

УДК 378.091.21:811.111'243

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THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHING SMALL TALK TO ECONOMY STUDENTS

The article deals with small talk as a social starter of upcoming conversation in business sphere. The importance of small talk in the UK and Germany is contrasted. The focus lies on a business partner's behavior patterns. Their analysis helps Ukrainian economy students to develop necessary communicational skills. Special attention is paid to appropriate topics and topics that are best avoided when conducting small talk.

Key words: *small talk, students specializing in Economics, business communication, cross-cultural differences in the UK and Germany, conversation starter.*

Маслова А. В. Важливість навчання "small talk" студентів економічних спеціальностей. – Стаття.

У статті розглянуто мовленнєвий жанр "small talk" як передумову подальшої бізнес-комунікації. Порівнюється значення "small talk" у Великобританії та Німеччині. Висвітлено типові для бізнес-партнерів зазначених країн поведінкові зразки. Їх аналіз допомагає студентам економічних спеціальностей розвивати необхідні комунікаційні вміння. Особлива увага приділяється темам для ведення "small talk".

Ключові слова: *жанр "small talk", студенти економічних спеціальностей, бізнес-комунікація, міжкультурні відмінності у Великобританії та Німеччині, початок розмови.*

Маслова А. В. Важность обучения "small talk" студентов экономических специальностей. – Статья.

Рассмотрен речевой жанр "small talk" как предпосылка дальнейшей бизнес-коммуникации. Сравнивается значение "small talk" в Великобритании и Германии. Освещены типичные для бизнес-партнеров указанных стран поведенческие образцы. Их анализ помогает студентам развивать необходимые коммуникационные умения. Особое внимание уделяется темам для ведения "small talk".

Ключевые слова: *жанр "small talk", студенты экономических специальностей, бизнес-коммуникация, межкультурные различия в Великобритании и Германии, начало разговора.*

The globalization causes the worldwide interrelation of the business activities in modern society. Due to the increase of the world trade business becomes more international oriented [1, p. 233]. Ukrainian companies operate today not only with domestic partners; this becomes more like a thing of the past. They realize that trade with such countries as the United Kingdom and Germany indicates considerable potential for business. Due to the following there is an urgent need to teach skills necessary for small talk in business communication to Ukrainian students specializing in Economics.

Dealing with other countries requires the thorough understanding not only political and economic perspectives, but also cultural aspects [15, p. 37]. In this connection the analysis of a business partner is of great importance. The thorough understanding of his behavior enlarges the self-awareness and makes the results of conversation more effective.

Analysis of the latest research and publications in this sphere done by M. Romanova, V. Fenina, R. Gesteland, B. Banutu-Gomez, J. Coupland, B. Endrass, J. Henderson, A. Kavalchuk and others has proven that economy of a country is influenced through business with the other countries. Due to the fact that the United Kingdom and Germany are the most preferable European business partners for Ukraine in practically all spheres of life, it is vital that understanding of the cultural aspect plays a great part in building the lasting relationships with these foreign partners.

It often happens than not the technical topics cause misunderstanding between business partners, but the social factors [8, p. 73]. Small talk, which is insignificant

in one country, can be a key element in the other one. In this regard the goal of the article is the following: description of the genre of the phatic communication "small talk" in British and German cultures and their comparison. The author of the article puts forward **the task** to analyze the concept of small talk, to compare small talk differences in the UK and Germany, identify safe topics and topics that are best avoided, and discuss conversation starters necessary for a successful business communication.

According to B. Malinowski, small talk is a type of speech in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words on some "supremely obvious state of things" [14, p. 303–304]. That is why small talk, as a fundamental part of the conversation, should be taken into account. It assists the development of strong relations with the business partners.

Small talk, which seems to be trivial at first glance, has not only the binding function from a conversation start to the main topic, but it also possesses a social function, from the initiation of the contact to the resolving of the tensions [3, p. 1]. Its contribution to the conversation must be seen as increase of the social cohesion between the business partners. Moreover, small talk helps to design social interrelations and ensures the decrease of the threat values during interaction.

The distinction should be made between small and real talk [3, p. 2]. The main feature of real talk is its task orientation, where some specific goals should be achieved. Real talk makes the things done. Small talk in its turn deals with the relationship level between interlocutors. A central role takes here an interpersonal focus.

The content of small talk varies from country to country. The selection of topics depends on the cultural background of a partner [4, p. 2]. It should be noted, that the same issue can be seen as a safe one in one country, but it can cause indignation in the other country. For example the question about business partner’s religion can be regarded as an unsafe topic in some cultures.

That is why it is important to describe small talk differences in the UK and Germany. According to R. Lewis, business meetings run not in the same way in these countries [13, p. 153]. He defined that duration and the content of the warm-up phase vary in both countries. According to this investigation Germans are very brief and precise. After official introduction and exchanging a few words they get straight down to business, while the British need some time to break the ice. They use small talk to gain the social contact to their business partners, whereas Germans are getting direct down to brass tacks and persevere. This icebreaker is regarded as an inalienable part of the conversation in the United Kingdom, but in Germany it won’t be paid much attention.. For this reason the line between “small talk” and “technical talk” in Germany is very thin [8, p. 73–74]. Moreover, there is no equivalent of Anglophone “small talk” by the southern neighbors of the UK. In comparison to English business partners, Germans are not used to talk small [11, p. 250]. They find small talk insufficient and non-goal-oriented. German speakers are disposed toward the minimal usage of the conversational routines during the initiating phase. The Figure 1 visualizes the differences.

Although according to the latest researches of “New Age UK” the usage of small talk in the UK has a tendency to fall [6]. As a result of the investiga-

tion nearly a half of the British are avoiding the social contact with their colleagues and business partners. It is caused first of all through the lack of time. But it is also due to the fact, that they feel themselves uneasy when they don’t find a common topic of conversation. Nevertheless the importance of small talk by the British in a business is still rather high in comparison with Germans.

The appropriate warm up-topics as well in the UK as in Germany are the weather, weekends, cultural events, sport etc. [12, p. 64–65]. The taboo subjects, which shall not be addressed in Germany, include personal income, religion, race. The topics about the Second World War, Nazi historical ideology and Hitler are also not desirable for a business conversation. It should also be taken into account, that the spiritual and esoteric matters, such as forecast and analysis of the future, possession or how to protect one self from “evil eye” can create the impression of frivolity, lack of emotional maturity by the educated part of the German society, especially among the technicians and engineers. In the UK such subjects as religion, the salary level, politics, questions discriminating sex, race etc. should be avoided.

In order to understand the differences in the perception of small talk, the behavior patterns in both countries should be analyzed [11, p. 249]. In the most cases the language differences play not so significant role in the intercultural interaction by the technical topics, as by the social or leadership issues [8, p. 73–74]. This can be primarily caused by the varying perception of small talk. G. Hofstede’s researches depict how culture of business partners differs from one’s own culture [10, p. 4]. In his works he describes the resemblances and differences of the societies, which results in unequal way of communication. G. Hofstede made investiga-

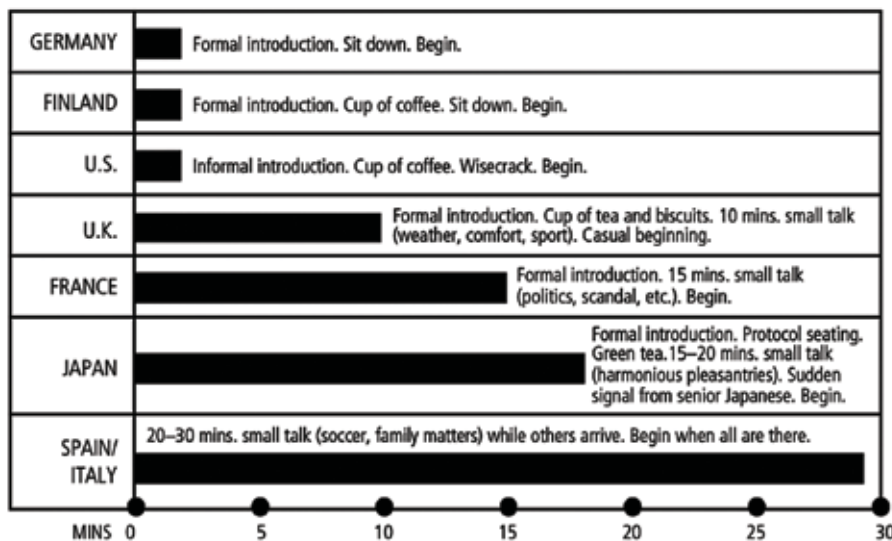


Fig. 1. Beginning a Meeting [13, p. 154]

tions in many modern cultures, among the other cultures he examined the peculiarities of the UK and Germany. For his explanation he used his own designed and approved 6-D model. This model contains six categories: power distance, individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, long-term orientation and indulgence. Uncertainty avoidance, which expresses how people stand for instability and ambiguity, has the most relevance to the difference in communication patterns between the British and Germans from all six parameters of the 6-D model. It describes what degree of the uncertainty and ambiguity people from different societies have if they feel themselves unwell. G. Hofstede refers the British to the cultures with the low uncertainty avoidance with 35 scores out of possible 100 points. It means they handle rather comfortably with the ambiguity. In comparison to that Germans scored 65 out of possible 100 points, which amount is almost twice as high as the British. Consequently, they are assigned to the societies with relatively high uncertainty avoidance degree [10, p. 192–194]. The tendency can be seen, that increasing instability indisposes the Germans. As a result they are eager to get straighter to the point in comparison to the British, who prefer a kind of talk around the point.

Relying on G. Hofstede's model J. House (2006) develops his own five dimensions' model of cross-cultural differences, which refers to inequality of communication between German and English speakers, including the British [11, p. 252]. He distinguishes between Directness vs. Indirectness, Orientation towards self vs. Orientation towards others, Orientation towards content vs. Orientation towards Addressees, Explicitness vs. Implicitness and Ad-hoc formulation vs. Verbal Routines. The most distinct parameter, which describes the differences between Germans and Anglophone speakers, is directness vs. indirectness [11, p. 255–259]. Germans are marked by their straightness, which can be interpreted as lack of politeness. They say usually what they think. English speakers are not used to such a frankly way of communication. They consider the conversation with "bald" verbs rude and unfriendly. According to J. House, Germans are self-oriented, they prefer to refer on their selves, at the same time the British pay more attention to their business partners, human aspect is in focus. While the British are more addressees oriented, their German partners tend to be more content oriented. They prefer to express their thoughts more explicit and detailed as the British, who in their turn consider the things self-explanatory. The sense of the message is here not clearly stated. Other than in Great Britain, it is unusual for Germans the usage of conversational routines. They tend to take the words literally, so their formulations are rather non-generalized and ad-hoc. On the contrary, the British conversation is aimed to fulfill the social function. The Anglophone speakers are not intended to convey directly the message,

they just show the phatic moves and verbal routines. G. Hofstede's other cultural dimensions have no much similarities to the J. House's model.

The British are always trying to keep to "communicational etiquette", even if they don't believe in that what they say [5]. They pretend to be interested in the interlocutor they are talking with, but it is sometimes only illusion. They act so to meet social expectations. This could be the reason why English language is full of caressing or palliative mannerisms. During the conversation British speakers are more indirect, they don't say everything what they think. In this way they are trying to grease their social life.

On the contrary Germans say what they really mean. One of the main features of Germans is their frankness and directness. Honesty and sincerity is of great importance here. They believe the British over-politeness is not efficient for the conversation [9]. Moreover they consider making small talk is wasting of their time. Thus it is not desirable for German speakers to raise direct the subject, they exchange a few words for creating a good working environment [12, p. 23]. But then it should be gotten down to business. This often causes the impression of their impoliteness by people, who are from indirect communication societies, e.g. British. They have the wrong image of Germans as rude and aggressive. One of the most problems in intercultural communication, which can be faced, is when the Germans regard the British according to their own national stereotypes and vice versa [8, p. 74]. This can be rooted to the language community they are part of.

Extending this idea M. Hammer's project life cycle can be taken into account [7]. He distinguishes, that the structure of the project can vary due to directness versus indirectness of the cultural communication, in which it is carried out. M. Hammer notices that in the cultures with direct communication the project starts with the clarification of the goals, plans, outcomes and deadlines. In contrary to the direct cultures, the cultures with an indirect communication try to provide a good working environment at the beginning of the project. They prefer to build the relations with the other members. This way of conducting the projects can also be transferred to the act of conversation and particularly to small talk in Germany and the UK.

That is the reason why German speakers are often depicted as coconuts with the hard husk outside, which is difficult to open [2]. But if somebody manages to crack it, it is sweet and tasty inside. Due to Germans hard covering they are considered as rude and impolite. British are seen as coconuts in comparison with Americans, but they are regarded as peaches by contrast with Germans. They are described as fleshy and juicy from outside, but their internal side is hard as a stone. Germans describe the British as dishonest on the grounds that behind their friendly cover lies shallow interest in conversation partners.

All the peculiarities described prove that knowing how much talk to use is essential in business communication with a foreign partner. The easiest way to initiate a conversation is to use the following starters: Pleased to meet you. How was your trip? Did you have a good flight/trip/journey? How are things in (London)? How long are you staying in (New York)? I hope you like it. Is your hotel comfortable? Is this your first visit to (Berlin)? [16, p. 12]. It should also be taken into account, that listening is just as important as talking: if you ask a question you should comment on the answer or ask a supplementary question. Moreover, it is considered to be inappropriate to monopolize the conversation by talking about yourself. The art of small talk is learning to speak so that all its participants feel included.

In this paper the differences in small talk perception between the UK and Germany were described. Therefore, when teaching small talk to economy students all the mentioned conversational patterns should be taken into account. Their disregard can lead to the tension and misunderstanding in intercultural communication. The focus of the paper lies on the development of the communicational skills of the business partner,

which are crucial for making a cross-cultural business. In order to prevent conflict it is recommended to take into account the cultural dissimilarities of the business partner [1, p. 240–241]. The major challenge for Ukrainian students specializing in Economics is to realize that besides the establishment of the common language platform, business partners should respect the usage of different oratorical and interpretive patterns of each other, which take their roots from specific cultural language systems [8, p. 75]. Furthermore, it could be also recommended to develop awareness of one's own business culture in order to avoid tensions during the intercultural conversation. It helps to make a distinction what belongs to one's own culture and to judge more objectively the differences with the other countries. Finally, the clue to effective and long-lasting cooperation is mutual adaptation of the conversation members to each other. Thus, the recognition of cross-cultural differences between Ukrainian and foreign partners makes it possible to react correctly to the interlocutor's actions and makes results of communication more efficient. The reached conclusions can be used in the creation of teaching aids and practical guidance on small talk conducting.

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