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## UNIT 7 SMALL TALK

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### Structure

- 7.0 Objectives
- 7.1 Introduction
- 7.2 Short Conversations
  - 7.2.1 Talking about the Weather
  - 7.2.2 Personal Matters
  - 7.2.3 Food
  - 7.2.4 Entertainment
- 7.3 Pronunciation Practice
- 7.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 7.5 Answers to Check Your Progress

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## 7.0 OBJECTIVES

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After going through this unit you should be able to

- engage easily in casual talk,
- link up with another speaker's utterances,
- pronounce the vowel sounds represented by the letters 'e' and 'i', and
- understand syllable division in words.

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## 7.1 INTRODUCTION

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In the past, conversation was considered an art. A good conversationalist was the light of social gatherings. Talking about the affairs of the everyday world in an interesting and entertaining manner was a cultivated talent. Communication is not always an exchange of information. Sharing ideas on everyday events can be a great source of pleasure and satisfaction.

Though conversation is not viewed as much of an art today as it was in the days of yore, the 'gift of the gab' is still thought desirable for maintaining cordial relations with people around us. Even in formal situations like meetings, the participants do not abruptly begin to talk about business. They first warm up with a few comments about the weather, the journey, food, sports, or current events, before broaching the subject matter.

Today the media have taken over the function of conversation. It has been said of television that a discussion programme on it should have the quality of a pleasant after-dinner chat – informed and elegant, but not pompous and argumentative. Similarly, good radio is said to have the quality of intimate conversation, and this is evident in the many new private radio channels which attract audiences by the quality of talk of the hosts of their shows.

Many people are very good at business talk but cannot hold casual conversation over tea or lunch, especially if they have to talk in English. In this unit we will look at some of the ways in which we can engage in 'small talk', as it is called.

## 7.2 SHORT CONVERSATIONS

In the sections below we will discuss how conversation is carried on about topics like the weather, food, entertainment etc.

### 7.2.1 Talking about the Weather

Weather is a very easy subject with which to start a conversation. This is because all participants in a conversation share knowledge about the weather. The weather is ever-changing, and so can direct the course of the conversation for a brief while at least. The topic is, moreover, neutral in nature – there is no danger of getting too personal, or of holding offensively strong opinions about this topic. The British are legendary for making remarks about the weather, and are the subject of many jokes in this regard!

Now read this sample of a conversation about the weather:

“Terribly hot isn’t it?”

“The temperature has touched 42 degrees according to the weather report today.”

“We are just in the middle of May. More than a month to go.”

“But the news reports say the monsoon will be early this year. It’s expected to hit the Kerala coast around the 28<sup>th</sup> of May.”

“Hope that’s true!”

Notice that the shared information of the two interlocutors makes it easy for them to take turns.

- Turn-taking is very important for the smooth flow of conversation.

As a response to what one speaker has said the second speaker continues or adds information. This implies that good listening is important to maintain the flow of conversation. If one of the participants is abstracted – if (s)he is not listening, the flow of conversation will be disturbed and uneven, because (s)he will not be able to respond. Similarly, a person who doesn’t allow the others to “get in a word edgewise” in a conversation, is a bore!

Here are some of the common words used to talk about the weather:

humid	sultry	sweaty	warm	hot	sunny
pleasant	windy	breezy	uncomfortable	stormy	

#### ✓ Check Your Progress 1

- A. Arrange the following utterances made by two speakers, Arvind and Bina about the weather into a coherent piece of dialogue. The first two sentences which is an exchange of greetings is given:

Arvind: Morning!

Bina: Nice, pleasant morning!

Arvind : It’s lovely. There’s a nip in the air.

Arvind : How far are you going?

Arvind : Hope this weather continues for some time.

Arvind : That'd be simply great. I'll be with you in a minute.

Bina: Just right for a good long walk. Care to join me?

Bina: But the days are warming up.

Bina: Just up to the Nature Park, and a brisk walk on the poolside. To look at the dew on the leaves and the buds before it hots up.

*Activity*

A. Try speaking to a friend in a similar way about the weather.

B. Watch the weather forecast of a television news programme. Note down some of the words and phrases used by the presenter.

## 7.2.2 Personal Matters

People and what they do are interesting topics for conversation too. While the word 'gossip' does have a derogatory sense, it would be a very drab life indeed if we didn't talk about others and ourselves. Most encounters begin with enquiring about the welfare of one's family members. If we are among friends, it is also quite usual to talk about the activities of other common friends. This is also one way in which people keep up with others who have moved away.

We might also happen to meet strangers. While some people may find personal questions embarrassing, they often serve to forge a friendly bond between two human beings:

*Read this conversation from a short story. Here we see two strangers exchanging not only personal information, but also their views on life, and the changing times:*

"You seem sad. What's the matter?"

I hesitated. Should I confess to a stranger?

The exaltation about the environment compelled me to drop my guard.

"I lost my job. Three weeks ago."

"Ha!" he snorted, as if he had heard a joke. "So that's the problem? Don't worry. After the war, I thought I had lost everything. A couple of years later, I was back on my feet, hale and hearty. When my wife Rose... Rosemary died, I thought I was a goner. I roamed here and there. But I am okay now. Thyme is the greatest healer. Thyme will pass. You will get a new job and you will forget you were out of one."

"None of my business, but why did you lose your job?" he continued, slurping the lemonade.

I shrugged. "They told me I couldn't relate to the youngsters... the new

*thyme*: = time. As pointed out in Block 1, even native speakers of English may have accents peculiar to particular regions. The beginning of this story gives us a clue to this speaker's accent:

*I SIGHTED him on the bench outside the lone café overlooking Rydal Water, the placid idyllic lake behind Wordsworth's Rydal Mount Cottage in England's enchanting Lake District. He was dressed in grimy black clothes and it must have been months since he had shaved or showered.*

*"What's the thyme?" he called out.*

*"What?"*

*"The thyme", he said, pointing to the wrist.*

*"Oh, the time is 5.20," I said, trying hard to place his accent. Was he Scottish or Irish?*

generation. I was a disciplinarian, an ogre to this generation's junkies. I couldn't stand their coming late, their clothes, their flirtations. So I got tough. It was a question of them or me. The management decided to get rid of me."

"Ha!" he snorted again. Much to my consternation. I could see no humour here. "The thymes, they are a changin'," he sang merrily. "Mister, you gotta change too. Can't remain the same. Don't worry. You will, you will. It will just take some thyme."

"What do I do till I get a new job?"

He scratched his beard. "You know what? Confronting thyme — pure, uncommitted, unoccupied thyme — is a terrifying experience for a human being. But once you learn it, it does good for the soul. Imagine no TV, no movies, no pubs, no theatre, no distractions at all. For example, being out in a place like this. What can you do but stand and stare? At the water, at the geese and the ducks. Sometimes nothing moves for hours. That's what I am trying to do. Confront thyme. It does good for the soul. It tells us worrying isn't any good."

(From the Hindu)

### Activity

A. Look up the dictionary to understand what the underlined words mean:

I thought I was a goner.

You gotta change too.

### √ Check Your Progress 2

Tick the option that explains why the speaker uses the underlined phrase in the sentence below:

"None of my business, but why did you lose your job?"

1. He was not interested in knowing about the stranger.
2. He thought the stranger might think he was too interfering.
3. He thought he would not be able to help the stranger.

Find out the meanings of these expressions: (You may consult a dictionary or ask a friend Look under the word 'foot' in the dictionary)

be back on one's feet

fall on one's feet

have both feet on the ground    find one's feet    put one's feet up

## 7.2.3 Food

Another favourite topic that lends itself to small talk is food, whether it be talk about the new or popular eating places in town or the fruits of the season.

In the following piece of conversation, an offer of fruit leads to a conversation about personal tastes and nostalgic memories that the fruit evokes in the participants

"Fresh guavas from our orchard."

"Really! They seem to be just ripe."

"Yes with guavas you want them just right; not too raw nor too ripe."

"Here's some salt and pepper. Sprinkle some."

"Reminds me of times back in the village. We would perch ourselves on the branches and merrily munch away, story book in one hand."

"Glorious days. You don't really get that natural taste now, with all these artificial manures and pesticide sprays."

"Mmm. Anyway from your orchard... That makes it special."

Notice the turns in comment and response. Each comment links itself up to the next in a chain generating a cluster of ideas triggered off by the first offer of fruit.

The subject of the first sentence is guavas.

The exclamation "Really" is a response to the first statement, an expression of wonder and acknowledgement. "They" is a pronoun substituting 'guavas' in the first statement.

The last word 'just ripe' is taken on for comment in sentence 3.

Sentence 4 adds an instruction.

Sentence 5 triggers a memory.

Sentence 6 "glorious days" refers to the times back in the village".

The last utterance links up with the first rounding up the exchange. The word that links it to the first is "orchard".

The conversation might have ended in two utterances, if the second speaker had accepted the fruit with just a "Thank you". It is part of the art of conversation to find something to say that pleases the other person, here, a comment on the fruits being just ripe enough to be at their most tasty. Again, the other person keeps the conversation going by agreeing. If learning to disagree and to pick weaknesses in the opposition's argument is the art of debate, the art of conversation would appear to be learning to be pleasant and agreeable.

This is what is called the 'co-operative principle' in conversation.

#### *Activity*

*Respond to these comments:*

"I love pineapple juice on ice cream."

"My brother is allergic to oranges."

"Are you a vegetarian?"

"Coconut water in these dog days is such a relief!"

"The Chinese food we get in Indian restaurants is not really Chinese!"

### **7.2.4 Entertainment**

Like weather and food, entertainment in a village, town or city is usually talked about a great deal. This again is shared information and leads to the strengthening of bonds. People talk about the places they have visited or events they have watched either to inform others or to comment on shared experiences. Cricket, football and tennis matches also provide food for conversation.

*Read this cartoon strip:*

A: I can't look!

B: The score is three to two in the last of the ninth

A: But we have two outs!

B: But Charlie Brown is on third! And our best hitter is coming up

A: Say, you don't think Charlie Brown will try to steal home, do you?

B: Never! Not even Charlie Brown would do anything **that** stupid!

C: I wonder if I should steal home!

You will notice that in informal conversation, speakers usually drop the polite tone. Expressions like "don't be stupid", "that's downright silly" etc. are used without really meaning to be rude.

### ✓ Check Your Progress 3

Underline the expressions that are colloquial (used only in informal conversation) in the following sets of dialogue

a. "Where're you off to?"

"To get myself some grub. Coming along?"

"Nopè. Plenty to do here."

b. "What shirt are you going to put on?"

"What shirt? It doesn't matter. A white shirt."

"You're not going to wear the tuxedo? Wait, I'll bring you a vitamin."

"I don't want a vitamin."

"But you yourself say they're good for you."

"Leave me alone."

"Well, it's your health, not mine."

c. "Hello, Doctor!, Hello Schloime-Dovid, you don't recognize me, eh?"

Look, he forgot!"

"But after all, weren't we neighbours? You used to come to our house to borrow the Yiddish newspaper!"

"You don't recognize me, eh? Take a good look! It's Zissel, the son of Chaye Beyle!"

"Why don't you eat something?" "Why don't you have something to drink? Come over here. Take a glass. What do you want?"

## 7.3 PRONUNCIATION PRACTICE

In the last unit we looked at the sounds represented by the letters 'a', 'o' and 'u'. We will now examine how three other letters, 'e' and 'i' and are pronounced in different letter combinations:

A. The letter 'e' has different sounds in the following common words:

- let, head.....  
relate .....  
earth .....  
heal, see .....  
heart .....  
beard .....  
few .....  
brother .....

√ Check Your Progress 4

Pick out the words from the following list that rhyme with the above list and write them against the words given above :

weather	second	speaker	conversation	pleasant	leaves
hearty	healer	lemonade	new	water	
geese	stranger	special meet	confess	allergy	

B. The letters 'i' and 'y' occur in the following words:

- pin .....  
fine, fly.....  
happy .....  
first .....

√ Check Your Progress 5

Pick out the words from the following list that rhyme with the above list and write them against the words given above :

strip	stripe	light	lit	kite	kit
sorry	try	mine	cry	fried	click
recognize	plenty	vitamin	third	shirt	

Read this poem aloud:

**THE CHAOS**

Dearest CREATURE in CREATION

Studying English pronunciation

I will teach you in my verse  
 Sounds like CORPSE; CORPS, HORSE and WORSE,  
 I will keep you BUSY, BUSY,  
 Make your HEAD with HEAT grow dizzy;  
 TEAR in EYE your dress you'll TEAR;  
 So shall I! OH, HEAR my PRAYER

Read the following sentences aloud:

1. Our credit facilities are temporarily discontinued.
  2. The sale of sheets is starting on the twelfth, isn't it?
  3. In my opinion, this recorder is distinctly superior to the one I showed you previously.
  4. These statistics were prepared by the store's senior statistician.
  5. With whom did Scott make his expedition to the Antarctic?
- C. Words can have one or more sound units or syllables. A syllable is a unit that has a vowel sound. Here is a list of one, two, three and four syllables:

coast: (1)

water: wa + ter (2)

oranges: o + ran + ges (3)

conversation: con + ver + sa + tion (4)

### Activity

Write 1,2,3,4 in the brackets against the following words to indicate whether they have 1,2,3 or 4 syllables

yourself ( )	statement ( )	expression ( )	silly ( )
health ( )	newspaper ( )	sprays ( )	anyway ( )
interfering ( )	dialogue ( )	shared ( )	entertainment ( )
coconut ( )	manures ( )	allergic ( )	business ( )
juice ( )	munch ( )	talked ( )	thought ( )
memory ( )	question ( )	shrugged ( )	guavas ( )
strength ( )	straight ( )		

- D. In words of more than one syllable, one of the syllables is pronounced more strongly than the others. These syllables are said to be stressed.

The word 'orchard' has two syllables. The syllable 'or' is stressed: **orchard**  
 In the word 'appear', the part 'pear' is stressed: **appear**

The word 'natural' has three syllables. The first syllable 'na' is stressed: **natural**  
 In the word 'agreeable', 'gree' is stressed: **agreeable**



✓ Check Your Progress 6

Underline the stressed syllable in the following words:

personal	healer	conversation	generation	weaknesses
enough	consult	forget	recognize	management
continued	lemonade	vegetarian	response	weather

## 7.4 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we looked at some examples of 'small talk'. This could be about the weather, common acquaintances, sports or entertainment or current events you also got familiar with some informal expressions used in everyday speech. Finally we saw how different accents could lead to problems in communication.

## 7.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Arvind: Morning!

Bina: Nice, pleasant morning!

Arvind: It's lovely. There's a nip in the air.

Bina: But the days are warming up.

Arvind : Hope this weather continues for some time.

Bina: Just right for a good long walk, Care to join me?

Arvind: How far are you going?

Bina: Just up to the Nature Park, and a brisk walk on the poolside. To look at the dew on the leaves and the buds before it hot up.

Arvind: That'd be simply great. I'll be with you in a minute.

2: be back on one's feet: be healthy again after a period of illness

find one's feet: to bcome able to act confidently and independently

put one's feet up: to rest or relax

fall one one's feet: to have good luck after a difficult period, a business failure

have both feet on the ground: be practical

3. a. "Where're you off to?" "To get myself some grub. Coming along?" "Nope, Plenty to do here".

b. "What shirt are you going to put on?"

'What shirt?It doesn't matter. A white shirt'.

'You're not going to wear the tuxedo? Wait, I'll bring you a vitamin'.

'I don't want a vitamin'.

'But you yourself say they're good for you'.

'Leave me alone'.

'Well, it's your health, not mine'.

c. 'Hello, Doctor!, Hello Schlomic-Dovid, you don't recognise me, eh?

Look, he forgot!'

But after all, weren't we neighbours? You used to come to our house to borrow the Yiddish newspaper!

'You don't recognise me, eh? Take a good look! It's Zissel, the son of Chaye Beyle!'

'Why don't you eat something?' 'Why don't you have something to drink? Come over here. Take a glass. What do you want?'

4. **let**, head: weather second stranger confess lemonade special

relate: speaker conversation pleasant leaves

earth:

heal, see healer geese meet speaker

beard

few new

heart hearty

brother water stranger allergy

5. **pin**: strip kit lit click vitamin

**fine**: stripe light kite fried try mine recognize cry

**happy**: sorry plenty

**first**: third shirt

6. personal healer conversation generation weakness

enough consult forget recognize management continued

lemonade vegetarian response weather