

The Ritual Infrastructure of Conversation

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1. Introduction

The curmudgeonly Larry David—fictional television executive and primary source of cringe in HBO's cringe comedy *Curb Your Enthusiasm*—hates social niceties.¹ So when he finds himself at a formal dinner party, he just sits there in a huffy silence.

The man next to him ventures a remark:

Guest: I don't even know how to write in cursive anymore.

Larry says nothing. Then, he tries this:

Larry: How's your marriage?

Guest: What the hell? Why—why would you ask me that?

Larry: I'm trying to elevate small talk to medium talk.²

Even Larry David knows that in the United States, the question »How's your marriage?« is not appropriate for small talk.

Larry does not want to make small talk for the same reason that many of us dislike the genre. It can be repetitive, tedious, and emotionally stifling. It seems to lack the stakes that enliven »big talk«. By definition, small talkers are not pouring their hearts out to each other, negotiating a contract, or debating which governmental policies they support. While each of them makes banal observations about the

1 For their prescient comments, patience, and enthusiasm, I am grateful to audiences at the Iceland Genre and Communication Workshop (Summer 2024), a Works in Progress session at MIT (Spring 2025), a Works in Progress session at King's College London, arranged by Elise Woodard (Spring 2025), and especially the Infrastructures of (Non)-Knowledge Conference at Ruhr University Bochum (Fall 2024). I am especially grateful to Karen Lewis, whose unpublished work on small talk inspired this project.

2 The Hero (2011): *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, Season 8 Episode 6, 15:38-16:00. Created by Larry David. HBO.

weather, small talkers might wonder, »Are we just doing this because we're afraid of silence?«

Since Bronislaw Malinowski's groundbreaking anthropological work on what he called »phatic communication«, theorists have acknowledged that small talk is neither pointless nor cowardly.³ The genre of small talk has a critical social function. It is through small talk that we build trust, nurture relationships, and mutually prepare for »bigger« forms of talk. Even within the culture-at-large, small talk how-to manuals circulate, all of which espouse the same view: small talk is a form of social glue.⁴ Decline to do it at your own peril.

So the question that I want to raise here is not *what* small talk does. Instead, I want to ask: how does small talk *do it*? How is it that uninteresting chit-chat about the weather or the local sports teams can knit relationships closer together?

Malinowski originally suggested that »the give and take of utterances that make up« small talk generates an »atmosphere of sociability«, which »bind[s] hearer to speaker«.⁵ On this view, small talk is a feelings engine, a way to produce good vibes that endear us to each other.

The view that I will sketch rejects this affect-centric approach. I am going to argue that small talk is a kind of rational ritual.⁶ In making small talk, we indirectly

3 Malinowski (1923) argued that phatic communication is communication that functions to promote social solidarity. For an overview of Malinowski-inspired work on small talk, cf. Coupland (2014) and Zuckerman (2021). Note that while Roman Jakobson theorized about something he called »phatic communication«, he defined it differently (Jakobson 1960). For Jakobson, phatic communication is communication that primarily aims to establish and maintain channels of communication; it is one kind of meta-communicative communication. It is an open question how the two kinds of phatic communication relate to each other. Malinowski, Bronislaw (1923): »The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages«, in: C.K. Ogden/I.A. Richards (eds.): *The Meaning of Meaning*, London: K. Paul, Trend, Tubner, pp. 296–336; Coupland, Justine (ed.) (2014): *Small Talk*, New York: Routledge; Zuckerman, Charles H.P. (2021): »Phatic, then: Communication and Communion«, in: James Stanlaw (ed.): *The International Encyclopedia of Linguistic Anthropology*, Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell. Jakobson, Roman (1960): »Closing Statement. Linguistics and Poetics«, in: Thomas A. Sebeok (ed.): *Style in Language*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. 350–377.

4 Examples of such manuals include Fine, Debra (2005): *The Fine Art of Small Talk. How to Start a Conversation, Keep It Going, Build Networking Skills—and Leave a Positive Impression!*, New York: Hyperion; Wadsworth, Melissa (2012): *The Small Talk Handbook. Easy Instructions on How to Make Small Talk in Any Situation*, Avon, MA: Adams Media and Fleming, Carol A. (2018): *The Serious Business of Small Talk. Becoming Fluent, Comfortable, and Charming*, Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publications.

5 Malinowski: *The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages*, p. 315.

6 I've borrowed this term »rational ritual« from Michael Suk-Young Chwe. Chwe (2013) argued that ceremonies function to produce common knowledge and thereby rationalize certain forms of coordination. Chwe, Michael Suk-Young (2013): *Rational Ritual. Culture, Coordination, and Common knowledge*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

generate evidence about the nature of our practical agency. We do this by showing each other the extent to which we can and will conform to social norms. We thereby make it rational for each of us to enter into further social interactions with the other.

Analytic philosophers of language often say that the aim of conversation is to exchange information.⁷ Does small talk undermine or vindicate this claim? After all, small talk has a social or »phatic« aim. But if I am right, small talkers primarily accomplish this aim *through* exchanging information about the kinds of agents that they each are.

What I think my analysis shows is something subtler. Philosophers need to distinguish between two kinds of conversational aims. Within any specific conversation, speakers themselves have joint aims that structure what they are doing. But small talk is a conversational *genre*. And in order to theorize about the structure of a conversational genre, we must identify not the speakers' but the genre's internal aim. Once we make this distinction, we can dispel a good deal of confusion within the analytic philosophy of conversation.

2. Some rules for small talk

Imagine that we were to replace small talk with some other kind of activity. Whenever we would normally make small talk, we instead play tic-tac-toe, recite song lyrics, or perform some elaborate handshake. What kind of society would this be? Would we lose anything—socially, interpersonally, morally?

Answering this question requires us to relate the *structure* of small talk to its *function*. In this section, I am going to attempt to loosely sketch small talk's structure. Using my own cultural context as a case study—middle class communities within the Greater Boston metropolitan area—I will specify a few of the genre's rules.

First, let's distinguish between two sets of rules for small talk. The first set of rules tells us when it is permissible or obligatory to initiate small talk. The second set of rules tells us what we may or must do when we are in the throes of making it.

Note that small talk is a kind of talk. So if some rule normally governs *all* conversations in a cultural milieu, that rule will govern small talk too. For example, it's normally rude to look at your phone while someone is talking to you. Therefore, it's

7 The claim originates with H.P. Grice's classic paper from 1967/1989. It has received its most developed treatment within Stalnaker's work on inquiry and the common ground. Grice, H.P. (1967/1989): *Studies in the Way of Words*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; Stalnaker, Robert (1984): *Inquiry*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press; Stalnaker, Robert (1999): *Context and Content. Essays on Intention and Thought*, New York: Oxford University Press; Stalnaker, Robert (2002): »Common Ground«, in: *Linguistics and Philosophy* 25, pp. 701–721; Stalnaker, Robert (2014): *Context*, New York: Oxford University Press.

normally rude to look at your phone while someone is *small* talking with you. I am going to focus on rules that seem specific to small talk.⁸

When can or must we make small talk? The rules are sensitive to at least three parameters:

A1. **Physical proximity:** in many cases, it is permissible or mandatory to initiate small talk merely because we are in each other's physical presence.

For example, if we are acquainted and riding an elevator together or using a communal kitchen at the same time, we must make small talk for the duration of our time in the shared space. Otherwise, we risk »cold shouldering« our acquaintance. If we are not acquainted, then we may initiate small talk. But we needn't.

A2. **Conversational phase:** conversations tend to have a phase-like structure. Often, small talk is a required phase of a larger conversation. It tends to follow greetings or precede leave-takings. It thus serves as an extended gateway into or out of the interaction.

When a North American academic philosopher meets with a student to discuss the student's paper, the professor usually initiates small talk before or after the academic discussion. During consultations, a doctor tends to make small talk with her patient. She usually performs it after greetings or while she accomplishes some routine technical task, like filling out a prescription form.

In both cases, we say that small talk makes the encounter feel »warmer« or »more personal«. Someone who does not perform it is abrupt, »cold«, or »just wants to get down to business«.

A3. **Relationship status:** whether we can or must make small talk depends upon our relationship. If we want to socialize with each other but do not know each other well, we often revert to small talk. We may not trust each other enough to have a heavier conversation. Alternatively, social norms may not permit us to have one.

Sometimes, we each occupy a role that requires one or both of us to make small talk with the other. If we are both attending an intimate party, or if we are seated near each other at a wedding, it is polite to make at least cursory chit-chat. Otherwise, we risk seeming snobbish.

Conversely, intimate partners should generally not make small talk. Making it indicates severe relationship strain. One counseling service talks about it like a disease, warning of the »damage of chronic small talk« between partners.⁹

8 For example, I set aside Grice's Four Maxims, which (allegedly) govern all conversations. Grice: *Studies in the Way of Words*, pp. 26–27.

9 Smyth, Teyhou (2024): »The Damage of Small Talk in Relationships«, in: Connolly Counseling Center. Online: <https://www.counsellor.ie/small-talk-in-relationships/> (last access: 01.07.2025).

Once we are making small talk, what should we do? We can ask the question slightly differently. If we want to know *whether* our interlocutor is trying to make small talk with us, which features of her speech should we attend to?

Almost everyone understands that small talkers ought to select »small« topics for discussion. (Even Larry David recognizes that his question constitutes »medium« talk.) We say that appropriate small talk topics are »light« or »safe« ones. As a rule-of-thumb, middle class Greater Bostonians tend to talk about the weather (and how bad it is), the traffic (and how bad it is), public transportation (and how bad it is), and the doings of the local sports teams. Informants from other parts of the United States complain that we are dour.

What makes these topics »light and safe« is not that they exist on some list that specifies culturally approved »light and safe« topics. These topics are »light and safe« because they reliably enable speakers to conform to small talk's rules.

Roughly, the rules have the following shape. (In a moment, I'll replace some of these rules with more accurate but theoretically laden ones.)

- B1. Avoid open conflict.
- B2. Avoid the display of strong emotions.
- B3. Avoid discussing or making salient private matters.
- B4. Show interest in your interlocutor.
- B5. Show empathy with your interlocutor.

Small talk rules generate a treacherous Scylla and Charybdis. Many of the topics that easily enable us to satisfy the negative requirements (rules B1-3) do not enable us to easily satisfy the positive requirements (rules B4-5). And although we are often curious about or empathetic with our interlocutors, the targets of that curiosity and empathy are often too personal. They're off-limits. Many of us hate small talk, I suspect, because we hate navigating this tension.

For example, if I am at a cocktail party and remark to you, »Interesting wallpaper, huh?« you are unlikely to fly into a rage or bitterly reply, »No, it's not interesting at all.« But I risk expressing that the wallpaper is more interesting than the flesh-and-blood person in front of me. If we continue to discuss the wallpaper's aesthetic demerits, we may each struggle to demonstrate sufficient interest in or empathy with each other. At least if we discuss the Red Sox's pathetic loss, I can empathize with your pain. What's there to feel about bad wallpaper?

On the other hand, I generally cannot ask you, »How much money do you make?« or »Do you have an opinion on the Beijing-Taiwan conflict?« The former is private. The latter risks controversy or (if you do not know much about the conflict) embarrassment. Even a philosophical question like, »What's the meaning of life?« can trigger existential anxiety, an outpouring of vulnerability, or—and this is not uncommon

mon in many parts of the United States—one party's cringey attempt to convert the other party to her religion.

Once we select a topic, we carefully modulate what we express. Often, we voice only those views that we believe that the other person shares. (If we are in agreement, then we do not risk conflict and so do not risk violating rule B1.) If we judge wrongly and our interlocutor does not share our view, she may pretend to agree with us anyway. At its worst, the conversation can devolve into a useless string of affirmations and affirmations of the affirmations:

Minnie: This weather sucks.
 Theo: It really does.
 Minnie: I agree.
 Theo: Yeah...
 Minnie: Yeah...

Even political discussions can have this stilted quality. Within my community, it is permissible to discuss national politics during small talk—but only because we are so politically homogenous. Each party tends to assume that everyone else agrees with her overall political orientation. Small talk can look like this:

Flora: How are you doing?
 John: I've been glued to CNN. I can't believe Trump's latest executive order.
 Flora: I know. It's ridiculous.
 John: Dark times.

In my experience, political minorities tend to bitterly complain about this practice. To satisfy the demands of small talk, they find themselves suppressing or misrepresenting their views.

Because so many people find small talk so boring, lists of small talk prompts circulate. Writers promise that the prompts will »juice up« small talk—in a socially permissible way, of course. Many of these prompts are, quite frankly, horrible. Here are a few from Debra Fine's popular manual, *The Fine Art of Small Talk*:

- (1) Describe your most important work experience.
- (2) Tell me about the best vacation you've ever taken.
- (3) Tell me about a movie/book you've seen or read more than once.¹⁰

The topics themselves are not bad. But if you were to actually *utter* (1–3) as written, you would sound like a job interviewer or an elementary school teacher: either pre-

10 Fine: *The Fine Art of Small Talk*, pp. 22–24.

sumptuous or condescending. You would not sound like a competent small talker, and you would risk offending your interlocutor.

Why? The prompts don't seem to violate the commonsense rules in (B1-5). Perhaps that is why Fine—who may have been working from a similar set of self-generated rules—did not immediately recognize the problem.

Sociolinguists are clear that in small talk—like in many forms of socially-oriented talk—we are acutely sensitive to *relationship management*.¹¹ What and how we communicate with each other *encodes* and thereby *expresses* information about how we view ourselves and each other. And in American English, someone who uses a bare imperative tends to express that she has a much higher social position than her addressee.¹²

Either this is false. Then, the speaker of (1–3) is pretentious. Or it is true. Then, the speaker of (1–3) is gaucheely »pulling rank.« This is because in small talk, Americans are expected to suppress many overt expressions of social rank difference. Thus, it is taboo to ask about salary (a proxy for class). Professors small talking with graduate students should not make salient their vastly greater purchasing power. And

11 This work emerged from Brown and Levinson's groundbreaking handbook (1978/1987), itself indebted to Erving Goffman's *oeuvre*, especially Goffman (1967, 1971). Work in this tradition includes Leech (1983), Locher (2004, 2006), Locher and Watts (2005), Spencer-Oatley (2008, 2011), Culpepper (2011), and Arundale (2010, 2020). Brown, Penelope/Levinson, Stephen (1978/1987): *Politeness. Some Universals in Language Usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Goffman, Erving (1967): *Interaction Ritual*, New York: Pantheon Books; Goffman, Erving (1971): *Relations in Public*, New York: Basic Books Inc; Leech, Geoffrey (1983): *Principles of Politeness*, London: Longman; Locher, Miriam (2004): *Power and Politeness in Action: Disagreements in Oral Communication*, New York: de Gruyter; Locher, Miriam (2006): »Politeness Behavior Within Relational Work. The Discursive Approach to Politeness«, in: *Multilingual* 25, pp. 249–267; Locher, Miriam/Watts, Richard (2005): »Politeness and Relational Work«, in: *Journal of Politeness Research* 1, pp. 9–35; Spencer-Oatey, Helen (2008): »Face (Im)politeness and Rapport«, in: Helen Spencer-Oatey (ed.): *Culturally Speaking: Culture, Communication, and Politeness Theory*, London: Continuum, pp.11–47; Spencer-Oatey, Helen (2011): »Conceptualizing ›The Relational‹ in Pragmatics. Insights from Metapragmatic Emotion and (Im)politeness Comments«, in: *Journal of Pragmatics* 43, pp. 3565–3578, Culpepper, Jonathan (2011): *Impoliteness. Using Language to Cause Offense*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Arundale, Robert B. (2010): »Constituting Face in Conversation. Face, Face-work, and Interactional Achievement«, in: *Journal of Pragmatics* 42, pp. 2078–2105. Arundale, Robert B. (2020): *Communicating and Relating. Constituting Face in Everyday Interacting*, New York: Oxford University Press.

12 Brown/Levinson: *Politeness*; Pinker, Steven (2007): »The Evolutionary Social Psychology of Off-Record Indirect Speech Acts«, in: *Intercultural Pragmatics* 4, pp. 437–461, here pp. 440–441.

for similar reasons, a higher ranked individual is expected to courteously decline to exercise her right to use the bare imperative.¹³

That does not mean that Americans must *never* express social rank difference in small talk. There are robustly asymmetrical, albeit subtle, rules about who can do what. (This fact tends to embarrass Americans, and so we do not discuss it. In fact, I have yet to find a small talk manual that makes this explicit to readers.) For example, the Canadian micro-sociologist Erving Goffman observed that:

Between superordinate and subordinate we may expect to find asymmetrical relations [of familiarity], the superordinate having the right to exercise certain familiarities which the subordinate is not allowed to reciprocate...in [some] American business organizations the boss may thoughtfully ask the elevator man how his children are, but this entrance into another's life may be blocked to the elevator man, who can appreciate the concern but not return it.¹⁴

The rules do not just regulate questions. Among American philosophy professors and graduate students (at least in my context), professors may congratulate students on the publication of an article. But at best, a graduate student may express her *admiration* for a professor's newly published article. An explicit congratulations is presumptuous.

Building on Goffman's work (especially Goffman 1967, 1971)¹⁵, the sociologists Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson proposed that a single variable, *social distance*, governs what we can and must do within conversations; both intimacy and rank can modulate this variable.¹⁶

13 In many contexts, a boss has the *right* to say to her employee, »Show up at 3 pm tomorrow.« But it is more courteous for her to say, »Could you show up at 3 pm tomorrow please.« Usually, the boss' tone and prosody—a brusqueness, a lack of rising intonation—make obvious that this is an indirect order, not a genuine request. Similarly, Goffman records that a nineteenth-century American book of etiquette advises: »The best-bred man whom we ever had the pleasure of meeting always employed, in addressing servants, such forms of speech as these—'I'll thank you for so and so, —Such a thing if you please, —with a gentle tone, but a very elevated key. The perfection of manner, in this particular, is, to indicate by your language, that the performance is a favour, and by your tone that it is a matter of course« (Goffman: Interaction Ritual, p. 62).

14 Goffman: Interaction Ritual, p. 64. I have personally encountered organizations that continue this practice, although it is now coded as a »traditional« or »conservative« one. In a non-academic but culturally conservative workplace, I witnessed an unwitting young man ask his older boss about his children. The boss bristled and declined to answer. In graduate school, I did not believe that I could permissibly ask senior faculty about their children and only made such inquiries after graduation. But my more casual friends reported to me that as graduate students, they asked this question.

15 Ibid.; Goffman: Relations in Public.

16 Brown/Levinson: Politeness, pp. 74–83.

The classical sociologist Georg Simmel, who inspired Goffman, imagined a single »ideal sphere« around individuals.¹⁷ Whether and how we may penetrate the sphere depends upon the nature of our relationship. Simmel's own approach is subtler than Brown and Levinson's: in some respects, a butler can encroach deeper into his employer's ideal sphere than can his friends. (The butler, after all, has the right to touch the employer while dressing him.)

Thus, a commonsense small talk rule like »Avoid discussing or making salient private matters« (B2) is actually a loose rule of thumb that helps us to conform to a rule like (B2*):

B2*: Express the appropriate degree of familiarity towards your interlocutor.

The more expansive rule in (B2*) explains why it is generally inappropriate to say:

- (4) You've lost weight.
- (5) You've got a bit of lipstick on your teeth.

In both cases, the speaker is observing a fact that is epistemically public. It is visually out in the open. Nonetheless, the speaker of (4–5) is acknowledging information that the »ideal sphere« protects.¹⁸ In small talk, someone who says (4–5) either assumes too much intimacy or arrogates to herself too high a status.

During the course of a conversation, our actual social distance may change. As we become more intimate during the conversation, we earn the right to penetrate deeper into each other's sacred sphere. More subjects become »on the table« as discussable. But conversational genre also seems to modulate social distance.

At the start of a therapy session, a patient may courteously say that her weekend was »Really nice, thanks for asking.« If the patient sobs about her terrible weekend ten minutes later during the actual therapy session, neither party will judge her behavior inconsistent. Similarly, business associates may speak much more frankly during a negotiation than they speak during the small talk that bookends it.

This shows that rules like (B2*) are sensitive not just to our actual relationship. They are sensitive to what we are *supposing* or *assuming* about it for the sake of our current conversational phase. (Here I depart from Brown and Levinson's analysis.) For this reason, the value that we assign to the social distance variable can encode information not just about our presumed relationship status but also about the nature of the interaction we are having. Thus, one way to *signal* to each other that we

17 Simmel, Georg (1950): *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*. Translated by Kurt Wolff. Glencoe, IL: Free Press, p. 332.

18 I develop this notion of non-acknowledgment in greater detail in Berstler, Sam (forthcoming): »Non-Epistemic Deniability«, in: *Mind*.

are making small talk is to presume more social distance than we know ourselves to have.

Why is small talk so hard? About this question, we can now say something more precise.

In describing the rules of interaction, Goffman quoted from Emile Durkheim: »The human personality is a sacred thing; one dare not violate it nor infringe its bounds, while at the same time the greatest good is in communion with others.«¹⁹ Most of Durkheim's work analyzed this push-pull tension within overtly religious practice. Inspired by Durkheim, Goffman believed that our everyday interpersonal norms derive from religious practice and thus exhibit the same tension.

In order to express our respect for someone, we must generally avoid assuming undue familiarity with her. But out of respect for her, we must also express prosocial attitudes towards her: that we trust her, that we like her, that we want to interact with her, that we share commonly valued traits and identities and have a basis for solidarity. Rules (B4) and (B5), which require us to express interest in and empathy for our interlocutor, are two small talk-specific ways to do this.

Goffman called the avoidance form of respect *negative deference* and the prosocial form *positive deference*.²⁰ Too much negative deference, and we are standoffish and cold. Too much positive deference, and we overstep. (Think of the graduate student effusively congratulating her advisor on her publication.)

Thus, a routinely successful small talker is someone who routinely solves the *Goldilocks Problem* of deference. She successfully displays exactly the right level of negative and positive deference. To effectively titrate between them, she must correctly identify the fine-grained details about her relationship with and status relative to her interlocutors. As we have seen, she also must consider the nature of small talk itself. Finally, to know how to *communicate* her deference, she must master the finely detailed rules and practices that constitute her culture's deference »expressive palette.«

It is no wonder so many of us worry that we chronically fail at the genre.

19 Durkheim, Emile (1915/1954): *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Translated by Joseph Ward Swain, Glencoe, Illinois: Free Press, pp. 229. Quoted on Goffman: *Interaction Ritual*, p. 73.

20 In her analysis of small talk, Klüwer (2011, 2015) develops a Goffman-style taxonomy of what she calls social dialogue acts. She catalogues acts through which speakers construct, affirm, and seek affirmation of their social self-image or face. In my terminology, these are all acts of positive deference. Klüwer (2015): *Small Talk Capabilities for Dialogue Systems*, PhD diss, Saarland University; Klüwer, Tina (2011): »I like your shirt–Dialogue Acts for Enabling Social Talk in Conversational Agents«, in: *Proceedings of the 10th International Conference on Intelligent Virtual Agents*, pp. 14–27.

3. Small talk is not basic politeness

We have now identified the structure of small talk. Or at least, we have identified the rough structure of small talk within one community of middle-class Americans living in the Greater Boston area. What can we infer about the practice's function?

Small talk is a mundane social ritual. Everyone must do it, and they must do it frequently. Therefore, it's tempting to assimilate small talk to other rituals of etiquette: shaking hands, saying »please« and »thank you«, holding the door open for others. But I think that this would be a mistake.

When children ask us why they must say »please« and »thank you«, we tell them that it is *respectful* or *courteous* to do so. There is also a saying: politeness (or kindness) costs nothing. Contemporary analytic philosophers assume that both pieces of folk wisdom are correct: etiquette, politeness, or manners is a system of norms that functions to facilitate the »routine, manageable, and predictable« display of respectful attitudes towards others.²¹

According to what I will call the *En Passant Thesis*, etiquette enables us to display our respect for each other *cheaply* and so *efficiently*. Rather than taking the time to say:

Emmy:	I respect you so much!
Daigo:	I also respect you so much!
Emmy:	I'm so glad.
Daigo:	Me too.

we can communicate the same sentiment »in passing:« either quickly or during the routine course of other activities.²² Because the rituals are simple and scripted, performing them is neither meaningfully time-intensive nor cognitively demanding nor emotionally taxing.

For example, it requires only a few seconds to shake hands or to hold the door open for someone. The increase in time it requires to say (7) instead of (6) or (9) instead of (8) is negligible:

21 Eidelson, Benjamin (2023): »The Etiquette of Equality«, in: *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 51, pp. 97–139, here p. 102. Representative defenders include Buss (1999), Calhoun (2000), Olberding (2016), and Eidelson (2023). Buss, Sarah (1999): »Appearing Respectful. The Moral Significance of Manners«, in: *Ethics* 109, pp. 795–826; Calhoun, Cheshire (2000): »The Virtue of Civility«, in: *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 29, pp. 251–275; Olberding, Amy (2016): »Etiquette. A Confucian Contribution to Moral Philosophy«, in: *Ethics* 126, pp. 422–466; Eidelson, Benjamin (2023): »The Etiquette of Equality«.

22 I have pilfered the metaphor of *en passant* and »in passing« displays from Eidelson's analysis. Eidelson: *The Etiquette of Equality*, p. 6.

- (6) Gimme the mashed potatoes.
- (7) Could you please pass me the mashed potatoes?
- (8) Move!
- (9) Sorry, excuse me.

And substituting the word »undocumented worker« for »illegal immigrant« or »difficult personality« for »raging asshole« adds no increase in time whatsoever.

These rituals have a simple and script-like quality. Because of this, competent people can successfully perform them with minimal cognitive and emotional effort. Interpreting the Confucian tradition, one philosopher describes etiquette as a form of social »choreography«, which delimits »prescribed steps...in the dance of social intercourse«.²³ These steps are easy enough for small children, the acutely neurodiverse, and the profoundly socially awkward to master.

But this functional hypothesis makes a mystery out of the small talk. Given its structuring rules, small talk is simply *not* cheap in the same way. It is less »YMCA« dance routine and more improvised tango.

First, small talk is often time intensive and carries meaningful opportunity cost. If I run into my colleague at the airport and we make eye contact, I must generally make small talk with her. This conversation can preclude me from reading my book or grading papers. It can cause me to fail to notice my boarding call. And in my experience (as both advisor and student), small talk can extend routine academic advising sessions by upwards of 10 minutes.

Second, small talk is rule-governed but not script-like. Because the rules are subtle, sensitive to dynamically changing variables, and in tension with each other, it is cognitively and emotionally demanding to satisfy them. We may need to wrack our brain to conjure up a steady stream of acceptable topics.²⁴ And we may need to seriously exert ourselves to suppress some of our emotions: our rage at someone's off-hand political remark, our distress when someone asks about our (philandering, no good) spouse, our boredom at our interlocutor's fly-fishing story. Cocktail parties can drain us in the way that routinely making requests like (7) instead of (6) never could.

For all the same reasons, small talk almost always carries meaningful risk of embarrassing ourselves, accidentally offending our interlocutors, or both. Many of us regularly decline to approach someone only because we are worried that we will not adequately perform the ritual. Our concerns are not just reputational. Our success or failure at small talk can have direct material stakes: it can affect the outcome of

23 Olberding: *Etiquette*, p. 429.

24 In his dissertation, Goffman coined the charming term »safe supplies«—that is *supplies* of »light and safe« topics. Goffman, Erving (1953/2022): *Communication Conduct in an Island Nation*, Bethlehem, PA: Mediastudies Press, pp. 119–124.

business deals, negotiations, workplace promotions, and customer and patient retention.

Is small talk just a defective piece of social technology? Given its pervasive cross-cultural presence, that seems like a bad hypothesis. Instead, we should assume that small talk has a different social function. If small talk knits relationships closer together, it is not because (or not just because) it facilitates the efficient and routine expression of respect amongst its participants. In fact, I think that we should take seriously the possibility that small talk's demandingness—and our consequent difficulty in performing it well—is not an unfortunate *bug* of the practice but a central *feature* of it.

4. Small talk involves showing, not telling

How does small talk work? On my analysis, small talk, like other routine politeness rituals, has a communicative function. It is a piece of social technology that facilitates the flow of socially important information. What cleaves small talk from these other practices is the *mechanism* through which this information transfer happens.

Routine politeness rituals are language-like in a critical sense. They depend upon the existence of conventional codes, which both sender and receiver jointly know. These background codes directly transmute the significance of words and bodily movements. If I extend my hand to you, I express respect only because there is a convention that tethers that gesture to that attitude.

On my view, small talk is a social ritual, but it isn't language-like in the same sense. (This can seem ironic or even paradoxical, because we use language in order to conduct the ritual. I will say more about this in the next section.) When you make small talk with me, I usually thereby infer that you respect me. But I don't infer it (just) because we jointly know a rule like, »Small talking with someone means you respect them.«

Instead, small talk is a communicative ritual insofar the ritual motivates us to *directly display* aspects of our practical agency to each other. When we successfully make small talk with each other, we show each other that we can and will conform to the ritual's rules. (And insofar as we fail to conform to its rules, we usually show that we can't or won't do so.) That might not be *why* we are small talking. But the function of small talk, as a ritual, is to facilitate the *production* of this kind of evidence.

To make this idea more precise and to show why it predicts small talk's structure, I will rely on a body of work called *signaling theory*. (Really, it is a theory of costly or hard-to-fake signals.) Signaling theory emerged in the 1970s, with parallel devel-

opment in economics and evolutionary biology.²⁵ This theory identifies and studies a strikingly elegant way in which we transfer information within low trust environments. Rather than saying that we have thus-and-such quality, we demonstrate it.

Here some terminology will help. When we say that *x signals that p*, we are saying that some property or event or state *x* carries the information that *p*. Thus, smoke signals fire, and footprints in the sand signal that someone was on the beach. When Donald Trump says, »I am Trump«, he is signaling that he is Trump.

About any signal, we can ask two questions:

(10) *What information* is the signal carrying? For example, why does bowing in Japan carry the information that the bower respects the target of the bow?

(11) *In virtue of what* is the signal carrying that information? For example, what makes it the case that Donald Trump's assertion, »I am Trump«, signals that he is Trump?

Some signals carry information in virtue of a jointly known symbolic code—sometimes a full-blown natural language, sometimes a ritual code. But that is not the only way to answer the question in (11). Sometimes *x signals that p* because there is a prin-

25 In economics, Spence (1973) is credited as the founder; in biology, Zahavi (1975), Zahavi and Zahavi (1998), and Grafen (1990). For a survey, which discusses the theory's indebtedness to earlier ideas in Veblen (1899/1994), Mauss (1924/1954), and Bourdieu (1972/1977), see Gambetta (2011). While much of Goffman's work is best reconstructed within this theory, he himself never quite articulated it. Spence, Michael (1973): »Job Market Signaling«, in: Quarterly Journal of Economics 87, pp. 355–374; Zahavi, Amotz (1975): »Mate Selection. A Selection for a Handicap«, in: Journal of Theoretical Biology 53, pp. 205–214; Zahavi, Amotz/Zahavi, Avishag (1998): The Handicap Principle. A Missing Piece of Darwin's Puzzle, New York: Oxford University Press; Grafen, Alan (1990): »Biological Signals as Handicaps«, in: Journal of Theoretical Biology 144, pp. 517–546; Veblen, Thorstein (1899/1994): The Theory of the Leisure Class, New York: Dover; Mauss, Marcel (1924/1954): The Gift. Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies, Translated by Ian Cunnison, London: Cohen and West; Bourdieu, Pierre (1972/1977): Outline of a Theory of Practice, Translated by Richard Nice. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Gambetta, Diego (2011): »Signaling«, in: Peter Bearman/Peter Hedström (eds.): The Oxford Handbook of Analytical Sociology, New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 168–194. With rare exceptions (cf. Funkhouser 2017, Pettit 2025), philosophers have mostly ignored theories of costly signaling. Skyrms' well-known work on signaling, indebted to Lewis (1969), is a theory of *conventional*, i.e. *costless*, signals (Skyrms 2003, 2010). Funkhouser, Eric (2017): »Belies as Signals. A New Function for Beliefs«, in: Philosophical Psychology 30, pp. 809–831; Pettit, Philip (2025): When Minds Converse, New York: Oxford University Press; Lewis, David (1969): Convention. A Philosophical Study, Cambridge, MA: Blackwell; Skyrms, Brian (2003): The Stag Hunt and the Evolution of Social Structure, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Skyrms, Brian (2010): Signals. Evolution, Learning, and Information, New York: Oxford University Press.

ciplered relationship between x 's ability to signal p and the truth of p itself. If not p , x could not easily signal p . These are so-called costly signals.

Conspicuous consumption is the classic example.²⁶ Suppose that as you are walking down the street, you spot a woman carrying an Hermès Birkin bag. You have a good eye for these things, and so you're sure that it's a genuine bag. Hermès Birkin bags are valued, at the low end, at \$10,000 USD. You infer that the woman is wealthy.

Why did you infer this? The act of *displaying* the bag—that is, sending the signal—generally requires purchasing the bag, and purchasing the bag requires wealth. Someone who is not wealthy could not acquire the bag. Either she could not acquire it in the literal sense: she lacks the money in her bank account. Or she could not acquire it in a more abstract sense: even taking into account the bag's signaling power, it is not rational for her to buy it. She cannot afford it. In technical terms, it is too costly for the middle or lower-class person to *send* the signal.

Biologists sometimes call these »unfakeable« signals. But it is important to emphasize that most costly signals are not literally unfakeable. They are merely difficult to fake. It is perfectly possible for a middle or lower-class woman to acquire what you believe is a Birkin bag. Maybe she spent \$500 USD on a high-quality knockoff, which fooled you. Maybe it's a real bag, but she didn't pay for it. She received it as a gift or stole it.

But notice that all of these ways to acquire the bag are *difficult*. It requires effort and fashionista know-how to identify a high-quality knock-off company. To receive a Birkin bag as a gift, the woman must have the right social network. And to steal a Birkin bag, she must have criminal savvy, not to mention high risk tolerance. So if you see a woman carrying what you believe is an Hermès Birkin bag, you cannot be *certain* that she is rich. But you have excellent evidence that she is.

When we say that a signal is »costly«, it is important to keep in mind which costs generate credibility. A costly signal, in the theoretical sense, is costly *for the would-be deceiver* to produce. For the honest signaler, sending the signal might cost next to nothing. If I am fluent in Russian, and I want to prove it to a monolingual English speaker, I can produce a paragraph of well-formed Russian as evidence. For me, that act is effortless and so relatively costless. The signal is credible because it would cost a *non-Russian* speaker time and effort to memorize and convincingly recite the same material.

For human agents, costly signals are a communicative backstop, a way to persuade others when our word cannot be our bond. It is easy for a non-wealthy person to produce the sentence, »I am wealthy.« And many people have motive to present themselves as wealthier than they know themselves to be. Talk is thus *cheap* in the technical sense.

26 Veblen: The Theory of the Leisure Class.

This is why wealthy people wear Cartier watches. It is why educated people obnoxiously pepper their speech with Latin or Shakespeare quotes. It is why social justice activists adopt an esoteric vocabulary. It is why many gang members prominently tattoo themselves.²⁷ And it is why mafiosi often require prospective initiates to commit a murder.²⁸

Small talk works according to the same logic. Small talk is an activity that facilitates the production of costly signals from each speaker to each interlocutor. As we will see, this information is socially useful: in acquiring it, each participant can better predict what the other will do. Moreover, whether or not the small talkers trust each other, the information they each send is credible. This is why small talk is such a useful practice on first dates, at cocktail parties, during employment interviews, and at the start of high-stakes negotiations.

Just in virtue of making small talk, what do small talkers signal, and how do they signal it? We can distinguish two categories of answers. There are the signals that we send in virtue of the fact that we can and will make small talk at all. And then there are the signals that we send in virtue of the fact that we can and will make small talk as *well* (or as poorly) as we are making it. Here, what we signal depends upon how well we perform the ritual. In this respect, small talk can have a test-like structure.

Let's start with the first kind of signal. When I choose to make small talk with you, I must generally expend effort, both cognitively and emotionally. I must incur risk (which in this context is a kind of cost): if I make small talk with you, I risk performing badly and thereby embarrassing myself, damaging my reputation, or insulting you. And I must expend time, which is to incur opportunity cost. As Pierre Bourdieu puts it, »*giving or squandering time* [is] one of the most precious of gifts«.²⁹ Why can I afford to give it to you?

In a normal context, there are two likely hypotheses, neither of which exclude the other. First, I want to interact with you, even within the strict confines of small talk. Maybe I want to interact with you because I simply like you. Or maybe I want to interact with you because I want a longer or deeper relationship. Small talk is my upfront investment in this future. The second hypothesis is a less flattering one: I am making small talk with you because I believe that I am socially required to do so, and I want to conform to that requirement.

If the second hypothesis is true, the first hypothesis might not be. But if the first hypothesis is true, the second hypothesis tends to be true as well. This is because most of us *dislike* small talk as a genre. If it were socially permissible to make silly banter, earnestly discuss politics, or directly talk about opportunities to collaborate

27 Cf. Gambetta, Diego (2009): *Codes of the Underworld: How Criminals Communicate*, New York: Oxford University Press.

28 Ibid.

29 Bourdieu: *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, p. 180.

as widget producers, most of us would generally pick these latter options. So even if I independently want to interact with you, I generally choose to make small talk specifically because I want to conform to social norms.

From a signaling perspective, our preferences are good ones. If you gain evidence that the second hypothesis is true, you gain a wealth of other evidence about me.

For example, you often gain information about how I view you. Some people seem to believe that they are not required to make small talk with people who are vastly socially inferior to them. (My best guess is that these people are wrong about what the social norms require us to do. But that's not essential to my point.) We call these people snobs and stuck-ups. If I am making small talk with you, I am credibly signaling that either I'm not snob or that I don't believe that you are vastly socially inferior to me.

Moreover, if you gain information that I want to conform to small talk norms, you normally gain information about my *orientation* towards social norms in general. If I am the kind of person who values conforming to small talk norms, then I am probably the kind of person who values conforming to other social norms. If I am the kind of person who wants to avoid the penalties associated with violating small talk norms, then I am probably the kind of person who wants to avoid the penalties associated with violating other social norms. And so on.

So if I am making small talk with you because I must do so, you gain credible evidence that (for whatever reason) I am a social rule follower. You can count on me to conform to basic social niceties in the future. This gives you some basic assurance that I won't commit egregious social *faux pas*, which could embarrass you. And it enables the basic social norms to render me predictable (or at least, more predictable than I had been). If you know what the rules are, and you know that all else being equal, I will follow them, you are in a good position to accurately predict what I am going to do.

Thus, the *mere fact* that I am making small talk with you at all opens a window onto my nature and my view of you. I like you, I want a relationship with you, I'm not a snob, I don't think I'm further up the social hierarchy than you, I'm a social norm follower, or some combination of the above. For the sake of exposition, I am presenting this information as disjunctive. But often context will easily resolve which set of hypotheses are the most likely. A doctor who makes small talk with her patient is often signaling lack-of-snobbishness. Someone who routinely pops into her colleague's office to make small talk is often signaling a desire for a further relationship.

Crucially, it is the *unpleasantness* of small talk that enables the ritual to act as this kind of window. The inanity of the topics, the repetitiveness, the fact that we generally don't share useful information, the suppression of many of our actual opinions—all of this ensures that it is evidentially meaningful when we choose to per-

form the ritual with each other. If you know that I love French wines, and you invite me to share an expensive bottle with you, you usually don't learn much when I accept the invitation. On the other hand, if you ask me to help you clean out your garage, and I accept, you tend to learn a great deal more about who I am and how I view you.

This serves as vindication of small talk, as we currently practice it. People who do not perform small talk because »I don't like it« or »small talk is boring« catastrophically miss the point. And ironically, how-to manuals that promise to make small talk »fun« or »painless« threaten to erode the utility of the very practice that they champion.

Couldn't any mildly irritating and difficult activity fulfill this function? Suppose that acquaintances had to recite Latin prayers when they find themselves on an elevator together. Or suppose that wedding guests had to solve difficult crossword puzzles as they mingle. Couldn't they accomplish the same signaling feat? No. As I will now argue, the signaling value of small talk does not just derive from the fact that we are willing to make it at all. When we are making small talk, we thereby show our interlocutors how *well* we can or will perform the ritual.

To elaborate this second claim, it will help to decompose small talk into three distinct tasks.

First, to make small talk well, I must exercise appropriate *control* over myself. This task has two sub-components: I must internally *suppress* some of my impulses, and I must outwardly *generate* the right palette of expressions.³⁰ If I compulsively glance at my iPhone screen, or if I accidentally guffaw when you mispronounce »escargot«, then I am not performing small talk well. Similarly, if I cannot seem interested while you ramble about fly-fishing, then—even if I actually *am* interested—I am failing in my social duties. The fact that small talk is boring often makes this task difficult.

Second, I must successfully solve the Goldilocks Problem. The Goldilocks Problem is the problem of deference: that is, the problem of successfully titrating between its positive and negative forms. When I have solved the Goldilocks Problem, I know how to conform to the rule in (B2*):

B2*. Express the appropriate degree of familiarity towards your interlocutor.

The task of solving the Goldilocks Problem has three *further* sub-components. (So we are now describing sub-components of sub-components.) First, I must resolve the contextually dependent social distance variable. This means that I must correctly identify what our background social relationship is, and I must identify how the

30 In focusing on the importance of control—both having it and signaling it—in interaction, I am indebted to Goffman (1967, 1971) and Velleman's subsequent development (Velleman 2001). Goffman: *Interaction Ritual*. Goffman: *Relations in Public*; Velleman, David J. (2001): »The Genesis of Shame«, in: *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 30, pp. 27–52.

genre of small talk influences what I should assume about it. Second, I must know how, in light of this variable, I ought to modulate my conduct. This requires general competency with deference as a ritual system. Finally, I must be willing to *actually* modulate my conduct in accordance with these rules.

If I think too highly or too lowly of myself, or if I have misjudged our level of intimacy, my conduct during small talk will quickly reveal this fact. For example, if I think we are much closer than we are, I might ask a question like (12) or (13):

(12) Are you in therapy?

(13) How much are you carrying in student loans?

You will judge my questions to be inappropriate, and you will infer that I have failed to correctly judge the degree of social distance between us.

Similarly, if my undergraduate student and I are making small talk, and she says (14):

(14) My other philosophy professor teaches much better than you.

I will probably take offense. My complaint is not that she *does* like her other philosophy professor better than me. I might even endorse that judgment. Rather, in openly assessing my teaching relative to my colleague's, she oversteps. (Of course, the problem with negative deference is that it systematically inhibits the flow of useful feedback.)

Thus, small talk reliably reveals disagreement about our relationship status. And it offers us an opportunity to indirectly resolve that disagreement, well before we transition into higher stakes »medium« and »big« talk. Through careful meta-communication—that is, communication about *how* we are communicating—we can negotiate the boundaries of our relationship in real time.³¹ Often, this proceeds through *testing*: the progressive introduction of more and more personal topics, until one party balks.

Similarly, if I am systematically incompetent with the local deference system or if I systematically refuse to use it, that will quickly shine through my conduct. Given the genre's demandingness, people who are systematically »awkward«, »cringe«, or »weird« will tend to be especially awkward, cringe, or weird during small talk. And people who generally refuse to pay the right sorts of homage—who refuse to leave

31 Laver (1975) makes a similar point, although he does not discuss signaling. Laver, John (1975): »Communicative Functions of Phatic Communion«, in: Adam Kendon/Richard M. Harris/Mary Ritchie Key (eds.): *Organization of Behavior in Face-to-Face Interaction*, The Hague: Mouton, pp. 215–238.

unacknowledged what ought to be left unacknowledged or to give lip service to what ought to be given lip service—will see no reason to start paying it during small talk.

Third and finally, in order to make small talk well, I must generally help *you* to make it well too—at least within reason. Goffman called this task *second-order tact* or *tact about tact*.³² He hypothesized that it is a requirement of any polite interaction. For example, second-order tact requires us to select topics that make it mutually easy for us to satisfy small talk's demands. (These are what we previously called »light and safe« topics.) Even if I know that I can keep my composure while discussing the Beijing-Taiwan conflict, I may not know whether you can keep your composure. In that case, I should not introduce the topic.

Thus, if I succeed in making near-perfect small talk, then generally I credibly signal: that I have control over my social performance, that I understand the nature of our relationship, that I am competent with the deference system, that I am willing to conform to the deference system, and that I can and will do my share to help you conform to the social norms that govern you. In short, I am a cooperative and socially skilled person, and you can count on my cooperativity and social skill going forward. By all conventional standards, I am an excellent target for future social interaction.

But much of the time, most of us do not make even *nearly* perfect small talk. From a signaling perspective, these cases are much more interesting. They tend to reveal much more targeted information.

For example, sometimes we could have performed better, if only we were willing to expend more effort. There is a literal sense in which I could have resisted the urge to check my smartphone, but I didn't. There is a literal sense in which I could have paid better attention to your micro-cues. But I didn't, and so I failed to recognize that I ought to have changed the subject.

In such cases, I tend to signal something about my orientation towards you or towards social norms or both. While I care enough to make small talk with you, I do not care enough to try to make it *well*. Since how well I perform small talk is gradable, this enables me to signal fine-grained information about my sociality or my view of you or both.

In a special subset of cases, my aims are actively malicious. I deliberately introduce topics that I know will upset you but not me, or I otherwise try to cause you to violate a social norm and so embarrass yourself. This is the inverse of second-order tact, and it is a way to signal aggression or a desire for dominance. When both parties mutually joust against each other in this way, they transform the ritual of small talk into a contest of skill.³³ This is the stuff of Jane Austen novels.

Sometimes, it is our current emotional state that imperils our ability to make small talk. In this way, small talk can serve as a preliminary mood test, a check before

32 Goffman: Interaction Ritual, p. 29.

33 Ibid.

we decide whether to enter higher stakes territory. If we are too distracted or angry or fatigued to succeed at small talk, we should probably terminate the encounter. Greetings can constitute a miniature version of this test. If my partner greets me after work, and I return a grumpy, »Hello«, he will wait to have a conversation with me.

Similarly, small talk can offer a window onto our affective relationship with our interlocutor. The day after my boss gives me a performance review, I may struggle to make appropriate small talk with her. My fury or distress or embarrassment may shine through my pretense of equanimity. My boss will thereby learn that I did not take the performance review well. (In an even more interesting case, my actions are strategic. I *simulate* that I am failing to suppress my fury at her because I want her to know that I am angry.)

This is one reason why we sometimes perform small talk as a way to transition out of difficult, awkward, or adversarial exchanges. If we each succeed at the genre, we thereby reaffirm that our mutual good will remains undamaged. Neither party needs long-term distance to »process« her negative emotions, and interaction can proceed as normal.

Finally, as we've already seen, small talk can be diagnostic of overall social skill. If you non-culpably lack the ability to reliably conform to social norms—if you are (for example) neurodivergent, a foreigner, or some other kind of outsider—it is usually a blessing to reveal this information through small talk. In future interactions, your interlocutor is less likely to misinterpret an accidental *faux pas* as a malicious one. And although she cannot reliably use social norms to predict you, she now has a »baseline« against which to judge your behavior. Finally, she can make informed decisions about whether she wants to expend the extra cognitive and emotional effort to interact with you again.

But these aren't the only reasons that you may have low social skill. In some cases, there is a clear sense in which you *could* have reasonably acquired the relevant knowledge and skill. The costs to acquire them—the effort and time you needed to expend—were reasonable. Your displayed lack of social skill thus reveals something about your values. You are generally an anti-social person, or you want to disaffiliate from the local culture.

Either way, your incompetence advertises that you do not *want* to be a good target for future cooperative interaction. For that reason alone, you are not one. Of course, the tragedy is that people in the former category are sometimes misidentified as belonging to the second category, and they are unfairly socially isolated.

Thus, small talk as ritual works for at least two reasons. First, it is costly to perform it at all. Second, once we are performing it, how we perform it carries a wealth of subtle and contextually specific information. This, in turn, can enable each small talker to decide whether and how to continue the interaction with her partner. In this sense, an episode of small talk is both exploratory and diagnostic.

What, then, is small talk really? It is a kind of evidence engine. Because it is a norm-governed activity and because of the specific norms that regulate it, small talk reliably motivates us to act in ways that reveal something important about who we are. Here's how Goffman puts the same point:

An act that is subject to a rule of conduct is...a communication, for it represents a way in which selves are confirmed—both the self for which the rule is an obligation and the self for which it is an expectation. An act that is subject to rules of conduct but does not conform to them is also a communication—often even more so—for infractions make news and often in such a way as to disconfirm the selves of the participants. Thus rules of conduct transform both action and inaction into expression, and whether the individual abides by the rules or breaks them, something significant is likely to be communicated.³⁴

Goffman's remarks presage what signaling theory helps us to clarify. All rules of conduct are expressively transformative. And the function of some rules—including the rules of small talk—*just is* their expressively transformative effect.

The rules of small talk transform what we do. If I institute a rule that says, »Wear blue to work tomorrow«, I have transformed the act of dressing for work. If my employees wear blue, they are no longer just wearing blue. They are also complying with my directive. And if they wear white or pink instead, they are no longer just wearing white or pink. They are now flouting my directive. Whatever color my employees wear tomorrow, I now learn something about their overall orientation towards my directives.

It is through this mechanism, not through what we openly *say*, that we »get to know each other« in small talk. Small talk can seem to rely on some inchoate, even magical principles. We »vibe« with our interlocutor or »like her energy«, and so we want to continue interacting with her.

But if I am right, what is happening is entirely mundane. In making small talk, we inevitably conform or fail to conform to the rules of the genre. Through how we interact with small talk's rules, we directly display our practical agency to each other: our preferences, dispositions, skills, and the values, commitments, and worldview that they presuppose. We thereby prove—or fail to prove—that we are good targets for social interaction.

34 Ibid., p. 51.

5. Genre goal and speaker goal

Have I over-intellectualized small talk? Invariably, when I present this analysis, someone complains:

But that's not what I am doing when I make small talk. I never think about all of this signaling stuff!

When I follow the rules, I'm doing it because I want to follow the rules. I'm not doing it because I want to *signal* that I want to follow the rules. And when I make small talk just because I like someone, I'm doing it because I like them. I'm not doing it because I want to *signal* that I like them. You are putting too many thoughts into my head.

It is indeed plausible that when people make small talk, many (most?) of them do not strategically calculate what their actions signal. If we were to ask them, »Why were you talking with your colleague in the elevator just now?« they would probably just say, »I wanted to make small talk« or »I was just being polite« or »I was curious how my colleague was doing.«

But this objection conflates two different kinds of aims: a conversational *genre's* aim and *the speakers'* aims when they converse within that genre. For this reason, it is not an objection to me. Let me explain.

My claims in this paper are about the aim of small talk *as a rule-governed social practice*. In talking about a practice's aim, I am talking about its function: the practice's primary contribution to the overall social system in which it is embedded.³⁵ (The contribution is *primary* just in case it explains why the practice emerged or persists.) Within the social sciences, it is completely routine to distinguish between a practice's function and the aims of agents who participate within it.³⁶

35 As a helpful contrast, consider my disagreement with Posner (2000). Posner has argued people conform to social norms (including norms about etiquette) *in order to* signal that they are good targets for further social coordination. Posner wants to explain and rationalize individuals' behavior. It is open to Posner to claim that social norms have functions *other than* the facilitation of such signaling. In contrast, I have remained neutral on why people conform to the rules of small talk, but I have made claims about their functioning. Note that I am using »signaling« in the loose sense of »making information available.« As I discuss later in this section, it is possible to signal without intending to do so. Posner, Eric (2000): *Laws and Social Norms*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

36 Merton (1949/1968) famously distinguished between *manifest* functions and *latent* functions, the latter of which participants do not recognize. In tethering a practice's function to its existence or persistence, I am implicitly assuming an etiological analysis. For the *locus classicus* on etiological functionalism in philosophy, cf. Millikin (1984). For more on functionalism in the social sciences, see Haslanger (2020) and Berstler (2025). Merton, Robert K. (1949/1968): *Social Theory and the Social Structure*, New York: Free Press; Millikin, Ruth (1984): Lan-

For a classic example, consider Emile Durkheim's theory of religion.³⁷ According to Durkheim, the function of religious practice is to enhance social solidarity and cohesion. This is why religion is good social technology. Durkheim was not thereby making a claim about what *motivates* individual people to attend weekly church services.

It is no objection to Durkheim to point out, »Lots of people go to Church because they believe God commanded it, or because they like the music, or because their parents are making them!« If anything, Durkheim will retort that religion works best when its practitioners do not understand what it does. If they knew that their religion functions as mere social technology, that it is *not* a divinely mandated way to influence the universe, they may lack motivation to continue the practice.

Similarly, it is probably structurally beneficial that most of us do not understand small talk's inner workings. If you understand the practice's signaling function, your pay-off structure holistically changes. For example, antisocial con artists will realize that they have reason to *mimic* the behavior of prosocial people and so have reason to conform to small talk's more onerous rules. (Some of them have surely already realized this!) If everyone were to know exactly how small talk works and that everyone else knows this, our behavior during small talk would carry less information. The practice would therefore become less useful to us.

For the philosopher of language, there is a broader lesson here. Thanks to H.P. Grice's pioneering work, many philosophers have attempted to analyze conversation as a special species of coordination problem.³⁸ That is, they have attempted to reduce the theory of conversation to the theory of joint action.³⁹ But for all the program's advantages, small talk reveals its limitations.

Here's the Grice-inspired chain of thought. In order to make a speech act at all, I must *intend* to do it. In order to understand my speech act, you must recognize my

guage, Thought, and Other Biological Categories, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press; Haslanger, Sally (2020): »Failures of Methodological Individualism«, in: Journal of Social Philosophy 53, pp. 512–534; Berstler, Sam (2025): Erving Goffman. New York: Routledge. MS. On file with author.

37 Durkheim: The Elementary Forms of Religious Life.

38 Grice: Studies in the Way of Words.

39 The most influential representative of this program is Stalnaker (1984, 1999, 2002, 2014). Recent developments include Roberts (2012), Harris and Unnsteinsson (forthcoming), who offer a theory of conversational genre in terms of rational coordination, and Berstler (2025), who shows how to extend the program to non-cooperative conversations. Stalnaker: Inquiry; Stalnaker: Context and Content; Stalnaker: Common Ground; Stalnaker: Context; Roberts, Craig (2012): »Information Structure in Discourse. Toward an Integrated Formal Theory of Pragmatics«, in: Semantics and Pragmatics 5, pp. 1–69. Harris, Daniel W./Unnsteinsson, Elmar (forthcoming): »Genre and Conversation«, in: Nous; Berstler, Sam (2025): »The Grice is Right. Grice's Non-Cooperation Problem and the Structure of Conversation«, in: Philosophical Perspectives 38, pp. 26–40.

speech act-constitutive intentions. My goals and plans inform what I intend to do, and your beliefs about my goals and plans inform your beliefs about what I intend to do. So our goals, plans, and intentions structure what we do within conversation.

Thus far, this is unobjectionable. The next steps are the troublesome ones: first, that conversation *just* is a sequence of rationally planned and organized speech acts and second, that if we want to study conversation as such, we just need to study this form of interpersonal planning and organization.

The advantages of this explanatory paradigm should not be understated. (And I myself have worked within and defended it.⁴⁰) Since it is a reductionist program, it is parsimonious. It ensures that the purest form of conversational analysis can be done from the armchair—an outcome philosophers and formalists naturally love. And it buys cultural universality on the cheap. So long as people have the same goals and plans, their conversations will have the same deep structure.

But how can the Gricean reductionist program explain what happens within small talk? If you and I share a project like, »Let's get to know each other« or »Let's see if we want to have a further relationship«, why do we then have a weird and stilted conversation about the weather, which both of us mostly hate? Our behavior is perplexing.

Worse still, if you and I merely share a project like, »Let's engage in an episode of joint activity that constitutes small talk«—which I suspect happens all the time—the theorist then needs an independent analysis of what small talk is and why we want to make it.

What I have tried to show is the power of a *social structuralist* analysis of conversational genre. On a social structuralist interpretation, the rules of small talk are not rational constraints that bind speakers in virtue of their shared goal. They are social norms that regulate a genre. Depending upon our pay-off structure, it may be rational for us to conform to them. It may be rational for us to ignore them. But whatever we do, small talk will tend to work its social magic.

Whatever we do while making small talk, we find that we are displaying our practical agency to each other. We achieve (or fail to achieve) a social end through exchanging information about the kinds of people we are. But we needn't *intend* to exchange this information. When the antisocial person refuses to make small talk well, she reveals that she is antisocial *regardless* of whether she planned to do so. And when a socially charming person excels at it, she reveals her skill *regardless* of whether she intended to show this.

This is the power of costly signaling as a communicative technology. It is the power of conversational genre as social *infrastructure*: as a set of rules that systematically shapes our choice architecture and so systematically alters what we signal to

40 Ibid.

each other. This is why small talk is an enduring mode of human interaction. It is why the practice persists—no matter how much we rail against it.

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