a discussion of baseball fails, the narrator shifts to the conventional cliché that "most women like to cook":

All at once we seemed to run out of things to say. Potential topics raced through my mind. If I was more interested in baseball, I could've discussed the Mariners, who'd played on both Saturday and Sunday. I couldn't recall who'd won either game, although Ritchie had gone on about it for several minutes that morning.

"Do you like baseball?" I asked, a bit desperately.

She looked up as if the question had startled her. "No, sorry. Do you?"

"Not really." We both fell silent.

"Most women seem to enjoy cooking," I said, trying again. "Hannah's cousin" I stopped abruptly, realizing I'd sounded like an idiot. It wasn't a good idea to mention that Winter had made me dinner the week before [Macomber, 2010, pp. 220-222].

This example highlights the generalizing vocabulary typical of platitudes: the pronoun *most*, quantifiers (*everyone, no one, always*), and adverbs of certainty (*certainly, surely*). Such lexical items convey universality while avoiding personal involvement. **These items enable the speaker** to maintain the flow of conversation and present himself as cooperative, though at the cost of originality.

Similarly, in *Rose Harbor in Bloom* by Macomber, Julie reflects on her son with a formulaic expression:

"We've certainly had our ups and downs. He's surprised me more than once" [Macomber, 2013, p. 228].

The phrase *ups and downs* is a prefabricated idiom that abstracts individual experiences into a socially recognizable cliché. Its effect is both supportive and non-committal: the speaker signals shared understanding without revealing specific details.

Platitudes are also typically concise and may take the form of paradoxes or conventionalized proverbs. In *Virgin River*, a casual exchange between Mel and Brie concludes with the platitude *What a small world*, which condenses coincidence into a generalized truth:

Mel: When did you graduate?

Brie: 2007.

Mel: We were there at the same time. [laughs] What was your major?

Brie: Political science.

Mel: Health sciences.

Brie: Opposite sides of the campus. Still, I'm sure we crossed paths.

*Mel: I'm sure we did. **What a small world** [Carr, 2019].*

The platitude condenses coincidence into a universal formula, relying on brevity, paradoxical overgeneralization, and catch repetition (*I'm sure*). It functions to close the topic neatly, maintain rapport, and highlight solidarity.

From a stylistic perspective, platitudes rely on formulaicity (pre-fabricated speech units), paradox ("the more things change, the more they stay the same"), and generalization. Pragmatically, they serve to sustain the phatic function of talk — keeping communication flowing, filling potential silences, and displaying solidarity.

In sum, platitudes in small talk are expressed through concise generalizations, often supported by generalizing pronouns (*most, everyone*), quantifiers, and adverbs of certainty. They may also appear in paradoxical or proverbial form. Their primary function is to preserve a light, superficial tone, maintain rapport, and provide folk wisdom when more personal and creative contributions are not possible or desired.

In contrast to the tactic of expressing opinion, which highlights the speaker's individuality through evaluative language, idioms, intensifiers, and irony, platitudes suppress personal stance and instead rely on shared cultural knowledge and collective wisdom. Whereas opinions allow interlocutors to present themselves as witty, supportive, or competent, platitudes emphasize solidarity by invoking universally accepted truths. Together, these two tactics represent complementary mechanisms of self-presentation: one foregrounding individuality, the other aligning the speaker with communal norms.

The tactic of advice

Advice can be defined as an expression of the speaker's subjective opinion regarding a problem that concerns the interlocutor, coupled with suggested ways to resolve it. According to J. Searle, advice constitutes a **directive speech act**, whose illocutionary force lies in the attempt to get the listener to perform a particular action [Searle, 1976]. In B. Fraser's classification, it belongs to the category of **propositions**, expressing the speaker's desire that the addressee evaluate and consider the proposed course of action [Fraser, 1975]. As N.Ya. Nera notes, advice seeks not only to guide action but also to evoke emotions, attitudes, and readiness in the addressee to follow the recommendation [Hepa, 2015, p. 189].

In the context of **small talk**, direct advice with explicit performatives (*advise, recommend, suggest, propose, offer*) is relatively rare, since such formulations can appear too categorical and threaten the interlocutor's negative face. For example:

*Dr. Mullins: All right. First item on the agenda is giving Muriel an official title. I **suggest** office manager. All in favor say aye [Carr, 2019].*

Here the performative *I suggest* frames advice as part of a collective decision, thereby softening its directive force.

More often, advice in small talk takes **indirect forms**, achieved through a range of syntactic and pragmatic strategies:

- Polite hedging and interrogatives:

Hope: Do you mind if I offer some unsolicited advice?

Preacher: If I did, would that stop you? [Carr, 2019].

Here advice is introduced via an interrogative softened with *do you mind*, which simultaneously acknowledges the addressee's autonomy and presents the speaker as considerate.

- **Imperative constructions:**

Take my advice and go and wake your father and give him your version. And make sure you put it plainly enough. [Beaton, 2012, p. 90].

Although structured as an imperative, the prefatory phrase *take my advice* frames the utterance as supportive guidance, enhancing the speaker's role as an experienced adviser.

- **Future tense as prediction/obligation:**

"The classes that I want you to pick up will be with me. You will probably be taking three or four classes with me per term for the rest of your time here" [Tartt, 2023, p. 37].

Here, advice merges with prediction, positioning the speaker as authoritative and knowledgeable.

- Negative questions offering solutions:

Hope: Community work definitely suits you. So, why don't we make it official? Would you like to be the Chief of Staff to the Mayor of Virgin River? Pays more than you're making now, and there's a real future in it if you want.

Lizzie: Wow, that's ... Yes, thank you. [Carr, 2019].

This indirect strategy presents advice as an attractive option rather than a command, projecting the speaker as supportive and generous.

- Modal predicates of obligation (*must, have to, should, ought to*):

*Danny: Well, that's your speech. Lizzie's right. You **should** just speak from the heart.* [Carr, 2019].

Here the modal *should* mitigates direct imposition, balancing authority with encouragement.

- Conditional formulations:

Brady: Tell you what, how about I ride the kiddie cars with you if you promise to go on the berry-go-round with me? [Carr, 2019].

Advice is presented as a reciprocal arrangement, projecting the speaker as playful and cooperative.

A particularly rich illustration of advice occurs in D. Tartt's novel:

"When you're worried about something," said Henry abruptly, "have you ever tried thinking in a different language? It slows you down. Keeps your thoughts from running wild. A good discipline in any circumstance. Or you might try doing what the Buddhists do ... One sits facing a blank wall. No matter the emotion one feels, no matter how strong or violent, one remains motionless. Facing the wall. The discipline, of course, is in continuing to sit" [Tartt, 2023, p. 265].

Henry couches advice in the form of a general **question** (*have you ever tried...?*), reinforced with detached elliptical utterances (*It slows you down. Keeps your thoughts from running wild.*). He also employs **modal predicative** (*you might try*), **idioms** (*run wild*), **evaluative adjectives** (*good, strong, violent*), **metaphors** (*hunger for permanence; facing the wall*), and **intensifiers** (*of course, in any circumstance*). These devices portray him as knowledgeable, reflective, and even philosophical. Yet, as the narrator's inner commentary (*goofball advice*) reveals, advice in small talk can also risk undermining the speaker's image if it seems excessive, irrelevant, or unwanted.

In sum, advice in small talk is expressed both directly (through performative verbs) and, more commonly, indirectly (via interrogative sentences, imperatives, conditionals, future-tense constructions, modal verbs, and elliptical phrasing). Pragmatically, it is often hedged or softened

to preserve the addressee's autonomy. As a tactic of self-presentation, advice allows the speaker to project themselves as supportive, empathetic, and cooperative, or alternatively as competent and knowledgeable. At the same time, the reception of advice determines its success: while tactfully framed advice can enhance the speaker's image, poorly timed or unwanted advice may produce the opposite effect, undermining their self-presentation.

The tactic of bragging

Bragging, or self-praise, is a form of explicit positive evaluation of one's own achievements, traits, or abilities. Ethically, it constitutes a violation of G. Leech's maxim of modesty, which prescribes downplaying one's merits for the sake of politeness and balance in interaction. From a psychological perspective, self-praise reflects the instinctive drive to stand out, attract attention, and assert dominance in a social group. In linguistics, it is viewed as a communicative action aimed at enhancing the speaker's status while often implicitly lowering that of the addressee. Cognitive linguistics approaches self-praise as an ethnoculturally marked concept, combining conceptual, figurative, and value dimensions and encoding experiential "quanta" [Shkitska, 2009].

According to V. Mozgunov, bragging is socially perceived as a breach of communicative etiquette, disregarding the implicit taboo against overt self-promotion [Mozghunov, 2004, p. 302]. The researcher identifies the following methods of positive self-representation: 1) presenting oneself as having one's own traits and properties that are valued in society or by an interaction partner; 2) citing participation in prestigious events or situations, where the above-mentioned traits were used to advantage; 3) displaying access to resources valued by others (contacts, prestige, influence); 4) **emphasizing the benefits of associating with oneself**; 5) quoting positive evaluations made by others; 6) naming one's successes directly [Mozghunov, 2004, p. 302].

In English etiquette, modesty is valued; hence the idiom *to hide one's light under a bushel*. Open boasting is often socially condemned, and bragging is sometimes mitigated or ironized, as in the following exchange:

Desterro was the first to come back from church; leisured and fashionable as always. Lucy leant out and said: "Congratulations on your knowledge of the clavicle." For she had looked at the board on the way to bed last night.

"Yes, I surprised myself," said The Nut Tart. "My grandmother will be so pleased. A 'first' sounds so well, don't you think? I boasted about it to my cousin, but he said that was most unseemly. In England one waits to be asked about one's successes."

"Yes," agreed Lucy, sadly, "and the worst of it is so few people ask. The number of lights under bushels in Great Britain is tragic."

"Not Great Britain," amended Desterro. "He says-my cousin-that it is all right north of the river Tweed. That is the river between England and Scotland, you know. You can boast in Dunbar but not in Berwick, Rick says." [Tey, 2023, p. 58].

Here, the speaker's self-presentation oscillates between overt boasting (*I surprised myself, a 'first' sounds so well*) and acknowledgment of cultural restrictions (*most unseemly*). The dialogue reveals the tension between personal pride and social norms of restraint.

Bragging in small talk often revolves around socially valued possessions (a house, apartment), personal achievements, or unique experiences. For example, Agatha highlights her professional identity and police connections:

"Do you mind if I don't talk about my work anymore?" said Agatha. "I don't like discussing it."

"Just tell us," said Amy, leaning forward. "Have you had any published?"

"No, this is my first attempt. I am a real-life detective, so I thought I may as well fictionalize some of my adventures."

"You mean you work for the police?" asked Harriet.

"I occasionally work with the police," said Agatha grandly. She proceeded to brag about her cases [Beaton, 2014, p. 15].

Bragging here is realized through self-labeling (*a real-life detective*) and association with prestige (*work with the police*). The adverb *grandly* underscores the self-promotional tone.

In Sophie Kinsella's novel, at a party Becky brags about her elite medical care (having the best doctor in New York supervising her pregnancy):

"Is she good, then, this Dr. Carter?" Mum looks from me to Suze.

"They call her the A-list obstetrician." Suze expertly starts to burp Wilfrid. "I read an article about her in Harper's. She's supposed to be wonderful!"

A-list obstetrician! That makes me A-list!

"She does all the supermodels and film stars," I can't help boasting. "They have tea parties and designer goodie bags and everything. I'll probably meet them all!" [Kinsella, 2000, p. 22].

The linguistic implementation includes elite associations (*supermodels, film stars*), generalizing pronouns (*all, everything*) functioning as intensifiers, exaggeration and hyperbole (*A-list, probably meet them all*).

Here, bragging serves as a strategy of self-presentation by constructing Becky's persona as socially connected, glamorous, and enviable.

Since direct self-praise is socially risky, speakers often distance themselves from it. A typical formula is prefacing the boast with disclaimers such as *I don't mean to brag, but...*:

Denny: I don't mean to brag, but I know a thing or two about speechwriting.

Hope: Oh, do you?

Denny: Yeah. That's right. I ran for class president senior year of high school [Carr, 2019].

Here the hedge (*I don't mean to brag*) attempts to mitigate face-threat, while the idiomatic understatement (*a thing or two*) masks confidence. At the same time, the speaker grounds his self-presentation in biographical evidence (*I ran for class president*).

Thus, bragging in small talk is typically realized through evaluative and intensifying language, generalizations, idiomatic or hyperbolic expressions, rhetorical questions, figurative language, and is often softened by disclaimers or framed as "humble-bragging."

In small talk, bragging is a double-edged tactic of self-presentation. On the one hand, it allows the speaker to project an identity of competence, social superiority, desirability, or uniqueness. It can highlight expertise (*I know a thing or two*), elite connections (*supermodels and film stars*), or special traits (*real-life detective*). On the other hand, since etiquette norms discourage open boasting, bragging risks damaging the speaker's image by making them appear arrogant, boastful, or self-absorbed. To avoid this, speakers often employ humour, irony, or hedging to reframe bragging as socially acceptable.

In sum, bragging in small talk functions as a tactic of self-presentation by emphasizing one's achievements, status, or connections through evaluative language, intensifiers, hyperbole, metaphor, generalizers, and disclaimers. It enables the speaker to construct an enviable, competent, or glamorous persona, but it remains socially delicate, as its overuse may threaten rapport and contravene norms of modesty.

The tactic of joke

Humour is an integral component of everyday communication: by smiling and joking, a speaker defuses the atmosphere, relieves tension, and sustains rapport.

Joke is a social sign that reproduces a comic scenario that forms the social roles of communication partners. Joke is a unit of humorous communication with an unexpected comic ending (punch), which is characterized by the release of expectation tension and is manifested in a laughing reaction. The basic features of joke are incongruity and deceived expectation.

In small talk, a joke is not only a comic scenario with an unexpected punch line, but also a tool of self-presentation. It allows the speaker to appear witty, relaxed, and socially agile, while creating a positive environment for interaction.

Comic elements in the tactics of a joke can be revealed with the help of emotionally coloured lexemes and stylistic means. V.O. Samokhina identified linguistic means of creating the

comic, to which she refers at the phonetic level: the play of sounds (homonyms, homophones, homographs), shibboleth, sound metathesis; at the lexical level: puns, blends, malapropisms, oxymorons, zeugmas; at the text-genre and discursive level: violations at the level of compositional structure, the introduction of intertextual elements, the violation of time plans, the mixing of styles [Samokhina, 2011].

T.G. Lukiyanova and K.V. Matiyko argue that “unlike stylistic figures, such as oxymoron, hyperbole, antithesis, etc., the comic may not be recognized immediately, because it is often expressed implicitly. Only the author of the message knows about this element, and only the recipient with the appropriate background knowledge can notice and understand it” [Lukiyanova, Matiyko, 2020, c. 120].

According to our observations, in small talk, the comic effect at the lexical-semantic level is created by such stylistic figures as alogism, hyperbole, metonymy, and periphrasis.

The comic effect in the following dialogue arises from illogical reasoning. Two tipsy passengers argue about whether the ship is moving, and one of them insists: “*I quite thought we were moving.*” To which the other replies: “*How absurd you are, Fanny, and yet I can’t help laughing*” [Waugh, 2012, p. 25]. The absurdity creates laughter, but more importantly, it shows how humour projects the speaker as tolerant and companionable: she laughs with her friend rather than at her, reinforcing solidarity.

In Macomber’s novel, the absurdity lies in the suggestion that someone’s mother is missing out on fruitcake: “*And to think she’s missing out on Matt McHugh’s fruitcake*” [Macomber, 2018, p. 76]. The passengers, stranded without food on Christmas, laugh at this incongruous remark. With her joke, the speaker relieves tension and re-establishes a positive mood, thus presenting herself as optimistic and supportive in a stressful situation.

Self-deprecating and even dark humour also serves a self-presentational function. In *Otherhood* (Netflix, 2019), Carol quips: “*The key to a clean house? Dead husband.*” Although the remark is shocking, the unexpected logic makes it funny. By joking about her own situation, Carol projects herself as resilient, ironic, and socially daring, while still entertaining her friends.

Jokes often serve to redirect unwanted questions. In Haig’s *Midnight Library*, Nora responds to the probing “*Why are you here?*” with: “*Bit early in the morning, isn’t it, for philosophy?*” [Haig, 2023, p. 38]. The incongruity – associating a practical question with an abstract discipline – shifts the focus, helping her save face. Here humour functions as a conversational shield, allowing the speaker to appear witty rather than evasive.

Another case of joking is based on playful metonymy. In *Virgin River*, a woman is teased: “*Cosmo? Manicure? Cartier?*” to which she replies: “*Wow. You should be a detective*” [Carr, 2019]. The list of stereotypical urban signifiers constructs a humorous portrait, and the hyperbolic response frames the interlocutor as clever but non-threatening. The speaker’s self-presentation here is that of someone who can parry teasing remarks with humor rather than defensiveness.

Periphrastic joking, too, is common in small talk. In Kinsella’s *Shopaholic Takes Manhattan*, the protagonist is humorously nicknamed “the office It-girl”: “*That’s what we’ll have to call you ... the office It-girl.*” [Kinsella, 2003, p. 62]. The exaggerated label is both flattering and ironic, creating a playful bond while projecting the speaker as witty and socially aware.

Across these examples, humour is achieved through alogism, hyperbole, metonymy, periphrasis, and other incongruities. But its communicative effect goes beyond the comic: the tactic of joke in small talk allows speakers to display wit, lighten the atmosphere, shift unwanted topics, and strengthen bonds. In terms of self-presentation, jokes construct the speaker’s image as socially competent, resilient, and likeable, while simultaneously entertaining the interlocutor.

The tactic of quip

According to I. Lavrynenko, the quip belongs to the conflict type of discourse and is considered a disharmonizing tactic that disrupts dialogue and provokes conflict. Alongside disapproval, reproach, insult, or threat, it is seen as part of the repertoire of face-threatening acts [Lavrynenko, 2010, c. 141]. V. Sedov, however, describes the quip as a “compliment with a minus sign” [Sedov, 1997, c. 191], highlighting its indirect nature, reliance on subtext, and the tendency to conceal criticism behind apparent politeness. While the quip may indeed have conflict potential, in the communicative environment of small talk it functions differently: it

injects playfulness into banal exchanges, prevents boredom, and provides speakers with a tool to express irony or skepticism without overt confrontation.

Quips often take the form of ironic compliments or sarcastic asides. In Kinsella's novel, Luke comments on Danny's advice for teasing his brother: "*Brotherly love. Beautiful, isn't it?*" [Kinsella, 2015, p. 17]. The sarcastic detachment and elliptical rhetorical question disguise criticism as mock admiration. Linguistically, the quip is realized through evaluative vocabulary (*beautiful*) deployed ironically and through syntactic detachment, which frames the remark as an aside. The speaker's self-presentation here is that of a witty, slightly cynical observer who distances himself from sentimentality.

The sarcastic edge of the quip can also be observed in film dialogue. When Gillian confronts Helen with "*You're married,*" Helen replies: "*Well, my marriage isn't as perfect as yours, Gillian*" [Chupack, 2019]. The parallel construction emphasizes the contrast, while the adjective *perfect* is loaded with irony. The quip enables Helen to veil criticism behind a compliment-like structure, projecting herself as sharp and realistic, while undermining Gillian's presumed marital ideal.

Similarly, in *Bridget Jones's Diary*, Natasha greets Bridget with the barbed remark: "*Not in your bunny girl outfit today?*" Bridget deflects with humour: "*No, we bunnies only wear our tails on very special occasions*" [Maguire, 2011]. Natasha's quip exploits the ironic recollection of Bridget's earlier embarrassment, using mock compliment and rhetorical questioning to assert superiority. Yet Bridget's joking response reframes the exchange, softening tension and salvaging her self-image. The episode illustrates how quips and jokes can interplay: the former as a challenge to face, the latter as a strategy of resilience.

Quips can also take the form of exaggerated politeness or mock admiration. When Mark casually mentions his weekend plans, Daniel retorts: "*How interesting. What a gripping life you lead*" [Maguire, 2011]. On the surface, Daniel uses emphatic evaluative lexemes (*interesting, gripping*), but the presuppositions of the conflictual relationship make the irony transparent. The syntactic emphasis (*What a gripping life you lead*) heightens the sarcasm, framing Daniel's persona as witty but also disdainful.

In other cases, quips appear in the form of allusion or cultural reference. In Macomber's novel, a man brusquely replies to a child asking his name: "*Scrooge.*" [Macomber, 2018, pp. 37-38]. The allusion to Dickens's miserly character signals an unwillingness to engage. Here the quip functions as a self-presentation device: the speaker constructs himself as unfriendly and detached, discouraging further talk without openly refusing.

Finally, quips may be overloaded with hedging or inversion, which paradoxically enhance their sarcastic edge:

'Oh, it's no use talking to Chastity. She's too high and mighty to be an angel now. Went out for a drive with Mrs Panrast in a Rolls Royce,' said Fortitude. 'I saw her. I was so sorry it rained all the time, or it might have been quite enjoyable, mightn't it, Chastity?'

*'Well, you ought to be glad. Leaves the men for you, Fortitude. **Only they don't seem to want to take advantage, do they?**'* [Waugh, 2012, p. 65].

In the girl's remark: "*Only they don't seem to want to take advantage, do they?*" the hedge *only*, the cautious verb phrase *don't seem to*, and the tag question might conventionally soften criticism, but in this context they sharpen the sarcastic tone, exposing the ironic undercurrent of rivalry.

Thus, quips in small talk are structurally similar to compliments, often relying on positive evaluative adjectives and emphatic syntax, but their pragmatic force is the opposite: they conceal criticism, distance, or mockery. They are commonly realized through irony, rhetorical questions, sarcastic detachment, allusion, or hedged formulations. As a tactic of self-presentation, the quip allows speakers to project wit, intellectual sharpness, or subtle superiority while avoiding overt aggression. Although quips may carry a conflictual undertone, in small talk they are often interpreted as playful banter or as a stylistic means of escaping banality rather than genuine hostility.

The tactic of evasion

Scholars approach the tactic of evasion from different perspectives, but most emphasize its pragmatic nature. L.A. Bilokonko interprets it as a deliberate choice by which a speaker

signals, through communicative techniques, that they do not intend to provide the requested information [Bilokonko, 2019, c. 76]. M. Chovhanyuk views it as a tactic of negative politeness, grounded in the Anglo-American cultural tradition of maintaining interpersonal distance and respecting the addressee's freedom of action [Chovhanyuk, 2015]. Similarly, I. Misiyahina links evasion with markers of uncertainty, hedges, and indirect formulations that acknowledge the interlocutor's autonomy while withholding personal disclosure [Misiyahina, 2012, c. 51]. According to V.V. Pidpala, the tactic manifests itself in ignoring the question, changing the topic, or providing lengthy explanations that shift attention away from the original request [Pidpala, 2021, c. 59]. S.V. Cherkashyn distinguishes between direct evasion (an outright refusal to answer) and indirect evasion [Cherkashyn, 2012], while S. Clayman identifies subtler techniques, such as reformulating the question, focusing on peripheral elements, or diverting attention to minor details [Clayman, 1993, p. 168].

The film and literary data confirm S. Clayman's observations that indirect evasion is especially common in small talk, where direct refusals would threaten harmony. For example, in Kinsella's novel a woman parries a probing question about her elegant outfit: "So how come you're so smart?" She shifts the focus away from the implied cause by responding: "I always look smart. You know that." The hedged assertion (*I always look smart*) accompanied by the appeal to shared knowledge (*you know that*) diverts the question, while the subsequent attempt to involve her companion in another task (*Are these yours or mine?*) redirects attention entirely [Kinsella, 2003, p. 57]. Linguistically, the evasion is marked by topic-shifting, appeals to common ground, and rhetorical diversion. Pragmatically, it allows the speaker to conceal her true motivation while presenting herself as controlled and socially adept.

In another example, Geoffrey Norris avoids admitting to professional failure when asked who he writes for. His vague reply "*It depends*", accompanied by shifty gaze and refusal to meet the interlocutor's eye, exemplifies evasion through vague language and non-verbal signals of discomfort. The elliptical *It depends* lacks referential clarity, buying the speaker time while avoiding explicit admission of having been sacked [Kinsella, 2003, p. 77]. Here evasion performs a face-saving function: the speaker seeks to protect his social image, though his hesitations ultimately betray the truth.

Evasion also relies on hesitation markers, temporizing, and minimization. When Rebecca is asked about her "urgent business," she stumbles: "*I... ahm... I'm going to...*" and then retreats into vagueness: "*It's not that important.*" [Kinsella, 2003, p. 13]. The ellipsis, filled pauses (*ahm*), and self-interruption convey embarrassment and unwillingness to disclose. The hedge (*not that important*) trivializes the question, aiming to dismiss it without lying outright. From the perspective of self-presentation, such evasion portrays the speaker as polite and conflict-avoiding, even though the inner narration reveals shame.

Silence itself can function as evasion, as when villagers ignore Agatha's question about unusual lights in the garden. A pause is followed by a clarifying question ("*Is anything missing?*"), and then by an abrupt change of topic to women's quilting [Beaton, 2014, p. 8]. The layered technique – silence, counter-question, topic shift – highlights evasion as a collective politeness move, maintaining the group's boundaries while keeping conversation light.

Overall, evasion in small talk is achieved through hedges (*kind of, sort of, somewhat*), vague formulations (*it depends, not that important*), hesitation markers (*I... ahm...*), appeals to common knowledge (*you know that*), counter-questions, silence, and abrupt topic shifts. It may also involve lengthy explanations that overwhelm the original inquiry. While theoretically associated with conflict or avoidance, in casual exchanges the tactic functions as negative politeness: it allows speakers to maintain harmony, avoid embarrassment, and save face. From the standpoint of self-presentation, evasion projects the speaker as tactful, self-controlled, and respectful of boundaries, even if it also hints at vulnerability.

The tactic of changing the subject

Changing the subject is a natural conversational tactic, since dialogue involves joint effort and speakers are free to redirect interaction at any moment. As Tsui observes, conversation constantly opens new possibilities, and some moves may prove less successful, requiring the speaker to adjust in order to avoid undesirable consequences [Tsui, 1994, p. 217; Dijk, 1981].

Researchers disagree about the strategic orientation of topic change: some see it as a cooperative tactic aimed at harmonizing communication [Voitsekhovska, 2014; Dede, 2019; Lavrynenko, 2010], while others interpret it as confrontational, a way of ignoring questions or refusing to provide requested information [Prokopenko, 2012; Chernenko, 2007]. In either case, changing the subject can perform a face-saving function, preventing conflict and preserving rapport.

Although the tactic resembles evasion, the difference lies in scope: evasion skirts the issue while remaining within its frame, often by hedging or giving vague answers, whereas changing the subject abandons the original theme entirely and redirects attention to a new one. In small talk, where conversation is expected to remain light and non-threatening, the tactic typically functions cooperatively, softening tension, concealing awkwardness, or refreshing the interaction.

In Beaton's novel, Jenny realizes that her criticism of Agatha may have created tension, so she abruptly redirects: "*Never mind the Mainwarings. Tell me about yourself. Married?*" [Beaton, 2013, pp. 25-26]. The imperatives (*never mind, tell me*) function as explicit signals of topic change. Her strategy allows her to save face, presenting herself as polite and considerate, while steering attention away from potentially offensive remarks.

Later in the same conversation, Jenny again shifts the subject with "*Anyway, we're talking about me and I meant to find out about you.*" The discourse marker *anyway* and the parallel construction (*we're talking about me / I meant to find out about you*) create contrast and justify the redirection. When the focus turns uncomfortably to Hamish's love life, it is he who changes the subject with a sudden, unframed question: "*Is there any more coffee?*" The abruptness of the shift, lacking transitional markers, projects a desire to maintain privacy without open refusal. Both examples illustrate how topic change operates as negative politeness, helping interlocutors avoid embarrassment and manage impressions.

Another example demonstrates how topic change can be couched in irony. In Waugh's novel, Lord Metroland tires of abstract political discussion and interjects: "*Anyhow, I don't see how all that explains why my stepson should drink like a fish and go about everywhere with a negress.*" [Waugh, 2012, p. 132]. The parenthetical *anyhow* signals dismissal, while the new topic is introduced with sardonic bluntness. Here the tactic highlights the speaker's authority to steer discourse and his cynical self-presentation as a man impatient with lofty rhetoric.

Smooth transitions are often achieved through partial agreement followed by redirection, as in Butlin's novel, where Phil acknowledges Steve's point about holidays before steering the conversation elsewhere: "*What you're saying about last-minute flights is all very well, Steve, but...*" [Butlin, 2007, p. 86]. The concession *all very well* softens the shift, projecting the speaker as cooperative and socially skilled.

At times, embarrassment motivates abrupt topic changes. In Kinsella's *Shopaholic to the Stars*, Becky, uncomfortable with her parents' teasing, grasps for diversion: "*Well, anyway! ... So, er...*" [Kinsella, 2015, p. 18]. The interjections (*well, anyway, so, er*) mark hesitation and a frantic search for a safer topic. While the tactic reveals discomfort, it also constructs Becky's persona as socially anxious but eager to maintain harmony.

These examples show that the linguistic realization of topic change relies on discourse markers (*anyway, anyhow, well, so*), conjunctions (*but*), imperative forms (*tell me*), parallel or contrastive constructions, interjections, and abrupt shifts signaled by questions or requests. Pragmatically, topic change protects the speaker's face and redirects interaction toward safer ground. From the standpoint of self-presentation, the tactic allows speakers to appear cooperative, tactful, and attentive to others, or alternatively ironic, authoritative, and in control of the conversation. In small talk, changing the subject is less a confrontational move than a stylistic means of preserving lightness and avoiding awkwardness, projecting the speaker's image as socially adaptable and relationally sensitive.

The tactic of reporting news and rumours

The self-presentation of participants in small talk often implies their awareness of social news. By reporting recent events or circulating rumours, speakers demonstrate involvement in community life, erudition, and access to sources of information. Such contributions enhance the speaker's "face" by presenting them as competent, socially connected, and well-informed. If the information derives from authoritative sources, it functions as *news*; if unverified and

spread through interpersonal channels, it constitutes *rumour*. In both cases, the pragmatic value lies less in the truth of the information than in its role in maintaining rapport and sustaining conversational flow.

Scholars emphasize that informing reflects the speaker's intention to satisfy the addressee's informational needs [Telychko, 2013], and that news-telling is characterized by *clarifications, retrospective reminders, and drawing conclusions from prior knowledge* [Shevchenko, 2014]. Lexically and syntactically, breaking news is frequently framed by the verb *hear* in the present perfect, marking awareness or ignorance of the addressee.

Let us analyse reporting news first. In *Vile Bodies*, Nina is told of a friend's engagement through the formulaic question *haven't you heard?*:

"She's got engaged to be married – haven't you heard?"

"My dear, the nurses are interested in no one but Princess Elizabeth. Do tell me."

"A young man called Ginger. Don't you remember him? He came on with us after the airship party"

[Waugh, 2012, p. 130].

Here the verb *hear* signals novelty and presupposes the addressee's possible ignorance, while the retrospective reminder *Don't you remember him?* reinforces the informational frame. The speaker's self-presentation is that of a socially aware insider, able to connect present news with shared past experiences.

A similar pattern recurs in another passage:

"Haven't you heard about Mary? ... She went off to Monte Carlo with the Maharajah of Pukkapore"

[Waugh, 2012, p. 132].

Again, a negative general question in the present perfect tense *haven't you heard* functions as a conventional opener for breaking news. The sensational content, couched in evaluative exclamations (*My dear, aren't the Mice furious?*), emphasizes the speaker's role as a privileged informant.

News can also serve self-presentation in professional contexts. In Kinsella's *Shopaholic Abroad*, Rebecca attempts to bolster her credibility by mentioning industry news:

"Elly Granger is leaving Investor's Weekly News. She's joining Wetherby's as fund manager."

"I heard," he says. "Doesn't surprise me" [Kinsella, 2003, p. 88].

Although Luke already knows the news, Rebecca's linguistic framing – **simple present reporting verbs** (*is leaving, is joining*) – marks her as informed and up-to-date. Her self-presentation here is strategic: to appear competent and connected, even though the effect is undercut by her interlocutor's response.

Speakers sometimes preface news with "warning signals" of importance, as in Kinsella's *Shopaholic Ties the Knot*:

"I particularly wanted to see you tonight, because I have exciting news. A very talented event designer is going to be working on your wedding!" [Kinsella, 2004, p. 50].

The evaluative preface *exciting news* heightens anticipation and frames the speaker as a bearer of privileged, desirable information.

Other formulae include interrogatives with *know*: *"Did you know ... ?"* [Kinsella, 2004, p. 57]. These constructions position the speaker as the one who controls access to information, subtly enhancing authority.

In contrast, rumours are less about factual accuracy than about social connection and shared interpretation. The psychologist C.G. Jung views rumour as a response to collective anxieties [Jung, 1969]. He defines rumour as an indirect manifestation of the collective unconscious, certain archetypal manifestations, a response to collective anxious expectations inherent in everyone. The researcher emphasizes the collective, spontaneous nature of this phenomenon and

highlights its problem-solving potential: “rumor is a circulating form of communication, through which people, being in an ambiguous situation, unite, creating a reasonable interpretation of it, while jointly using their intellectual potentials [Jung, 1969].

As for rumour, O.D. Boyko defines rumour as “a specific way of interpreting information, caused by a lack of awareness, uncertainty of the situation, the presence of anxiety and fear in society, which is characterized by deformation, generalization, relevance of content, simplicity, accessibility, emotionality, informality of the form of presentation; circulation / self-distribution / actualization in the process of oral distribution through channels of interpersonal communication” [Boyko, 2013, c. 3].

Let’s turn to our data. An episode from *Death of a Dreamer* demonstrates the oral and widespread nature of the rumour about the bet that Jeremy made with Captain Bartlett:

“Have you heard about this bet I’ve got on with Bartlett?”

“Aye, everyone’s talking about it,” said Hamish [Beaton, 2012, p. 36].

The markers *have you heard* and *everyone’s talking about it* underline the oral and communal nature of rumour circulation. The speaker’s self-presentation relies not on authority but on embeddedness in the social network where “everyone” knows and shares the story.

Rumour also functions as entertainment, as in *Sweet Magnolias*:

Visitor: *Oh, I heard the old one is in Cancún* [Anderson, 2020].

The casual formula *I heard* signals second-hand information and provides amusement, allowing the visitor to join the social exchange.

Sometimes rumours touch on personal matters. In Beaton’s *Death of a Dreamer*, Hamish presses Priscilla about gossip linking her to Jeremy Pomfret:

“Sounded to me like you were going to be Mrs Pomfret.”

“Let’s not talk about Jeremy” [Beaton, 2012, p. 196].

Here, rumour functions as a probe into sensitive topics. Its linguistic cues include **indefiniteness** (*sounded to me*), **reported speech**, and *absence of source attribution*. Self-presentation operates on two levels: the spreader portrays himself as well-informed and socially alert, while the addressee (by resisting the topic) presents herself as guarded and self-protective.

Linguistically, both news and rumours are frequently introduced by interrogatory sentences with *hear* in the present perfect (*haven’t you heard...?*, *have you heard...?*), by evaluative prefaces (*I have exciting news*), or by knowledge-checking questions (*Did you know...?*). News is typically marked by **simple present reporting verbs** and **retrospective reminders**, signalling reliability and timeliness. Rumours, by contrast, rely on **indefiniteness**, **anonymity**, **second-hand attribution** (*I heard, everyone says*), emphasizing collective participation rather than verifiable truth.

From a self-presentation perspective, reporting news enhances the speaker’s image as informed, competent, and connected to authoritative sources, while spreading rumours highlights sociability, insider status, and the ability to entertain. Both tactics contribute to the phatic function of small talk: news projects credibility and authority, while rumours foster solidarity and group belonging. In fictional discourse, characters use them not only to convey content but also to fashion identities – as experts, insiders, entertainers, or guardians of social bonds.

Another way of presenting information in small talk is gossip, which we will address in the next paragraph.

The tactic of gossip

Gossip is a central tactic of small talk, characterized by the exchange of information – often evaluative, sometimes unverifiable – about third parties. Unlike news (linked to reliable sources) or rumours (anonymous, circulating, often collective), gossip is personal, socially

embedded, and oriented toward intimacy. It functions not only to share information but also to reinforce social bonds: by inviting another to join in gossip, the speaker signals trust and shared group identity.

Linguistically, gossip often begins with first-person pronouns and verbs of cognition or perception (*I hear, I know, I wonder, I assume*), which suggest exclusive access to information and arouse the interlocutor's curiosity. In *Virgin River*, Jo Ellen initiates gossip with the hedged speculation *I wonder*, drawing others into discussion of Hope's possible remarriage:

Jo Ellen: I wonder whether they wanna use the B&B for their reception.

Connie: What are you talking about? Hope's not gonna get married again.

Jo Ellen: Well, how do you know that?

Lilly: Technically, they're still married [Carr, 2019].

Here the linguistic markers of gossip are hedging (*I wonder*), interrogatory sentences, and the appeal to shared insider knowledge. The pragmatic effect is to stimulate curiosity and invite co-participation.

Gossip may also start with a question about appearance or behaviour, often implying implicit criticism. In Steinbeck's novel, attention to Mrs. Baker's hat and hair color functions as indirect negative evaluation:

"Did you see Mrs. Baker's hat? She must have got it in New York."

"What has she done with her hair? ... It's almost strawberry" [Steinbeck, 2001, p. 54].

Here, questions about third parties, speculative modality (*must have*), and evaluation of appearance signal gossip, while the implicit criticism enhances solidarity between speakers at the expense of the absent other.

A common discourse marker is the parenthetical *you know*, which prefaces evaluative narration. In *Virgin River*, Jo Ellen reports having witnessed the doctor's behaviour:

"You know, I saw him dancing mighty close to Muriel St. Claire at the Mingle..." [Carr, 2019].

This use of *you know* constructs common ground, while the narrative frame (*I saw him...*) lends gossip an air of authority and exclusivity.

Formulaic openings – *If you ask me..., I heard..., And I assume you've heard...* – similarly mark gossip as a cooperative yet evaluative move. In another *Virgin River* example, Connie comments on Charmaine's behavior:

"If you ask me, Charmaine's a damn fool to let a guy like you get away. Then again, I always thought she was a little big for her britches" [Carr, 2019].

Here, gossip is couched in negative evaluation (*damn fool, too big for her britches*) and introduced by the conventional formula *If you ask me*, which both personalizes and softens the criticism.

Follow-up questions and elliptical prompts (*How so? What about...? What's that about?*) sustain gossip and encourage elaboration, as in Macomber's narrative:

"She's had a hard time."

"Oh?" I wasn't sure what he meant. "How so?"

"Her divorce." As he said that, I recalled the comment in Hannah's letter.

"Her husband was Mark Lancaster," Patrick went on to explain.

The name caught my attention. "What about him?" I asked. "Who is he?"

[Macomber, 2010, p. 106-107].

The brevity and open-endedness of these questions reflect the interactive, co-constructive nature of gossip.

Gossip typically targets finances, morals, character, or social status. In Barbara Pym's *Some Tame Gazelle*, Sybil condemns Ella for exploiting her daughter:

"Old people shouldn't expect their children to give up their lives to them... she has plenty of money and could get a paid companion who would expect to be bullied" [Pym, 2009, p. 20].

The moralizing tone (*shouldn't expect*), evaluative lexis (*poor Mary, bullied*), and appeal to proverbial wisdom frame gossip as judgmental but socially cohesive.

Gossip also reinforces in-group identity, as when Piers assures Wilmet that she stands out among the "dreadful" guests:

"You do stand out among all these rather dreadful people" [Pym, 2009, p. 41].

The negative evaluative adjective (*dreadful*) constructs intimacy by opposing the in-group (Wilmet + Piers) to the out-group (the "others").

The participants of another small talk begin to discuss one of the guests – Simon, as soon as he leaves them. The author's comment marks the joy and pleasure that Miss Doggett feels from gossiping (*Miss Doggett looked interested; Miss Doggett wandered on happily*) and from the awareness that she possesses "exclusive" information (*She had a good deal of information*):

'Margaret,' she said, addressing Mrs. Cleveland, 'who was that young man who went just now?'

'Oh, that was Simon Beddoes,' said Mrs. Cleveland casually. 'His father used to be British Ambassador in Warsaw, or something like that.'

'Really?' Miss Doggett looked interested and thoughtful. She glanced at Anthea, who seemed a little confused when her father asked her what Simon had thought of the first editions. 'Then he must be the son of Sir Lyall Beddoes, who died a year or two ago,' said Miss Doggett. 'I believe he left a considerable fortune. He was a kinsman on his mother's side of Lord Timberscombe... .' Miss Doggett wandered on happily. She had a good deal of information from Debrett and Who's Who tucked away in her head. 'I don't remember who Lady Beddoes was before her marriage. Nobody distinguished, I think. She lives in Chester Square' [Pym, 2017, p. 41].

Miss Doggett provides information about Simon's family finances, and his mother, Lady Bedoz, is evaluated negatively by Miss Doggett (*Nobody distinguished, I think*). Thus, the lack of achievements of the gossip object becomes the gossip topic, which gives the gossip a negative-evaluative character.

Later, the same gossip, Miss Doggett, discusses the affairs of another family. She contrasts her own knowledge with the ignorance of the recipient of the gossip, Miss Morrow, who cannot, due to her social position, know what is happening at Leamington Lodge. The gossip calls meddling in other people's affairs a duty, and the unpleasant facts, about which she speaks rather vaguely, "need to be discussed." (*one cannot let pass without comment*):

'Miss Morrow,' said Miss Doggett in a warning tone, 'you are not a woman of the world. You cannot possibly know what goes on outside Leamington Lodge... Encouraged by Miss Morrow's silence and bent head, Miss Doggett went on to speak of what she thought they ought to do. 'I believe it may be my duty to speak to Margaret about it,' she said thoughtfully. 'Don't think for a moment that I'm suggesting that there could possibly be anything in it,' she said, turning to the unworldly Miss Morrow, 'but you know what I mean. There are some things that one cannot let pass without comment. It is a duty one has to other people, not always a pleasant or an easy duty, but one which must be performed...' [ibid., p. 48].

Thus, Miss Doggett's gossip is loaded with namedropping, retrospective knowledge, and negative evaluations (*Nobody distinguished, I think*), which together elevate her self-presentation as knowledgeable and socially superior. The unwillingness of her own companion to gossip about Anthea or to support her employer's criticism of Anthea angers the gossipier, who ultimately declares that Miss Morrow does not understand such things.

In sum, gossip in small talk is marked linguistically by formulaic openers (*I heard, If you ask me, You know*), verbs of cognition (*wonder, assume, know*), evaluative lexis (often negative) applied to the third persons, and elliptical follow-ups (*How so? What about...?*). It frequently targets appearance, morals, finances, and achievements, constructing the absent third party as an object of judgment.

From a self-presentation perspective, gossip allows the speaker to signal insider knowledge and exclusivity, display moral or aesthetic judgment, reinforce solidarity with the interlocutor by creating an in-group vs. out-group dynamic, satisfy the phatic function by maintaining engagement and stimulating curiosity.

Thus, while gossip often carries a negative evaluative component, in the context of small talk it serves primarily to build intimacy, affirm group belonging, and project the speaker as well-informed and socially embedded.

Conclusion

Fictional discourse incorporates not only speech genres and individual speech acts, but also broader communicative strategies and tactics that model discursive situations. To understand the essence of a speech genre, one must attend to the intentions of the communicants and the strategies and tactics through which these intentions are realized.

The conversational analysis of small talk in English fictional discourse demonstrates that participants constantly maneuver between two overarching strategic guidelines: the wish to be polite and the desire to present themselves in a favourable light. The first is linked to positive politeness, oriented toward supporting the interlocutor's "positive face" through closeness and reciprocity. The second is shaped by negative politeness, which maintains communicative distance while protecting autonomy. Together, these intentions have given rise to two major strategies of small talk: *showing interest in the interlocutor* and *self-presentation*.

This study has focused on the latter. Ten communicative tactics have been identified as ways of implementing the self-presentation strategy: **expressing opinion, platitude, advice, bragging, joke, quip, evasion, changing the subject, reporting news and rumours, and gossip**. Each tactic employs its own linguistic markers and serves a distinct self-presentational purpose:

- *Expressing opinion* highlights individuality and rhetorical competence through hedges, evaluative lexis, irony, rhetorical questions, and detachment.
- *Platitudes* downplay individuality in favour of solidarity, employing short generalizations, quantifiers, and culturally shared formulae.
- *Advice* projects competence and authority, but is often softened by hedges, interrogatives, modal verbs, and indirectness.
- *Bragging* elevates the speaker's status with evaluatives, hyperbole, intensifiers, and humble-brags, though it risks violating politeness norms.
- *Jokes* present the speaker as witty and creative, drawing on alogism, hyperbole, periphrasis, and playful violation of logic.
- *Quips* resemble compliments in form but function sarcastically, relying on irony, rhetorical questions, and emphatic structures to project superiority or playful conflict.
- *Evasion* preserves face and tact through hedges, vagueness, reformulations, and indirect answers.
- *Changing the subject* maintains harmony by diverting attention with parenthetical words (*anyway, anyhow*), conjunctions (*but*), and imperatives.
- *Reporting news and rumours* underscores the speaker's knowledge and insider access, typically introduced by interrogatives with *hear* or *know*.
- *Gossip* strengthens intimacy and in-group belonging through evaluatives, formulaic openers (*If you ask me, I heard*), and negative assessments of absent others.

Taken together, these tactics show that small talk is far from trivial. It is a dynamic arena of impression management where speakers negotiate two intertwined goals: **self-expression** (projecting competence, wit, and individuality) and **self-alignment** (emphasizing solidarity, tact, and cooperation). The linguistic resources employed – hedges, evaluatives, intensifiers, idioms, rhetorical questions, ellipsis, and formulaic phrases – enable speakers to present themselves as knowledgeable, witty, tactful, supportive, or well-connected, depending on the situation.

Thus, small talk in fictional discourse emerges not as “empty talk,” but as a strategic practice where language is mobilized to construct identity, maintain relationships, and balance personal distinctiveness with social harmony.

It is hoped that these studies will serve as another proof that modality, evaluation, emotions, felicity conditions of a particular speech situation are all determined by the speaker’s intentions and strategy. In any and every speech situation communicants express in some way their own attitude and employ some strategies and tactics. It is upon these strategic aspects that we should concentrate in developing while tackling particular speech variants.

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SELF-PRESENTATION STRATEGY IN SMALL TALK: EVIDENCE FROM ENGLISH-LANGUAGE FICTION

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This study explores small talk in modern British and American fictional discourse, focusing on the ways in which communicative strategies and tactics shape the interaction of characters. The *aim* of the research is to identify the communicative strategies of fictional small talk, with special attention to the strategy of self-presentation. The *objectives* are: (1) to determine the strategic guidelines that govern small talk; (2) to identify the communicative tactics employed by characters to implement the strategy of self-presentation; and (3) to describe the linguistic resources that verbalize these tactics.

To meet these objectives, the study applies both general scientific and linguistic *methods*. Observation was used to identify characteristic features of phatic communication, while the descriptive method enabled their systematic classification. Within special linguistic methods, conversational and contextual analysis were employed, which made it possible to determine intentions of fictional characters engaged in small talk. In addition, stylistic and hermeneutic methods were used to examine the literary text. The *empirical material* consists of 340 episodes of fictional small talk drawn from contemporary English-language novels and films.

The *results* reveal that participants in fictional small talk maneuver between two main strategic guidelines: (a) politeness, aimed at protecting the interlocutor's "face," and (b) self-presentation, aimed at portraying oneself favorably. Ten key communicative tactics of self-presentation have been identified: *expressing opinion, platitude, advice, bragging, joke, quip, evasion, changing the subject, reporting news and rumours, and gossip*. Each tactic is associated with specific linguistic markers. Expressing opinion relies on evaluative language, hedges, and rhetorical questions; platitudes are characterized by concise generalizations and formulaic expressions; advice is implemented through imperatives, modal verbs, and interrogatives; bragging employs hyperbole, intensifiers, and humble-brags; jokes exploit allogism, irony, and periphrasis; quips use sarcasm, emphatic structures, and rhetorical questions; evasion employs vagueness, hedges, and reformulations; topic change is facilitated by parenthetical words and imperatives; reporting news and rumours frequently involves verbs like *hear* or *know* in general questions; gossip relies on formulaic openers (*If you ask me, Have you heard*), evaluative lexis, and in-group alignment.

The carried out conversational analysis shows that these tactics implement the strategy of self-presentation: some highlight individuality and competence (opinions, advice, jokes, bragging, quips), others underscore solidarity and cooperation (platitudes, gossip, news-sharing), while still others preserve tact and harmony (evasion, topic change). Thus, small talk in fictional discourse emerges not as "empty

talk," but as a strategic practice where language is mobilized to construct identity, maintain relationships, and balance personal distinctiveness with social harmony.

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