

# English Small Talk in Business Letters: Language Forms and Messages

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**Abstract:** - The study examines English small talks also called phatic communion in English business letters. Small talk is a type of speech in which ties are created by a mere exchange of words. In such communication words do not convey meanings, but fulfill a social function. The problems which are discussed involve the forms and messages the written small talks have in business letters. The aim of the study is to find the forms and messages of the written small talks in the letters. To get reach of the aim of the study applies a socio-pragmatic approach, a linguistic research methodology. The result of the study shows that in business letters there are various forms of small talks with directive, expressive, and declarative category. They contain various messages for example thanks, hope, rejecting, apology, praising, regretting, agreeing, reminding, etc. The letter writers as businessmen use the small talks in their letters with the purpose of establishing and keeping business relationship. The small talks can muffle and please the business participants.

**Key words:** English phatic communion, English business letter

## I. INTRODUCTION

Language used as a medium of communication in social daily lives either oral and written appears in two modes – mode of thought and the social mode (mode of action) (Malinowski, 1923, Arimi, 1998). Malinowski's language function elaborated by Arimi (1998) means that language in the mode of thought is that language is used in society for expressive purposes, stating concepts, thoughts and perceptions. Understanding such language functions does not derive from speakers' experience in using a language, but comes from a dictionary or linguistic book. In the speakers' daily lives the use of language is not only limited to the function. They do not always use language only to express concepts or thoughts, but use it use it in the form of social mode, which is intended for the purpose of building and maintaining social relations.

The use of language in social mode is realized in the form of phatic communication as also known as small talk, meaning that the language of communication conveys information but the information is not important, the importance is the social relations created by the speech codes. Phatic communion so-called small talk of a language is closely related to a culture to which the language belongs. Therefore, phatic communion of a language will differ from another language. However, it is possible that a small talk of a language is the same as that of another language. For example, in English there are small talk, "How are you", "You look smart"(Wardhough, 1986). Indonesian also has these small talks, like "How are you", "You

look bright", but the "Just arrived" is not small talk in English (Arimi, 1998). Small talk is not only stated in oral form, but also in written form, for example in business letters

Understanding the use of small talk in English business letters is very important. Especially for people whose native language is not English. Ignorance or neglect of pleasantries in business letters can have negative consequences. Jiammin (1999) argues that the use of small talk in business letters can build and maintain business relationships. On the other hand, lack of small talk in business letters can cause business relationships to break or break up. Most of the business turnover in the world is through correspondence. Therefore the ability to make business letters is very important, in order to provide a good image for the company, as well as for the individuals involved in it. There is no profit to be gained from business letters that are ugly, messy, hard to read, hard to understand, and do not cause sympathy from the recipient of the letter. A systematic letter, with polite language that is easy to understand, neatly typed, will be highly appreciated by the recipient of the letter, and encourages him to quickly give a reply (Magethi, 1990). Unfortunately, study on the small talk in English business letter is a bit neglected.

Given the importance of small talk in English business letters for those whose native language is not English, it is necessary to carry out research examining small talk in English business letters. The purposes of the study are to find out: (a) the form of English small talk in business letters, (b) messages the small talk contains, (c) the functions of small talk. The form of small talk referred to form of speech in English business letters which constitute small talk, whether it contains praise, thanks, approval, and others. The third problem deals with why people use small talk in their business letters.

Business letters in this paper are all letters written by business participants, related to their business activities. According to Spooner (1978), there are a number of business letters, which include accounting, agreements, requests / offers, complaints and rejections. Magethi (1990) classifies business letters into letters of order and confirmations, complaints and adjustments, requests for information and notifications, credit, billing, and letter of postponement. In this paper all kinds of business letters compiled into the two books by the two authors are used as study samples.

The study on small talk in English business letters can enrich literature on English small talk and contribute to

linguistic studies in general and socio-pragmatic studies in particular. Besides that, the study is very useful especially for those whose native language is not English. This research will give them an overview of the forms of verbal speech in business letters, their functions and the messages the small talk contains. Lack of understanding the small talk in business letters in English can cause a failure in business relations (Jianmin, 1998). Thus, it is important for non-native speakers of English to understand the English small talk.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Small talk which in English is known as phatic communion (Malinowski, 1943. Wardhough, 1986). In Indonesian, it is called “basa-basi”, and in Minangkabau language called “baso-basi” (Arimi, 1998). Wardhough (1986) further more stated that in English, expressions such as “Nice day!”, “How are you”, “You are looking smart today” donot convey meaning (proportional content), but rather for effective values that give meaning to build or maintain social relations between speech participants. “*Phatic utterances do not really communicative anything; rather their uses allows communication to occur should there be anything of consequence to say*” (Wardhough (1986). Thus small talk is a speech through which social ties among speakers are created.

Malinowski (1923) offered that ‘language is not as a countersign of thought, but as itself a purposeful activity’ by which individuals establish a relationship among themselves (Wolf, 1989). Malinowski calling such language as phatic communion, defined that the language is a type of speech in which union ties are built –in the function, it is not as a means of transmission of thought (Wolf, 1989). Establishing ties of union as interactional goals is more focused rather than maintaining conversational coherence (Cohen, 2018). The language is usually used by speakers when they are involved in face-to-face talk spontaneously uttered to break silence (Galantucci, 2018).

Phatic communion or small talk is realized in the form of directives, commissives, expressive, and declarations Searle (1976). The forms according to Searle (1976) have certain messages (contents) dilevired to interlocutor. Directive small talk is a form of speech which contains invitation, rejection, hope, forbidding, etc. Form which contains offer and promise is commissives form, and small talk used to express the psychological state of speaker to a condition experrined by interlocutor is expressive small talk. The talk contains welcoming, praising, apology, thank, etc. Declarations are forms which contain agreement, acceptance, etc. The forms are usually used to state the truth or untruth of an expressed proposition.

In English business letters, small talk is important, or can even it is vital for the continuity of business relationships. Jianmin (1999: 8) who called small talk by the term interactional use of language.

*“Business writing such as letters, memos, reports, and so forth, is naturally thought to be message oriented, with the aim of requesting or providing information to carry out bussines dealings. However even if business letters or writing, the interactional use of language can be vital importance because a good relationship is a prerequisite in business transaction”.*

Brown and Yule (1983) as quated by Jianmin (1999) described more that;

*“We greet each other with “ good morning”, “ how are you?” or even “It is fine day, isn’t it?”. We say these things not because we are interested in the information about each other’s opinion about the weather. Similarly, when we write thank you letters, ...So what are the main purposes of our using language, spoken or written, in this case? The answer is to establish and maintain social relationship, a function of language termed the interactional use of language”.*

Thus, it can be stated that small talks (phatic communions) are the language used either in written or oral form with the aim not to request information by the speaker to the listener or interlocutor, but to build, strengthen, and maintain a good relationship between speaker and listener. The meaningthe language contains is not the important thing. The important thing is to build and maintain a good relationship between the speaker and the listener. It differentiates small talk from non-small talk (Elfiondri, 2019).

## III. METHODS

This study applies qualitative method based on linguistics in which there are three stages including: (a) the stage of providing / collecting data, (b) data analysis, and (c) the stage of presentation of the results of the analysis. The data of this research are English small talks in English business letters. Data sources are English correspondence books (English Correspondence) in which business letters are written in English. Data were collected by doing observation technique. Data are observed, and then recorded on a data card. Based on linguistic approach, data are analyzed and presented qualitatively.

## IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Forms and Massages of Small Talk (Phactic Communion)

In oral and written communication, the very important thing is the form of speech acts. The form of preamble speech acts including illocutionary speech acts, which is an act of doing something. The important thing in the speech act is not the statement that informs but the act of doing, precisely doing something (Arimi, 1998). In general, small talk can be grouped into four categories, namely directive, commisive, expressive, and declarative form. In the bussiness letters, it is found that the writers use three forms of small talk – directives, expressive, and declaratives.

#### 4.1.1 Directive Small Talk

The directive small talk is a form of small talk that is commonly used in the form of invitations / appeals, prohibitions, rejections, and expectations. The purpose of the directive here is that the speaker wants the interlocutor (his speech partner), which in this study, the letter-writer wants the reader to do something based on the letter writer's written speech. In business letters, these forms contain the intentions or unwillingness of the speaker, which are the writers' messages. The forms and messages are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. The Forms and Messages of Small Talk

No	Form of Small Talk Utterances	Messages
1	<i>We look forward to your visit.</i>	Hope
2	<i>We hope your stay will be a very pleasant one.</i>	Hope
3	<i>We are sorry to have to tell you that we cannot fill your order for 200 pairs of gloves.</i>	Rejecting
4	<i>I'd appreciate a quick check up on these references.</i>	Hope
5	<i>You will enjoy your purchase for a long time to come.</i>	Hope
6	<i>I take this opportunity to wish you many happy moments as you wear it.</i>	Hope
7	<i>Best wishes for the success of your book!</i>	Hope
8	<i>We hope this marks the beginning of a long and pleasant association between us</i>	Hope
9	<i>We hope you will enjoy your association with this store.</i>	Hope
10	<i>We hope this satisfactory, and that we can continue our long and friendly association.</i>	Hope
11	<i>We sincerely hope you enjoyed yours three weeks here.</i>	Hope

The expressions "*We look forward to your visit*" and "*we hope your stay will be a very pleasant one*" are small talks which contain a message of hope. The use of "*look forward to*" expression which conceptually means waiting in full hope is deliberately chosen to show the use of hope and contain the purpose of politeness compared to expression "*wait*" (We wait your visit). Likewise, "*we hope your stay will be a very pleasant one*" is clearly intended to make the letter reader (listener) feel happy, so that the relationship of businessman and customer (the speaker-listener) is established and maintained. Both forms of small talk are found in the letter of hotel booking.

In responding customer order, the letter writers (as businessmen) are very careful in using language form which does not offend so that their business relationships remain established. One example of a form of small talk that contains a message of rejection is "*We are sorry to have to tell you that we cannot fill your order for 200 pairs of glove*". The form shows phatic communion (small talk) by way of expression of self-blaming "*we are sorry*". Factually they (letter writers as

businessmen) should not say "sorry" because they do nothing, but to keep their relationship with their customer, they blame themselves for being unable to fill the order for 200 pairs of glove. In the way, their rejection using the expression "*sorry to have to*" does not hurt their customer.

The form of small talk "*I'd appreciate a quick check up on these references ...*" is found in the business letter of a credit recommendation request. The expression "*I'd appreciate*" has the nuance of politeness to make speech partners respected. If the letter writer just wants to inform something, he/she might not use the expression "*I'd appreciate*". In order that his/her direction to do a quick check up on these references does not hurt customer, he/she uses the speech form of "*I'd appreciate*". The purpose of using the speech form is to keep social relation with the customer.

The small talk "*You will enjoy your purchase for a long time to come*" is found in the business letter of goods delivery. This form contains a message of hope, through which customer is entertained and pleased by the word "enjoy". The writer through the small talk sends a hidden message of a hope that the customer will do purchase again in the near future. In the case, language is used as means of business tie between seller and buyer. It is a hope the talk contains. The small talk "*I like this opportunity to wish you many happy moments as you wear it*" also contains writer's hope. The writer of the business letter hopes that customer feels happy to wear the product he buys. The talk is clearly expressed as phatic communion of which the intention is to keep the established business tie. The seller keeps it through the use of language function called small talk or also called phatic communion.

The written form of small talk, "*Best wishes for the success of your book!*" which is a directive form also contains message of hope. The letter writer makes use of the expression "*Best wishes*" for his business partner. The expression in language function was intended to show concern for the purpose of small talk. Other directive forms of small talks found in English business letters are such as "*We hope this marks the beginning of a long and pleasant association between us*", "*We hope you will enjoy your association with this store*", and "*We sincerely hope you enjoyed yours three weeks here.*" The expressions are small talks in business letter containing a message of hope indicated by the use of 'hope'.

#### 4.1.2 Ekspresive Small Talks

In English business letters, the writers also use expressive small talk. It is a form of small talk that has the intention to express the psychological attitude of the speaker to a situation experienced by the speech partner. The writers use small talks to deliver their messages containing thanks, apology, greeting and regretting. The expressive small talks and messages they contain are presented in the following table 2.

Table 2. The Forms and Messages of Expressive Small Talk

No	Form of Small Talk	Messages
1	<i>Many thanks for your order which ...</i>	Thanks
2	<i>Thank you for your order of ...</i>	Thanks
3	<i>Thank you very much for ...</i>	Thanks
4	<i>Thank you for your courterus letter</i>	Thanks
5	<i>We will be grateful for ....</i>	Thanks
6	<i>We shall be very grateful indeed for...</i>	Thanks
7	<i>We are certainly sorry for...</i>	Apology
8	<i>We are sorry...</i>	Apology
9	<i>It's embarrassing to us to realise ...</i>	Apology
10	<i>We are sorry that ...</i>	Apology
11	<i>We cannot tell you how sorry we are ...</i>	Apology
12	<i>We must now regretfully ...</i>	Regreting
13	<i>Forgive us for ...</i>	Apology
14	<i>I am grateful ...</i>	Thanks
15	<i>You have been most patient and considerable, ...</i>	Praising
16	<i>Dear Sir, Madam, ...</i>	Greeting
17	<i>Yours truly</i>	Greeting
18	<i>Sincerely yours</i>	Greeting
19	<i>Very truly yours</i>	Greeting

Similar to the directive small talks, the expressive form of small talks are used by the letters-writers to establish and maintain good relations between the writers and their business partner. However, in the expressive type of small talk, the form of written speech is used to express their feelings about the condition of the situation being experienced by their partner.

Expressive written small talk of the expressive type such as *'Many thanks for your order' . 'Thank you for your order', 'Thank you very much for ...', 'Thank you for your letter' , ' We will be grateful indeed for ', ' We are very grateful for ', and ' I am grateful ' I am grateful love* are used for the purpose of expressing the gratitude of the writers to their business partner. The expressions of the small talks contain thankful messages. Other messages the expressive small talks contain in business letter are apology, regretting, and greeting. Apology message is found in the expressions such as *"We are certainly sorry for" ... , "It's embarrassing to us realise", "We cannot tell you how sorry we are", "Forgive us", "We are sorry"*. The letter writers ask for apology by way of expressing of feeling really sorry, embarrassed, and guilty. They humble themselves in order not to disappoint their customers. This is certainly for keeping and maintaining their business tie with the customers.

Besides using the expressions of feeling really sorry, embarrassed, and guilty, the letter writers also use regretful expression as used in *"We must now be regretful"*. The letter writers always keep their communication with the customers. They praise their customer as reflected in the small talk, *"You*

*have been most patient and considerable, ..."*. Even though there is no problem in serving their customers', they always maintain their harmonious relationship. They always start writing a business letter with a small talk, *"Dear sir/Madam"* and end it with *"yours truly, sincerely yours, very truly yours, your faithfully"*.

#### 4.1.3 Deklarative Small Talk

Declarative small talk is a form that is commonly used to express the truth or untruth of propositions expressed by speaker. This declarative form of small talk is usually found when a person expresses an opinion, suggestion, advice or complaint, an agreement, acceptance, evaluation and reminder. In the business letter, it is found that the letter writers use the declarative forms with messages of reminding, evaluating, and agreeing.

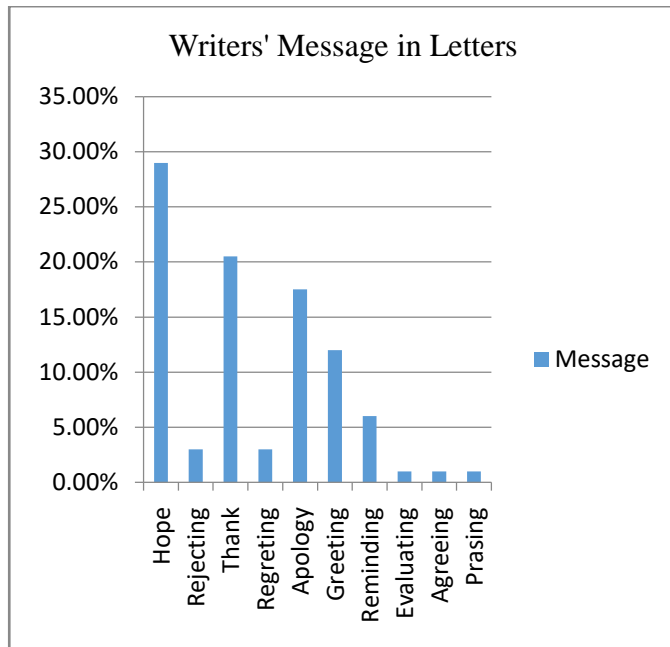
Table 3. The Forms and Messages of Declarative Small Talk

No	Form of Small Talk Utterances	Messages
1	<i>We don't like to remind you a good customer like you that a bill is overdue</i>	Reminding
2	<i>We know that reminders like this are annoying</i>	Riminding
3	<i>This is to tell you how very much I appreciate the cordial reception you gave me on my first visit to Dallas</i>	Evaluating
4	<i>We were platteren and pleasure by you advice of...</i>	Agreeing

The deklaratif small talks *"We don't like to remind you a good customer like you that a bill is overdue"* and *"We know that reminders like this are annoying"* are the forms in which the letter writers express their friendly reminder to their customers. The reminder is message the small talk contains. The writers insert the expression *"We don't like ..."* in order not to threat the customer's face. The customer's face is threatened regardless of the expression. The expression is certainly to keep social tie with the customer. It is similar to the second small talk of the reminder. The writers avoid threatening the customer face by declaring that the reminder is annoying the customer.

The declarative small talks are made in order to keep the customer comfort which in turn keeps the social relationship between the writers as sellers and their customer. Another way of pleasing the customer, the writers use the small talk *"This is to tell you how very much I appreciate the cordial reception you gave me on my first visit to Dallas"*. It is a declarative small talk because the writers declare the truth of their proposition they express. The small talk is usually used by those who want to express an opinion in the form of agreeing, accepting, reminding, and evaluating (Arimi, 1998). The small talk used by the writers is a declarative one which contains a message of evaluating. The writers please the customer by expressing their good evaluation on service provided by the customer.

Graph1. Percentage of Writers Messages in the Letters



In line with the function of small talk, the above graph presents that writers of letters (as speakers) use the small talk (phatic communion) in order to establish and maintain their tie of union (social relationship) with their customers (as interlocutors). The writers' attitude is indicated by the highest percentage of hope-message followed by thanks, apology, greeting, reminding, regretting, rejecting, evaluating, agreeing, and prasing. The messages are language functions to which the letter-writers assign through the small talks in order to keep pleasing the customer. Even though the writers regret, reject, or remind their customer wishes, the small talks they use can please and cannot hurt their customer, so that they can keep their harmonious relationship.

## V. CONCLUSION

Based on the results of an analysis of English business letters, it is found that in English business letters there are a

number of linguistic forms of which the purpose is not to inform something, but to establish and maintain social relations between business participants – business men (letter-writers) and customers. The linguistic forms are small talks which have function as interactional language. The talk can muffle the participants' anger and please them. By using the small talk, the business participants can express any thing they feel or want to say regardless of feeling worried that their speeches (languages) will spoil their social relationship in business. Through the small talks, the business participants (sellers and customers) can build and maintain their business relationship.

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