“No offense guys”: Some ambiguous functions of small talk and politeness in workplace discourse

Diego Valencia

The University of Hong Kong
diego919@graduate.hku.hk

This paper analyses small talk as a form of linguistic politeness in connection with building solidarity and getting things done. The paper sets out on a theoretical discussion of politeness and on some of the multifunctionalities of small talk in workplace discourse. Small talk is interpreted in a business setting, drawing on authentic data from a media corporation in Hong Kong. Small talk is examined as a linguistic politeness device with multiple functions, such as building solidarity, attending to the face needs of others, doing power, and getting the job done. In addition, some of the complexities and ambiguities of small talk in workplace exchanges are also explored. Findings indicate that despite its alleged triviality and some of its face-threatening overtones, small talk plays a role in facilitating a collaborative, harmonious, and productive work environment.
1. Introduction

In the workplace, interlocutors may rely on small talk as a form of linguistic politeness to build collegiality and get things done. However, the salience of small talk exchanges is specific to context, interlocutors, time, place, and space. In addition, culture specific issues, social distance, and the degree of imposition may also inform transactional and relational workplace discourse. Holmes and Stubbe (2003: 88) argue that “small talk is popularly disparaged; indeed its very label suggests it is trivial and not worth taking seriously”. Some people may argue that the salience of small talk in the workplace, due to its apparent superficiality, does not merit much attention. However, previous research done in the field has revealed that when it comes to workplace discourse, small talk and business talk are closely interwoven. Koester (2004: 1407) argues that “office colleagues may be more or less task oriented in their interactions with one another, and orient to both transactional and relational goals.”

One of the main functions of workplace discourse is to execute tasks, and “workplace talk can be collaborative talk that encompasses making arrangements, decision-making, and discussing and evaluating transactions” (Koester 2006: 32).

In reference to workplace discourse not associated with either transactional or non-transactional work related topics and tasks, Koester notes that:

“there are conversations or stretches of talk which do not involve workplace topics or tasks at all, which are labeled as ‘small talk’. These conversations involve talk about the weather, the weekend, health, family, etc., or various forms of joking and teasing” (Koester, 2006: 33).

This quotation clearly elucidates the spontaneous nature of the occurrence of small talk and of the widely open category of topics that can be classified as small talk incidents in the workplace. Holmes (2000a: 48 – 49) characterizes small talk as “an obvious example of discourse which is oriented to the addressee’s positive face needs. Indeed, small talk might be considered a core example of positively polite talk”. At work business talk and personal talk can cross boundaries. Coupland (2000a: 1 – 25) argues that “the commercial and professional worlds of talk are interactionally
constituted partly on the basis of social talk”. Therefore, it is worth examining business talk and small talk as one, and within this framework small talk is interpreted as a form of linguistic politeness.

In the workplace, interlocutors may rely not only on official talk but also on small talk as a linguistic politeness strategy crucial to getting the job done. Holmes (2000a: 48 – 49) argues that small talk “typically serves to establish, maintain and renew social relationships, with the most common use of small talk being therefore to maintain solidarity and collegiality in the workplace”. However, small talk may also serve other functions in the workplace, such as doing power. Mullany (2006: 55) argues that in workplace meetings “small talk is highlighted as a multifunctional device and that when analyzing politeness in the workplace the importance of power is emphasized.” People in positions of power, may use small talk to get others to do certain things, reinforcing the hierarchy of power in the workplace. Nevertheless, small talk incidents may not necessarily achieve their intention and may become instead a threat to the face needs of others. In summary, when it comes to workplace discourse, small talk and politeness appear to play a multifunctional role crucial to the creation of a harmonious, friendly, and productive workplace.

This paper takes small talk as a form of linguistic politeness as its central concern, and explores some of the functions and complexities small talk plays in conversational exchanges in the workplace. In addition, it highlights how the use of some of the linguistic politeness devices used in small talk may be conducive towards building collegiality, getting things done, and attending to the face needs of others. The paper also explores how small talk may backfire and become a threat to the face needs of the hearer due to its untimely use and culture specifics. The overall purpose of this paper is two-fold: 1) to review some of the theoretical models of politeness by analyzing small talk as a representative form of linguistic politeness and 2) to examine some of the features of small talk in the Hong Kong context by analyzing authentic discourse data from a business meeting. The first section of the paper will be dedicated to a theoretical examination of small talk as a form of linguistic politeness. Once the latter has been presented and small talk defined, this paper will move on to examine how workplace relational discourse is constructed through small talk exchanges; and to explore how small talk functions as a linguistic politeness tool which may attend to or may threaten the face needs of interlocutors.
2. Small talk and politeness

For some time, linguists have been trying to come to an agreement on the nature of politeness and how it can be defined, but they have not reached a conclusion yet. Brown and Levinson (1987: 61) base their politeness theory on the notion of face, which is defined as “the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself”. Furthermore, they have argued that positive and negative politeness are concerned with redressing or avoiding face threatening acts (FTAs); adding that negative politeness includes discursive acts such as offering an apology or showing deference; whereas positive politeness includes hedging opinions, mitigating criticism and self-deprecation.

Others have argued that “politeness is a set of communal practices or strategies which communities of practice develop, affirm, and contest, and which individuals within these communities engage with in order to come to an assessment of their own and other’s behavior and position within the group” (Mills, 2003: 9). Yet, others have proposed that the nature of politeness is associated in some way with “harmonious/conflictual interpersonal relations” (Spencer-Oatey, 2005: 95). In this framework, face and politeness have been defined as rapport management, with

“rapport being defined as the relative harmony and smoothness of relations between people, and management refers to the management or (mismanagement) of relations between people and includes any kind of behavior that has an impact on rapport, whether positive, negative or neutral” (Spencer-Oatey, 2005: 96).

However, most approaches to politeness acknowledge that it is situated in the wider context in which it is expressed: in particular, “norms of what are considered to be appropriate and polite ways of interacting with each other are embedded in the cultural context in which interactions occur” (Schnurr and Chan, 2009fc: 3). Kuiper and Flindall (2000: 183) argue that “discourse is situated within a culture and a culture within a discourse”, And Holmes and Stubbe (2003: 5) argue that “most workplace interactions provide evidence of mutual respect and concern for the feelings or face needs of others, that is, of politeness”. Politeness in the workplace may revolve around some of the anticipations interlocutors may harbor, expectations in which respect for ones’ needs and wants are appreciated and respected. In a business meeting, one in which the attendees hail from different ethnic backgrounds
and speak different languages, the chairperson may need to take this into consideration when making use of small talk as a solidarity builder in order to avoid accidentally threatening the face needs of some of the attendees.

Lastly, politeness in the workplace is closely linked to interpersonal contacts and to power relations, and to how these two coexist and affect the dynamics of workplace discourse. Politeness in the workplace:

“relates to the nature of politeness itself, and in the social order that underpins work exchanges, one would assume ‘politeness’ to be one of the complex sets of factors constantly at play in dyadic or multiparty encounters, whether face to face or mediated” (Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris, 2006: 7).

From this literature review one is able to notice that for most approaches to politeness and in spite of some of the different terminology and definitions, politeness is concerned with the avoidance of trespassing the self-image that others claim for themselves, and for the need of showing concern for the face needs and wants of others. Small talk and politeness intermingle to allow interlocutors in the workplace to create a more harmonious and productive work environment. At work, interlocutors may rely on various linguistic politeness devices to create an amicable reciprocal communication channel between interlocutors with the objective of working together to get the job done.

3. Small talk and some of its functions

In the workplace, official conversational exchanges are characterized by “an orientation by at least one of the participants to some care, goal, task or identity… conventionally associated with the workplace” (Drew and Heritage, 1992: 22), thus transactionally oriented interactions. However, researchers have argued that in the workplace, interlocutors interact not only to carry out official transactions but also to discuss some other issues which may not necessarily be task oriented but which also have a place in workplace discourse, namely “small talk”.

Clearly, workplace communication does not have to be task oriented only. In addition work conversations may also display the speakers’ attention to relational concerns. Koester (2004: 1406) refers to “small talk” as “relational talk” and describes it “as
Diego Valencia

encompassing anecdotes and a wider range of conversations that may be of mutual interest to workplace interlocutors”. Relational talk may include topics like gossip, chit-chat, humor, and general casual talk about the weather, pets, movies, fashion, family issues, etc. Some of these relationally oriented interactions do not have to be seen as workers not being engaged in their tasks, since small talk may contribute towards relieving workplace stress and achieving better results.

In addition, Cheepen, Holmes, McCarthy and Coupland (2000, as cited in Koester, 2004: 1410) point out that it is not always possible to neatly separate “business talk” from “small talk”. Holmes and Stubbe (2003: 89) argue that “small talk in the workplace may occur ‘literally’ at anytime and in any possible interactional context”. They have proposed that small talk also refers to social talk and that it does not only occur during non-work-related social conversation topics. Small talk may also take place during work connected conversational situations, which are not necessarily task oriented contexts, e.g. talking about applying for leave, shift preference, substituting for a colleague, or simply the need to do overtime.

Moreover, Mullany (2006: 63) argues that “small talk can be viewed as a very effective way to disguise power relations”. Fletcher (1999) as cited in (Holmes and Stubbe, 2003: 89) argues that “social talk is an important means by which we negotiate the dimensions of politeness and power in interpersonal relationships at work.” Small talk may serve as an important linguistic device that people in positions of power may employ to get subordinates to follow instructions, transact and get the expected results. As a result, people in positions of power may be faced with instances in which they might be under pressure to deflate their power by favoring to communicate with their subordinates in a more subtle way, thus they may rely on small talk as a linguistic device to turn the heat down, build collegiality, get things going and attend to the face needs of others.

4. Methodology

The data on which the analysis draws was collected as part of a group project. For further details on the methodology employed for this research, please see Bibi (this volume).
5. Analysis

This section relies on the use of some examples to elucidate and highlight some of the complexities and multi-functions of small talk in the workplace in addition to some of its possible ambiguities and overtones. Some of the findings appear to confirm that in workplace discourse, politeness and small talk may be closely interrelated and that both may play a crucial role in respecting the face needs of others, creating harmony, fostering camaraderie and getting things done.

5.1 Some ambiguities of small talk

During pre-meeting informal social interaction the male boss of the team, Andy, appears to use small talk as an “ice breaker” in an effort to “warm up” towards his subordinates, show concern for their feelings, attend to their face needs and build collegiality. He is also the one responsible for chairing the meeting reflecting his superior position of power within the company’s hierarchy. This is cemented by some of the responses exhibited by the subordinates to the incidents of small talk. In addition, some small talk incidents which may have been intended to act as solidarity builders camaraderie in the meeting, may have failed.

Example 1

*Context:* Andy, the boss, greets the attendees and before calling the meeting officially to order he introduces the researchers/visitors. During this exchange, the boss uses some instances of “small talk” e.g. chit-chatting and teasing; as a pre-meeting warm up. Please refer to the appendix for transcription conventions.

1 Andy: good morning guys!
2 I have some special visitors today +
3 this gentleman is Vincent Lo +
4 he is the coordinator of this project +
5 and he has brought two beautiful colleagues with him today!!!
6 Next to Vincent is Mary Lee!!! And she is going to participate
7 in the Miss Hong Kong contest later!!!
8 Attendees: ((laughter))
9 Andy: and the other one is Claire Hassan +
and ++((addressing one of his subordinates directly)) Sonia!!!

Claire Hassan can speak Chinese very well?

Attendees: ((laughter))

Andy: no offense guys!!!

I just want you to know their background ++

It may be argued, that in the workplace, small talk may be prone to happen at any time interlocutors find themselves interacting. Holmes and Stubbe (2003: 89) argue that “social talk occurs at times and in spaces which are officially designated for non-work or social activities, activities when workers are free to develop and strengthen collegial relationships.” Due to its spontaneous and unpredictable nature, small talk exchanges may occur at any moment speakers may find themselves facing each other e.g. while waiting for the elevator, during breaks, before a meeting, etc.

At line 1, the boss enters the room and greets every one: good morning guys, a typical phatic exchange, aired at setting a pleasant social mood. Koester (2006: 57) observes that “the opening and closing segments of conversations are highly structured, often involving among other elements, ritual phatic exchanges”. Greetings as well as closings may be considered good examples of small talk; although formulaic and ritualistic in nature, they may serve as a sign of sharing feelings, showing affect, creating goodwill, and setting a pleasant social mood. In addition, they may serve a face attending function.

As a result, subordinates may derive a feel good factor, knowing that the boss cares and acknowledges their presence. Holmes and Stubbe (2003: 90) argue that their research data has shown that “the first encounter of the day between work colleagues can be considered an obligatory site for small talk.” Moreover, they report that a boss who stormed into the office issuing orders was a very strange occurrence, and most likely would have been a very unpopular person.

However, initial encounters may not necessarily have to be limited to ritualistic exchanges only. They may also take the form of informal social, casual or relational talk e.g. comments on the weather, movies, music, pets, fashion, hairstyle, etc. Koester (2006: 56) argues that “relational talk addresses topics outside the workplace”. This elucidates that in workplace interactions, participants may have the ongoing urge to share some of their experiences of the world with others while inviting others to reciprocate, in an attempt to establish harmonious interactions at work.
As illustrated in example 1, at work when people find themselves engaged in face to face interactions e.g. gathering for a business meeting, small talk is likely to occur. At line 1, the male boss after having greeted everyone, uses this opportunity to introduce the visitors. It is during this latter exchange that Andy adds some personal comments about the presence of the two female visitors. At line 5, Andy utters: *Mr. Vincent Lo has brought two beautiful colleagues with him today*; a personal observation to which he added seconds later in the next line, *and Miss Mary Lee is going to participate in the Miss Hong Kong contest later.*

In this exchange, the boss appeared to have relied on his own perceptions of the world and uses small talk in an attempt to relate to all the attendees, and to display his own sense of appreciation and humor in front of his subordinates. Holmes and Stubbe (2003: 109) argue that like small talk “humor is a valuable multifunctional resource in workplace interaction, adding that many meetings are punctuated by bursts of humor, which tend to occur at strategic points”. From lines 1 to 7, if the intention of the boss was to be humorous, it appeared that his objective was achieved, since his utterance was met with laughter from the audience. Laughter and expressions of interest and surprise “seem to have more to do with the way in which speakers relate to each other, rather than with getting the job done” (Koester, 2004: 1407). Some of Andy’s subordinates may have interpreted this as a tension releasing moment, as an expression of solidarity with the boss in a show of respect for the hierarchy. Moreover, Hay (2000: 58) argues that laughter may act as an expression of solidarity between seniors and subordinates; an argument that appears to corroborate the importance of abiding to the hierarchy of power in the workplace.

However, a comment of this nature coming from the male boss in charge of chairing the meeting may have been interpreted by some of the female subordinates as having been unnecessary or even a face threatening insult. Thus, what may have been intended to be a pre-meeting “ice breaking” moment could have turned out to be instead an offensive remark. At line 8, the collective laughter manifested by some of the participants present, may not necessarily have to be interpreted as a show of solidarity with the boss. The boss’s intention may have been to show camaraderie while reminding others about “who runs the show here”. Mullany (2006: 67) argues that “any expression of alleged solidarity should be treated cautiously as it may be masking institutional power relationships”. Subordinates may not have had an alternative, other than laughter, to acknowledge the boss’s attempt to cement his hierarchical power.
From lines 9 to 11, Andy, an ethnic Chinese, continues to rely on small talk during pre-meeting warm up time. He utters the name of one of his subordinates: Sonia, Claire can speak Chinese very well. This meeting was being attended by participants from different ethnic and multilingual backgrounds: India, Pakistan, Malaysia, China and Hong Kong. Claire, one of the visitors, is a Hong Kong born resident, from South Asian lineage. Therefore, a comment of this nature may have proven to be face threatening not only to Sonia, but also perhaps to some other attendees who may not be versed in Chinese. The hearer(s) may have assumed that the boss may be expecting them to be fluent in Chinese, like Claire. In addition, having been singled out by name, in the presence of coworkers and visitors alike, may be seen as a threat to Sonia’s’ face needs. However, it is difficult to tell exactly what the speaker’s intentions may have been in this case.

This same utterance, line 11, owed to some of its ambiguous overtones may have turned out to be somewhat face threatening to some of the other attendees, due to the multiethnic and multilingual composition of the participants. In this context, this utterance lends itself to various interpretations. Claire speaks Chinese while Sonia does not, yet both are from South Asian lineage. However, if Sonia would speak Chinese, this utterance could be interpreted as a compliment, solidarity builder and a show of appreciation on the part of the boss. But, since Sonia does not speak Chinese the utterance is an attempt to tease (and subtly criticize) her and has to be interpreted as a face threatening act.

Teasing has been defined as an “utterance in which the speaker expresses a potentially insulting/aggressive comment but simultaneously provides/relies upon cues that the utterance is to be understood as playful/nonserious” (Alberts, 1992: 155, as cited in Schnurr and Chan, 2009: 9). Here, the intention of the boss may be interpreted as being twofold. Firstly, the aggressive force of this comment may be seen as a direct intimidating threat towards the subordinate. Perhaps, he might have been insinuating that Sonia may need to learn Chinese. Secondly, the boss might have just been ambiguously “teasing/joking around”, with this comment having been left open to the hearer(s)’ own interpretation.

This exchange may then call for the boss to switch into “damage control” in order to “clear the air” of any misunderstandings and attend to the face needs of subordinates. Hence, Andy’s apology at line 13, no offense guys. This mitigating utterance can be seen as a self-correcting response to lower the heat, do damage repair and attenuate the force of the small talk incident. Thus, Andy uses this phatic exchange, in an
Small talk and politeness in workplace discourse

attempt to attend to the face needs of Sonia, convey emotion, create goodwill, and set a pleasant social mood among subordinates. Moreover, this attempt to build solidarity may also be seen as the boss doing power and signaling that he was ready to move on with the order of business.

“Employing teasing humor enables the speaker to convey a serious and potentially face threatening message in an ambiguous manner, and the audience is left to resolve this ambiguity by figuring out “whether the speaker is serious or whether he or she is only joking” (Eisenberg, 1986: 186, as cited in Schnurr and Chan, 2009: 9). In this case, the audience has apparently decided to interpret the ambiguity of this utterance and to assume that the boss was “just teasing/joking” as indicated by their “laughter” response; since “shared humor emphasizes common ground and shared norms” (Holmes and Stubbe, 2003: 111). Subordinates may not have other recourse than to acknowledge Andy’s display of humor due to the workplace power hierarchy.

At line 12, this exchange is met with laughter from some of the attendees and a:

“humorous comment which elicits a positive response (such as laugh or smile) indicates that the speaker shares with others a common view of what is amusing – thus creating or maintaining solidarity, while enhancing the speakers’ status within the group” (Holmes and Stubbe, 2003: 11).

The collective laughter at line 12 shows that the boss and the other participants may share the same attitude towards the small talk incident. However, “humor is also a relevant resource of power relationships in the workplace” (Holmes and Stubbe, 2003: 109). The boss’s attempt to use a humorous small talk exchange shows that he might have been more concerned with doing power than with threatening the face needs of a subordinate. Lastly, it may be argued that the boss uses small talk as a device to attend to the face needs of visitor and subordinate alike, and to establish and maintain solidarity and camaraderie amongst his team players.

5.2 Failed small talk

In workplace discourse a small talk incident may not achieve its intended results due to the speaker’s lack of shared background knowledge thus leading to possible a misunderstanding or embarrassing situation.
Example 2

*Context:* During the course of the meeting, Andy calls on Alice and signals that it is her turn to present her report.

1 Andy: Alice!!!
2 Alice: Alice (-) yes!!!
3 Andy: Alice (-) how’s your back?
4 Alice: Neck!!!
5 Andy: Yeah::
6 Everyone: ((laughter))
7 Andy: I mean neck (.)
8 Alice: Ok (.) It’s ok (.)
9 Andy: It’s ok? Uhh-uhh (-) Ok!!!
10 Alice: There’s a new programme for (xxx) China uh it’s uh Las Vegas
11 uhh + it’s action adventurous drama uh it’s all about how Las
12 Vegas (XXX) uhh ++ being maintained uh largest city (xxx)
13 and resort and Las Vegas and uhh +
14 Andy: It + it’s not a reality show uhh?

In the workplace, the boss issues instructions to his subordinates and these can be labeled as “directives”, or “control acts”, speech acts intended to get someone to do something (Holmes and Stubbe, 2003: 31). In example two, at line 1, the boss utters: Alice, and follows this directive with a brief pause, signaling to the hearer that her turn to speak had arrived. At line 2, Alice responds with a minimal response *yes*, in acknowledgement of the instructions in this task oriented conversational encounter between boss and subordinate.

At line 3, the boss in what looks like an attempt to use small talk to build collegiality asks *Alice how is your back?* Alice responds *neck* (line 4). Here, the intention of the utterance may have been an attempt to show concern for the wellbeing of a worker, attend to her face needs and do collegiality. At line 5, the boss utters the minimal response *yeah* as in *yeah that is what I intended to say, your back not your neck*; but no apparent “official” apology for this mix-up or “slip of the tongue” was offered.

At line 6, this exchange is met with laughter from the audience. Holmes and Stubbe (2003: 111) argue that a “humorous comment which elicits a positive response (such as a laugh or a smile), indicates that the speaker shares with others a common view
about what is amusing, thus creating or maintaining solidarity while also enhancing the speaker’s status within the group”. Although, the boss may have had a lexical mix-up which was met with collective laughter, his original intention may have been to foster collegiality.

At line 7, the boss discretely corrects his utterance as in *I mean neck* using the modal verb *mean* to tone down the utterance. Had the verb *mean* been left out, “the utterance would have sounded much more blunt and less chatty and friendly” (Koester, 2006: 59). Alice acknowledges with the repetition of the minimal response *okay, it’s okay*. This minimal response may also be interpreted as a conversation stopper as in *OK, it’s ok* and *thank you for asking*, but we can move on (line 8). Here, the boss appears to have been making an effort to control the damage, by correcting his lexical mistake and attending to the face needs of his subordinate.

In the workplace, some incidents of small talk may be more oriented towards doing power. In example 2, at line 8, Alice replies using the conversation stopper *okay, it’s okay* in an effort to express politeness and to follow workplace hierarchy. Alice appears to have chosen to cement her social distance, motioning to the boss that she is ready to continue with her transactional task. In this case, it is the subordinate who puts an end to the small talk, since it appears that she may not have wanted to be the topic of conversation. Alice chooses to avoid a shift from business talk, that is to say the meeting’s agenda, to relational talk with a focus on discussing her wellbeing. At line 9, the boss utters *uhh-huh, ok*; using an agreeing minimal response and a conversation stopper. Here, the boss, being conscious of what his earlier mistake may have caused, may have chosen to respect his subordinates’ wish by not pursuing the issue any further in an attempt to do damage repair after his lexical mix-up, and attend to Alice’s face needs.

In the meantime, Alice prefers to deflect the focus away from her with a conversation stopper; while Andy with his self-ingratiating remark *uhh-huh* cements his position of power and moves the order of the meeting from small talk to business talk. According to (Holmes and Stubbe, 2003), “this shows how leaders use small talk to do power”. Therefore, the boss is in the power position to use small talk incidents as s/he likes, put an end to them when s/he sees it fit, in order to continue with transactions. After all, the ultimate objective of the boss is to get things done.
6. Conclusion

This paper examined some of the functions and complexities of small talk in workplace communication. I have reviewed some recent theories on politeness, in particular with reference to small talk and workplace communication. One key aim was to stress the salience of small talk in workplace settings and how it can function as a linguistic politeness device that may act to enhance workplace communication, build collegiality and get things done. By drawing on the concept of small talk, I attempted to demonstrate how workplace interactions could be transactional and/or relational in nature vulnerable to unexpected shifts in focus and purpose. Small talk attends to the positive face needs of speakers. However, in the event that it fails it may be potentially damaging to speaker’s and hearer’s face needs posing a challenge to the interlocutors face. In addition, the ambiguous nature of some small talk incidents may lead to various interpretations that may provoke some face threatening acts.

In the workplace, interlocutors may be concerned with their face needs being attended to and respected. In this paper, I used authentic data extracts from a business meeting to illustrate the salience of small talk as a linguistic politeness device and examined some of its possible ambiguous overtones. I have discussed how at times the demarcation line between small talk and humor may be blurred, making it difficult to categorize some instances as one or the other. I have explored briefly how small talk may act as a power marker in workplace communication. In the workplace, the features examined here, may contribute towards creating an amicable work environment, improving communication, building collegiality, fostering a sense of belonging and achieving results. Politeness and small talk should thus be viewed as vital components of workplace discourse.

Lastly, this study has relied only on one source of data for the analysis, namely extracts from one business meeting in a Hong Kong corporation. In addition, due to this being a small scale research the salience of laughter was not examined in detail, and should be a topic for future research consideration along with the topic of small talk and gender in the Hong Kong context.
Appendix

Transcription conventions

All names are pseudonyms. The transcription conventions are as follows:

(::) Colons indicate prolongation of sound
(-) A dash indicates a sharp cut-off of the prior word or sound
? A question mark, indicates a raising in intonation
! Exclamation marks are used to indicate an animated or emphatic tone
(( )) Double brackets; contain transcriber’s descriptions additional to transcription
(.) A period indicates a stopping fall in tone
+ A plus sign indicates a pause between utterances
++ Two plus signs indicates two pauses between utterances

References


