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# **Enhancing the authenticity of assessments through grounding in first impressions**

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## **Abstract**

This article examines first impressions through a discursive and interactional lens. Until now, social psychologists have studied first impressions in laboratory conditions, in isolation from their natural environment, thus overseeing their discursive roles as devices for managing situated interactional concerns. I examine fragments of text and talk in which individuals spontaneously invoke first impressions of other persons as part of assessment activities in settings where the authenticity of speakers' stances might be threatened: (1) in activities with inbuilt evaluative components and (2) in sequential contexts where recipients have been withholding affiliation to speakers' actions. I discuss the relationship between authenticity, as a type of credibility issue related to intersubjective trouble, and the characteristics of first impression assessments, which render them useful for dealing with this specific credibility concern. I identify four features of first impression assessments which make them effective in enhancing authenticity: the witness position (Potter 1996), (dis)location in time and space, automaticity, and extreme formulations (Edwards, 2003).

**Key words:** first impressions, discursive psychology, assessments, credibility, intersubjectivity, accountability, authenticity, sincerity

## ***Introduction***

In order to move forward with any shared conversational project, participants need to believe what others are saying. Questioning claims can side-track ongoing conjoint activities leading the talk to realms of suspicion, doubt, or disbelief which can result in conflicts, accusations, or even failure of common projects. There is a plethora of conversational and discursive resources for managing credibility, from screening next turns for non-alignment, which can foreshadow mistrust, to pre-emptive techniques such as factual discourse (Potter, 1996).

This paper documents *the use of first impressions as a discursive resource employed for enhancing the credibility of one's assessments of persons*. More specifically, by grounding an evaluation of an individual in a specific past event which occasioned it – the first interaction with that person – a speaker *sets up the authenticity of her assertion*. That is, the historical positioning of the assessment argues against potential claims that it has been unauthentically produced for and by the ongoing conversation. A first impression assessment offers a precise moment in time which brought it about, clearly situated in the past and unrelated to the speaker's current concerns. The initial interactions, on which first impressions are based, accommodate such claims by *occasioning the perceptual availability of the assessed individual*, thus ensuring the assessor's access and her entitlement to evaluate the person she previously met. In addition, the first encounter is a *distinct and distinguishable episode* in the history of a relationship, enabling individuals to single it out for use in an ongoing conversation. Last but not least, first impression assessments are usually formulated as *spontaneous, involuntary reactions* to first sightings. This rhetorical setup strengthens the authenticity of these evaluative constructions by arguing against the possibility that they might have been occasioned by individual dispositions and, in turn, attributes their origin to the characteristics of the referent.

Threats to credibility are not omnipresent in interactions and strategies to pre-empt them are often found in those ordinary and institutional contexts which foster such trouble. The current study explores two settings when and where the genuineness of evaluative constructions is made relevant. First, the authenticity of assessments can be questioned when speakers are involved in activities which are made up of slots projecting the production of such evaluations. For example, in gift exchanges, receivers orient to inbuilt expectations to positively assess received gifts, thus transforming the genuineness of their appreciation into a matter of moral performance (Robles, 2012). Second, in sequential contexts where interlocutors show little involvement in ongoing conversational projects proposed by the speakers, assessments grounded in initial interactions permit conversationalists to keep the topic open by adding independent arguments which strengthen their claims while also constructing new opportunities for their partners' contributions. First impression assessments restrict the scope of previous claims, thus attending to potential, unspoken objections which might have occasioned the lack of participation.

In examining first impressions from a discursive perspective, the paper aims to contribute to the ongoing efforts of discursive psychology to document the uses of psychological predicates in naturally occurring talk and to understand how psychological constructs are invoked and made relevant in conversational projects (Edwards & Potter, 2005; Kent & Potter, 2014; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). So far, studies of first impressions, embedded in a cognitivist ontology, have set out to explore the mechanisms involved in impression formation as an intra-mental cognitive process and describe its outcome as a representation or mental image of the perceived person (Fiske, 1993; Hamilton, Katz, & Leirer, 1980; Iluț, 2009; Ivan, 2009). Little attention has been paid to linguistic formulations of first impressions, encased in an “analytic black box” (Stokoe, 2010, p. 262) and treated as ephemeral and variable manifestations of more enduring, but hidden phenomena. Most

researchers opted for numerical transformations of standardised personality judgments elicited through questionnaires, without giving a second thought to the epistemological consequences of these methodological choices (Billig, 2011; Danziger, 1990; Rughiniş, 2012). Instead, by looking at when and how individuals spontaneously call upon first impressions in everyday settings, as opposed to researchers soliciting them in laboratories, I hope to catch a glimpse of the array of manifestations and functions first impressions exhibit in everyday life. By examining the rhetorical and pragmatic use of first impressions as a means of authenticating assessments in environments where their credibility might be challenged, I intend to bring additional evidence to support the treatment of language as a medium for action and its “rich surface” (Edwards, 2006, p. 41) as the paramount focus of social psychology.

The paper draws on conversation analytic and discursive psychological work exploring the interactive production of assessments (Heritage & Raymond, 2005; Mondada, 2009; Pomerantz, 1984; Raymond & Heritage, 2006; Wiggins, 2013). I aim to investigate how difficulties related to authenticity, which I analyse as a type of credibility trouble, bear upon the sequential and discursive construction of assessments of persons: (1) What are the characteristics of these breakdowns in intersubjectivity? (2) What features of the environment prompt individuals to orient to authenticity issues? (3) What features of first impression assessments lend themselves useful for tackling such issues?

### ***Intersubjective underpinnings of credibility***

Edwards (1997, p. 99) remarks “Whenever participants perform the discursive actions of revealing what they think, how they see things, what they understand of their situations, or of just describing the way things are, they inevitably do so in and for interaction”. Contributing to an interaction is never just about individuals communicating a thought or a feeling, sharing

an impression or an opinion, judging a person, or describing an object. It involves the management of how an utterance will be heard by co-present parties as communicating, sharing, or judging, what reactions it will bring about, and what will the consequences be for the performing actor. These accountability concerns are endemic to the production of talk and text, incorporated into each actor's "performance" (Goffman, 1956, p. 8), as well as into the moment-by-moment negotiation of a "definition of the situation" (*idem*, p. 2). At the same time, individual definitions are unremittingly weaved into a "working consensus" (*idem*, 4), which refers not only to the propositional content of the talk, but also to the local entitlements to define truth and fallacy, reality and fiction with regard to specific domains of existence.

Credibility issues, such as believability, trustworthiness, reliability, sincerity, honesty, or authenticity are one type of interactional trouble which throws the working consensus out of balance and affects the progressivity of conjoint projects. Their emergence in talk-in-interaction is engendered by interpretative practices which temporarily suspend intersubjective idealizations (Heritage, 1984; Pollner, 1987; Schütz, 1953) that accomplish a shared view of the activity in progress. The resulting conundrum resides not in faulty understandings, as is the case with troubles dealt with through repair (Rae, 1994; Schegloff, 1992), but arises from the availability of competing interpretations of various aspects of an actor's performance. In making sense of the previous speaker's action, the interpreter comes up with more than one possible meaning. Based on reciprocal expectations of intentionality, one of the versions, let's call it the "intended" version, will be deemed the sense the speaker had purposefully put forward for her action (Garfinkel, 2006). Alternative interpretations are in an adversarial relationship with the "intended" meaning, having been built by questioning or denying this version's ties to past, present, or future realities, referred to by the first speaker. Credibility becomes an interactional issue when the recipient acts based on one of these alternative interpretations. In responding to the first speaker's action, the interpreter

offers for inspection the issues which lead to the alternative interpretation, (in)credibility being achievable only in and through interactional displays. If effective, credibility inquests can lead to the temporary halt, adjustment, transformation, or even to the abandonment of the course of action supported by the “intended” version (see Drew, 2003, p. 933 *et passim*, for a discussion on speakers’ treatment of recipients apparent skepticism).

Different types of credibility failures arise at the intersection of specific interpretative practices applied to particular actions-in-context. The (in)authenticity of a compliment, the (un)reliability of a description, or the (im)plausibility of a story are accomplished through the employment of discursive resources adapted to each particular account, the circumstances in which it was produced, and any contending interactional projects initiated by the interpreter’s turn. Both speaker and recipient can orient to the credibility of a stretch of talk, either defensively or offensively, by warranting and strengthening or questioning and undermining its claims, as part of managing the subject-object relations (Edwards, 2007) of accounts and their producers. For instance, a speaker’s version of “what happened” can be disputed by making apparent her stake and interest in proposing this version of events (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter, 1996). In turn, speakers may employ various devices for pre-empting credibility threats. Orienting to the objectivity of their accounts, individuals may make use of narrative sequences encompassing detailed descriptions, corroboration from several independent sources (Potter, 1996) or various “externalising devices” (Woolgar *apud* Potter, 1996, p. 151). Complementary, speakers may also orient to the subject-side accountability of past and present actions, including their actions of recounting past events (Edwards & Potter, 1993), by “normalising” their accounts, thus pre-empting claims that they may be disposed to exaggerate or lie (Jefferson, 2004a; Sacks, 1984; Wooffitt, 1992), by minimising stake or interest in the proposed version of events (Edwards & Potter, 1992), or by designing accounts



of their own actions which do not infringe plausible membership category boundaries, thus avoiding the risk of appearing “phoney” (Sacks, 1992b, p. 79).

Many resources for achieving (in)credibility have been identified by Goffman (1956, 1967) and built into his dramaturgical conceptualisation of social life. For instance, the demarcation between the province of for-public-performance, “the front region”, and the province of private actions, “the back region” (Goffman, 1956, p. 69), sets up the possibility of differentiation between actions on the basis of their sincerity and authenticity. While performances in the front region are considered to be purposefully directed towards the present audience, backstage performance is interpreted as embodying the actor’s genuine thoughts and feelings and, thus, enjoys wider credibility. In addition, relationships between actions can be exploited for use in credibility disputes. Related actions ascribed to different regions can be deemed consistent, which will enhance their reliability, or divergent, in which case the incidental audience will regard the backstage version as the authentic performance.

The credibility ascribed to different actions depends also on their supposed controllability. Involuntary or uncalculated reactions, such as response cries (Goffman, 1978) are deemed genuine and, thus, get credited with higher credibility (Goffman, 1956). Assigning an action to this category takes into consideration not only the individual’s ability to purposefully control its execution (Chelcea, 2008; Jderu, 2012), but also what the interpreters might propose as the actor’s ostensible motives for it. Neither the ascription of a performance to the front or back region, nor its definition as a purposeful action or an involuntary reaction are pre-established, but figure as matters with which participants deal *in situ*.

So far, I have tried to sketch the intersubjective underpinnings of credibility, as a class of interactional trouble. The following analysis consists of the examination of pre-emptive formulations employed by a first participant as a means of constructing authentic person

assessments in sequential contexts where their genuineness might be questioned. Although credibility does not explicitly appear as an issue in the examined fragments, the analysis will show that speakers orient to it as a central concern furnished by the immediate environment of the interactions.

Before proceeding with the analysis, though, I will briefly review several relevant features of assessments, with a focus on studies which have identified and discussed issues related to their credibility.

### ***Authenticating assessments***

Conversation analysts observed assessments to be a wide-spread practice and resource for participating in social interaction. As a speech act, an assessment displays a speaker's stance towards the evaluated referent. The producer becomes morally accountable for her public position taking (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1987; Wiggins, 2013). Preceding and subsequent turns at talk may refer to the epistemic grounds of the assessment (Pomerantz, 1984), the speaker's stake or interest in producing it (Edwards, 2007), and her entitlement or competence to offer an evaluation of the referent (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1987; Raymond & Heritage, 2006). These matters are crucial for the formulation and deployment of both assessments and responses to them. Assessments formulated as first impressions index an *initial meeting* between the assessor, usually but not always the speaker, and the assessed individual, as the epistemic and moral basis of the proffered evaluation.

As an interactive activity, an assessment can organise the contributions at talk of several co-present individuals. Pomerantz (1984) observed that, frequently, when the current speaker offers an assessment, the next one will also produce an assessment of the same referent. The relationship between the two adjacent turns is regulated by preference organisation with agreements and disagreements being constructed as visible and recognisable for the purpose of the interaction. Although assessments are not as powerful a

resource as questions or request for mobilising responses (Stivers & Rossano, 2010), they have been noticed to single out parts of utterances to receive immediate reactions, even before turn completion (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1987). Failure to respond to assessments is not treated as an accountable matter, but producers can be seen to orient to this absence by unpacking the matter in subsequent turns (*ibidem*).

The architectural features of assessment activities lend themselves as resources for various conjoint conversational projects stretched over several turns. For instance, Mondada (2009) shows how assessments during dinner conversations can be recruited to redirect the focus of the talk at delicate moments such as arguments. By producing an assessment of a mutually available object which projects a second assessment, individuals successfully divert or close discording topics. Through turn design and sequential positioning of assessments, individuals can be seen to negotiate various aspects of their epistemic status with regard to the assessed referents (Heritage & Raymond, 2005) and can claim and sustain social identities (Raymond & Heritage, 2006). When proffered assessments are not responded to in an affiliative manner, displayed identities might also run the risk of being challenged.

The interactive organisation of assessment activities is also sensitive to participants' concerns regarding intersubjectivity. In proffering assessments, individuals' accountability of and for their actions is an ongoing concern (Edwards & Potter, 1993). As Goodwin and Goodwin (1987, p. 45) remarked, an unattended assessment is unable to do its job of "establishing the assessable character of an object". In this circumstance, the stance publicly taken by the speaker fails to achieve its interactional purpose unless it is acknowledged by those recipients to whom it was addressed. Furthermore, the actions implemented through the assessments may also be at risk of not getting accomplished.

The production of second positioned assessments faces a further challenge, related to their credibility. The constraints of preference organisation regulate the form of preferred and

dispreferred answers and can, sometimes, conflict with other concerns, such as access to the referent and entitlement to assess (Heritage & Raymond, 2005). For instance, Heritage and Raymond (2006) show how second assessors may encounter difficulties responding to first positioned assessments, when they have to juggle with low entitlement to assess and the requisite of producing a genuine response. In this context, genuineness is achieved through various means such as upgraded or independent evaluations, which might seem to claim higher entitlement for the second assessor.

The independence of assessments constitutes a key argument for their genuineness and is therefore pursued by speakers as part of their display of authenticity. Independence is a provocation not only for second assessors who might be heard as “merely” agreeing with prior speakers, but also for the producers of first assessments in sequential contexts where their actions might be interpreted as having been brought about by contextual constraints or circumstances, as Robles (2012) and Edwards and Fasulo (2006) have observed.

In mapping the ritualistic organisation of gift exchanges, Robles (2012) points out the normative features of assessment production. Among them, authenticity is of one the most difficult to accomplish, due to the fact that gift exchange rituals provide slots for co-present parties to enact “expecting” the gift receiver to proffer a positive assessment. Expectations are achieved (1) sequentially, through the gift-offer – assessment-of-gift adjacency pair, whose preference presses for a non-delayed, positive assessment and (2) interactionally both through embodied and linguistic redirection of attention towards the gift receiver at the moment of the gift opening and through participation in the assessment activity once the gifted object becomes accessible (Good & Beach, 2005). Robles (2012) notices that authenticity of positive assessments cannot be achieved only through extremely formulated evaluations – often displaying the speaker’s investment (Edwards, 2000) – or response cries – usually heard as embodying involuntary reactions. Instead, inbuilt and enacted normative

constraints demand that additional resources be invested in the evaluative work. This is accomplished by gift receivers through picking out features of the gifts for appraisal by invoking their usefulness, functionality, or physical appeal, in tune with co-present participants' evaluative contributions (Robles, 2012).

Furthermore, authenticity is an issue when assessment implicative exchanges have already taken place in a conversation. In sequential contexts where the congruence of participants' stances towards a third party has already been established, it is challenging to produce assessments to be heard as pre-existing stances, independent of the ongoing conjoint project. Solutions, identified by Edwards and Fasulo (2006), include: formulating upgraded "my side" evaluations, using "honesty phrases", indexing the speakers' direct experience or personal history related to the evaluated third party, and shifting from objective to subjective assessments.

Based on empirical observations from discursive studies examining the accomplishment of (in)credibility in interaction, we can distinguish between authenticity and sincerity practices, based on how they address the issue of speaker's accountability (Edwards & Potter, 1993; Jackie, Stokoe, & Billig, 2000) and on the aspect of the performance they select for reinforcement. Enhancing authenticity warrants against claims that the taken stance might be exhibited as a result of situational constraints. Sincerity practices are oriented towards pre-empting or refuting suspicions that assessors have undisclosed stakes or interests served by the stance they have taken and its interactional effects.

The analytic section of this paper will focus on authenticity-enhancing practices for assessments, used in two specific contexts: (1) as part of activities which have inbuilt slots for evaluative displays and (2) in sequential contexts where interlocutors withheld affiliation to prior assessment implicative talk.

### ***Method and data***

I rely on discursive psychology and conversation analysis for examining fragments of talk and text in which first impressions are spontaneously mentioned. Both approaches propose treating language as a medium for action, rather than a more or less veracious representation of otherwise inaccessible phenomena. Discursive psychology focuses on how psychological objects crop up in and as parts of individuals' daily interactions, how they are constructed, for instance through the employment of the psychological thesaurus, and the work they can be seen to achieve. Conversation analysis focuses on the sequential organisation of talk and the methods and practices used by speakers to accomplish, *in situ*, orderliness, intelligibility, and accountability.

Both discursive psychology and conversation analysis favour naturally occurring talk-in-interaction and argue against the employment of hypothetical examples, field notes, or accounts elicited by the researcher. Up until now, first impressions studies have predominantly made use of the latter strategy for generating empirical evidence. Conversely, this study employs a collection of spontaneous mentionings of first impressions, occurring in both oral and written discourses. This permits the examination of their sequential context and their discursive composition, features overlooked by previous studies. Extracts stem from an assorted corpus of verbal and written talk-in-interaction, which was screened for instances relevant for the current topic. Both audio recordings and written records were obtained by one of the participants, with the consent of all involved parties, as part of several research projects employing naturally occurring conversations. None of the projects dealt with first impressions, therefore it is safe to assume that speakers have not been alerted for this phenomenon. Identity related information has been anonymised.

The extracts were first transcribed in their original language (Romanian) using the conventions devised by Gail Jefferson (2004b). Then, a word for word and an idiomatic

translation were developed according to the guidelines for non-English data (Hepburn & Bolden, 2013). For convenience, the extracts inserted in the paper contain the Romanian and the idiomatic English versions.

### ***Analysis of first impression assessments***

So far, I have reviewed evidence provided by empirical studies showing that and how assessment formulations are sensitive to the prospective authenticity of the stances they embody. I have framed this discussion within the larger context of managing credibility intersubjectively. In the following section I present an analysis of evaluative constructions designed as first impressions and I argue that these formulations work to support the authenticity of the proffered evaluations. Thus, accounts of first impressions constitute a discursive device that is particularly effective in enhancing authenticity. The two types of environments in which this practice appears will be examined separately. In the last section of the paper I will discuss possible links between them.

#### **First impression assessments in settings with inbuilt evaluative components**

The following fragments contain first impression assessments as part of two different activities: (1) a texted birthday wish and (2) an introduction of a speaker during a public book launch. Both activities habitually provide participants with slots for displaying positive stances towards (1) the birthday wish receiver and (2) the guest speaker, respectively. As such, individuals may work to design their assessments in order to be heard as not having been produced as a requirement of the ongoing activity, but as independent and pre-existing and, thus, authentic evaluations.

The birthday message was sent by Sofia to her friend, identified in the text by the nickname “Ciki”. Fragment 1 encompasses the first eight lines of a ten lines short (mobile) text message, sent at 01:54 a.m. on Ciki’s birthday. The timing, prompt after the birthday’s

onset, and the type of message, mobile as opposed to email, are constitutive features of their close relationship, further evidenced by the message's content.

<<Fragment 1>>

Fragment 1 commences with an informal greeting comprised of “dear” plus recipient nickname, followed by an account for texting, produced in the first available slot, in a similar way to “reason for (a) call” (Sacks, 1992a, p. 773; Schegloff, 1986, p. 116), thus swiftly moving forward with what is proposed to be the message's agenda. The “reason for texting” invokes several previous occasions on which Sofia has congratulated her friend on her birthday “it's the 8 th year when I am smsing you on the occasion of another spring passing by” (line 1). It places the current action in an uninterrupted series of birthday wishes sent by Sofia through mobile text messages, making relevant the length and constancy of their friendship. The “reason for texting” has another feature, noteworthy for the current discussion. Its reflexive construction, using the present continuous, “it's the 8 th year when I am smsing you” (line 1) depicts it as a “real-time” description of the sender's action. This formulation attends to Sofia's accountability by casting her as an external observer reporting on her own progressively unfolding action, described as triggered by an event-in-the world: “another spring passing by”. In addition, it makes the ongoing present available for referring to and contrasting with subsequently invoked time frames.

The first impression is delivered in a multi-layered narrative, a story within a story, which locates the recounted actions in two different temporal circumstances. The first time frame invokes an episode from the girls' relationship, when Ciki visited Sofia: “when you came to me in Cl, the first time, that we were walking on the street and I told you, out of the blue” (lines 3-5). This is proposed as the context of the second temporal shift, which encompasses the first impression assessment “there are some persons that you don't meet



without a purpose and about whom you realise from sec 2 that they will be part of your life and about whom you will care very very much” (lines 5-8). Although the assertion does not contain explicit references to either the sender or the receiver of the message – being formulated using the “indefinite” (Sacks, 1992a, p. 165) second person pronoun “you” – its sequential position in the birthday wish ensures that it is understood as an account of their friendship and as a display of Sofia’s appreciation for her friend. Harboured by the last slot of the narrative, the assessment gains support as Sofia’s genuine stance through its impersonal formulation and its embeddedness in a story of a past event which is said to have occasioned it and which the sender is now recounting in her SMS.

The evaluative construction consists of three parts (1) “there are some persons that you don’t meet without a purpose”, (2) “about whom you realise from sec 2 that they will be part of your life”, and (3) “about whom you will care very very much”, ordered (chrono)logically and ascendant with regard to the sender’s involvement. The first item invokes and makes available the referent of the subsequent evaluations “some persons”, while also hinting towards the assessment to come through the negative construction “don’t meet without a purpose”. The second item encompasses the first impression as a prompt, spontaneous, and uncontrolled reaction triggered by the first meeting. The speaker’s involvement is minimised through the formulation of the impression as a discovery of an objective fact about the referent. Finally, the third part delivers the speaker’s stance, as a direct consequence of the two previous items (*cf.* Jefferson, 1990). Occupying the very last slot of the construction, the sender’s extremely formulated affective display (Edwards, 2000) can be understood as a reluctant confession of one aspect of the sender’s private, “backstage” (Goffman, 1956, p. 69) – and, thus, genuine – emotional landscape.

By invoking general features as well as particular moments pertaining to their friendship history, Sofia designs her birthday wish for the current recipient (Sacks, 1992a),

and positions herself as an intimate friend. In the same register, she discloses her deep involvement in their relationship and her appreciation of Ciki as a close friend through a reported conversation which supposedly occurred in the past. As such, her assessment is proposed to be her pre-existing, authentic stance, not having been occasioned by the present circumstances – a birthday wish which habitually includes positive evaluative constructions. Last but not least, the first impression assessment’s genuineness is further supported through its design as an immediate, involuntary consequence of an initial meeting. Its spontaneity and unintendedness are part of the sender’s management of subjectivity, locating its origin in the “object” of the assessment, rather than in the assessing “subject” (Edwards, 2003, 2007).

The second fragment analysed in this section stems from the beginning of a two hours recoding of talk-in-interaction during a book launch, organised in a coffee shop. It depicts the organiser, Bogdan Hrib (BH in the transcript), introducing one of the guest speakers, Oana Sîrbu (OS in the transcript), a famous Romanian singer and actress. The book launch was attended by around twenty participants, the organiser, the two editors of the book, and two guest speakers. The selected fragment is located at the beginning of the event, a point in the interaction constituted by the initiation of the proceeding by the organiser through the introduction of the invited speakers, a common component of this activity (Brown, 2008).

#### <<Fragment 2>>

By recalling his first sighting of OS 26 years ago, BH treats her as an incumbent of the category “celebrities” and positions himself in the related category “fan/follower”, which makes relevant his admiration for her as an inferentially available characteristic of their relationship (Sacks, 1992a; Stokoe, 2012a). The first time she is mentioned, in line 6, she is referred to only by name without any additional identitary information. BH’s discourse further orients to OS’s popularity. He invokes the normativity of introducing her, although

the audience is presumed to be acquainted with her: “I *should* tell you” (lines 6-7) and designs his introduction as a minimal, personal account “I should tell you *just* that now before starting I was remembering” (lines 6-8).

BH orients to the authenticity of his recall by asserting its independence from the ongoing activity. By employing a continuous tense to refer to his actions, he manages the accountability of his story, casting himself as an observer and proposing his telling to have been occasioned by its availability and relevance, thus pre-empting potential suspicions that the story might have been thought up purposefully for the current event, since introductions habitually contain appraisals of guest speakers (Atkinson, 1984).

BH further expands his telling of the first time he had heard OS sing on television, portraying it as a memorable event and indirectly asserting his admiration for her. After a side sequence (Jefferson, 1972), omitted from the fragment, the speaker restarts his story (line 46) and furnishes it with additional, descriptive elements in support of its credibility (Potter, 1996): the layout of the room, the number and type of beds, the position and the characteristics of the television set. Furthermore, the detailed and vivid recollection of an episode which occurred 26 years ago functions also as a display of the speaker’s deep affective involvement in that event (Edwards & Potter, 1992).

The explicit assessment “Uh: and she is unchanged” (line 60), located in the last part of the sequence can be heard as a compliment and is in fact treated as such by OS’s disagreement (Pomerantz, 1978) “We:[:ll (0.1) °unchanged]” (line 61). Without containing any evaluative words, the utterance functions as a positive assessment by suggesting that OS has not aged and looks as young as she did 26 years ago. The inherent comparison on which the assessment is based links past and present temporal frames and can be heard as brought about by the speaker’s recollection of the first time he saw OS.

### **First impression assessments as solutions to prior disaffiliation**

So far, I have examined evaluative constructions involving first impressions produced in settings containing inbuilt assessments of individuals. Participants designed their evaluative constructions as occasioned by an initial encounter, independent of their ongoing interactional project and thus embodying their authentic, pre-existing stance towards the referents. The next two fragments contain first impression assessments produced by speakers after co-present parties have refrained from participating in conjoint interactional projects.

Fragment 3 stems from a conversation between Marcella and Eve, two young girls who have been close friends for several years. Eve slept over at Marcella's the night before and now they are having breakfast. The recording spans over 55 minutes. The extract is located 17 minutes into the conversation.

#### **<<Fragment 3>>**

While eating, Marcella and Eve are talking about diets and exercising, Eve starts a telling (line 6) about her neighbour, whom she admires for her slender figure and dietary habits. Marcella ratifies this course of action with a minimal "go ahead" in line 8 and then confirms recollecting (line 10) a previous telling invoked in the story's preface (Jefferson, 1978). Throughout the rest of the interaction, encompassed by Fragment 3, up until the first impression assessment, Marcella repeatedly withholds participation in Eve's evaluative project by passing on the opportunity to respond to her actions and by "blatantly" disattending them (Mandelbaum, 1991, p. 98) through the initiation of a competing, though short, side sequence (lines 21-25). Eve can be seen to orient to Marcella's lack of involvement by expanding her telling, providing her friend with further opportunities to intervene (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1987), and proposing her account to be based on shared knowledge through the use of the "common knowledge component" (Stokoe, 2012b, p. 233)

in lines 32-33 “I’ve known her since she was little, *you know?*”. Simultaneously, she orients to potential issues which might have occasioned Marcella’s lack of affiliation. She (1) reformulates and restricts her evaluative claims to attend to precision issues (lines 18-20) (Drew, 2003), (2), clarifies and justifies the basis of her evaluative stance through detailed description of her neighbor’s physical characteristics (lines 27-34), and, (3) finally, invokes an episode where the girl’s physical appearance is ratified through the first impression she makes on a large audience (lines 35-43). This last conversational move is able to elicit a feeble reaction from Marcella (line 44), which does not turn into support for Eve’s evaluative project.

The first impression assessment is delivered as part of Eve’s remembering of a recent occasion, a wedding party, which both she and her neighbour attended, thus, being proposed as independent from the ongoing interaction. In the recounted episode, the speaker positions herself as a witness (Potter, 1996) to the recounted event, thus establishing her access to the recounted event, but minimising her involvement and responsibility. The first impression assessment is attributed to the guests who attended the wedding. It is formulated as a powerful positive response triggered by the girl’s arrival at the party: “When she entered because she also arrived much later u- everybody was <w:ow:>” (lines 42-43). This reported first impression assessment revives and corroborates Eve’s prior failed attempts through the invocation of consensual appraisals of her neighbour’s physical appearance.

Fragment 3 indexes the visibility of first impressions as reactions to initial encounters. First impressions are not only memorable – as proposed by Bogdan Hrib in Fragment 2 – but also observable and, thus, describable by co-present parties. As opposed to Fragments 1 and 2, in which participants recounted their own experiences of initial encounters and affective stances, as type 1 knowable, in Fragment 3 the speaker can be seen to describe the reaction of a group of people accessible through her being an eye witness of the scene, thus a type 2

knowable (Pomerantz, 1980). Any issues pertaining to the limited access Eve might have had to the wedding guests' subjective experiences is resolved through the formulation "everybody was <w:ow:>" (line 43). While it conveys the strength and positivity of the guests' reactions, it is also vague enough to be heard as a description produced from an observer's position.

The last interaction to be examined stems from a chat between two young girls, Anna and Maria, who have been friends for approximately ten years. They live in the same neighbourhood and get together regularly for coffee. The sequence is located in the second part of a two hours and twenty minutes long recording, approximately an hour and forty minutes into the conversation. Due to its length, I divided the sequence in two parts.

Fragment 4 contains the beginning of the sequence in which Anna is deriding a girl named "that" Gabi<sup>1</sup>, without receiving any support from Maria. Fragment 5 contains a first impression assessment of "that" Gabi, among Anna's other actions also oriented towards belittling her.

Prior to Fragment 4, Anna had just informed Maria about her latest line of discontent regarding Tania, a common friend. Anna's main complaint revolves around the fact that Tania had not paid her share of the rent on an apartment both use as an office and Anna had to cover the expense from her own pocket. Tania had promised to reimburse Anna after getting her pay check, but had not kept her word and had since avoided face-to-face contact. To this delicate subject, Maria offers a reassurance that they will eventually find a way to establish a meeting, (lines 1-3). This response constitutes a weak acknowledgement of Anna's complaint (Edwards, 2005) and does not support her course of action. Instead, it can be seen as a conclusive remark, which initiates sequence closure (Schegloff, 2007). At this point, Anna revives the topic by mentioning another complainable: Tania has found a new

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<sup>1</sup> The selected fragments feature two girls, both named Gabi. One of them, referred by Anna as 'our' Gabi (line 86) is befriended with her, Maria, and Tania, while the other one, called 'that' Gabi by Maria (line 16) is Tania's friend and Anna has only recently met her. For convenience, in order to differentiate between the two, I will refer to the common friend as 'our' Gabi and to Tania's friend as 'that' Gabi.

role model, “that” Gabi, whom Anna disapproves of, and plans to take her along to their meeting (lines 7-11). Throughout the two fragments, she makes her case against “that” Gabi, and indirectly against Tania, as her admirer, by invoking various episodes – including her first impression of “that” Gabi – which are informative of the girl’s inadequacy and her negative influence on Tania.

#### <<Fragment 4>>

In Fragment 4 we see Maria repeatedly withholding affiliation to Anna’s course of action by twice passing on the opportunity to contribute to the interaction (lines 10 and 13). After a (0.2) gap attributable to Maria, Anna expands the topic, by providing additional details related to the problematic relationship between Tania and “that” Gabi (lines 11-12), furnishing her friend with new opportunities to affiliate. This new item still does not succeed in eliciting a contribution from Maria. After a longer, (0.7) gap, again attributable to Maria, Anna starts a story of her first encounter with “that” Gabi, dissociating the ensuing assessment from the ongoing interaction. It gets interrupted in line 16, through the initiation of a repair on “that” Gabi’s identity, leading to a side sequence omitted from this fragment. Anna restarts the story in line 50 by recycling several of the elements used in lines 14-15.

#### <<Fragment 5>>

Anna’s new attempts to ensure Maria’s participation, featured in the beginning of Fragment 5, are still unsuccessful, up until the first impression assessment, which secures only momentary affiliation through laughter (Jefferson, Sacks, & Schegloff, 1987). Her turns are furnished with the details of a face-to-face, fortuitous encounter with “that” Gabi. The invocation of this episode provides Anna with the entitlement to produce a detailed description of her physical appearance (Potter, 1996), implied to be indicative of her character “An Gabi was dressed in a pair of baggy jeans (0.7) <cut> (0.9) >Speaking of

impressions (0.6) you know? (lines 54-58)”. Not receiving a response, she discontinues the description to insert a contrast structure with evaluative implications (Smith, 1978) “in my mind it was supposed to be a <woma::n> (.) who works in the human=resources department in <recruitment>, a matu::re (0.4) woman °responsible thirty-six years old (0.3) married” (lines 60-64). It highlights how “that” Gabi’s outfit is problematic “°>She should h-ve looked totally different” (line 64) and renders her morally accountable for infringing the dress code – and by implication other rules – of categories she is supposed to belong to.

The first impression assessment (lines 65-73) is built upon “that” Gabi’s description, which minimises Anna’s involvement in its production. In addition, her spontaneous, involuntary reaction elicited by seeing “that” Gabi “I instantly associated her <with (.) the boys from: (0.1) the park who ride the skateboard” (lines 65-67) further reduces Anna’s involvement in the evaluation and, instead, emphasis its “objectivity”, suggesting that the trigger of the assessment is located in the referent, rather than associated with the observer and her disposition (Edwards, 2007).

Anna’s statement in lines 74-75 “[T]his was the first impression<sub>6</sub>” refers to her previous turn – through the use of the pro-term “this” – as the content of her initial reaction to “that” Gabi and indexes it as the basis of her negative evaluation “°I s’d o::h my god°” formulated through a “surprise reaction token” (Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 2006, p. 152) constructing Anna as a reluctant assessor, forced by overwhelming evidence to take a negative stance towards “that” Gabi.

### ***Discussion***

This article contributes to discursive psychology’s programme of respecifying social psychological concepts by closely examining their spontaneous occurrence in talk-in-interaction. While cognitively informed research endeavours of first impressions start out with pre-established definitions and standardised data-generating instruments, this study



aimed to examine pre-theorised characteristics of first impressions rendered observable and relevant through their employment by individuals in their everyday talk and text: their discursive construction, their sequential positioning, their rhetorical and pragmatic relevance.

The article differentiates between inauthenticity and insincerity as types of credibility issues associated with the speakers' "subject-side" (Edwards, 2007, p. 31). While both exploit and challenge intersubjective idealisations with regard to the meaning of individuals' actions, authenticity refers to the circumstances which bring about a speaker's actions, while sincerity is often linked with a "hidden" motive or agenda speakers have for acting in a certain way. In the examined fragments, first impressions are used to formulate assessments as speakers' authentic stances towards present or absent individuals. That is, first impressions are appealed to as assessments that are enduring, pre-existing, and independent from any situational constraints which might bear upon their invocation. Compared with "honesty phrases", (Edwards & Fasulo, 2006, p. 343) employed by speakers doing a "my side" telling in the context of affiliative displays, first impression assessments constitute a resource for dealing with recipients' lack of affiliation. Additionally, speakers may deploy evaluative constructions as reactions after first encounters in settings which typically contain inbuilt assessment components, orienting to the possibility that their actions might be interpreted as triggered by situational constraints. Compared with "normalising" devices (Wooffitt, 1992, p. 204) which manage the credibility of stories of unusual experiences by positioning speakers as ordinary members, not prone to exaggerate, first impression assessments manage speakers' accountability for their evaluative constructions, by positioning them as external observers or narrators who recount events as they were seen and experienced.

On both occasions, the employment of first impression assessments warrants the authenticity of actors' evaluative stances: (1) they make relevant *witness positions* which furnish individuals with access and entitlement to describe the referents and produce

assessments on these bases; (2) participants dissociate their evaluative remarks from the current interactions and *locate them, by means of narrative constructions, in different spatial-temporal frames* which are said to have occasioned them; (3) individuals manage their accountability for the proffered assessments by *formulating them as spontaneous, uncontrolled, momentary, or powerful reactions* elicited by first sightings/interactions with the referents; (4) first impressions assessments permit extreme formulations which elicit (weak) responses from co-present parties. As such, first impression assessments are constructed as individual experiences of involuntary reactions, triggered not by participants' dispositions, but by the referents' objective features.

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**Fragment 1 - Sofia, Birthday SMS, 1-8**

	Romanian	Idiomatic English
1	Dear Ciki, este al 8 lea an in care te sms uiesc	Dear Ciki, it's the 8 th year when I am smsing you on
2	cu ocazia implinirii unor primaveri :)) Nu stiu	the occasion of another spring passing by :)) I don't
3	daca iti mai amintesti tu cand ai venit la mine la	know if you remember when you came to me in Cl, the
4	Cl, prima oara, ca ne plimbam pe strada si ti-am	first time, that we were walking on the street and I
5	zis eu, din senin, ca sunt unele persoane pe care	told you, out of the blue, that there are some persons
6	nu le cunosti degeaba si de care iti dai seama din	that you don't meet without a purpose and about whom
7	sec 2 ca vor face parte din viata ta si la care	you realise from sec 2 that they will be part of your
8	vei tine tare tare mult.	life and about whom you will care very very much.



Fragment 2 - BH, Book launch, 6-63

	Romanian	Idiomatic English
6	BH: <u>Despre:</u> <u>Oana:</u> <u>Sîrbu:</u> >să:< o să vă spun	BH: <u>Abou:t</u> <u>Oana:</u> <u>Sîrbu:</u> >shou:ld< I should
7	decât că acum înainte de a începe mi-	tell you just that now before starting I
8	aduceam aminte de ( ) primul moment	was remembering the ( ) first moment
9	când am văzut-o la un televizor alb	when I saw her on a black and white
10	negru <u>absolut</u> ( ) eram în armată: în	television <u>absolutely</u> ( ) I was in the
11	optzeşase.	army: in eightysix.
12	(.)	(.)
13	OS: Televiz <u>o::r</u>	OS: Televis <u>o::n</u>
14	BH: Televi[zor] [(era ochei er]a-)=	BH: Televi[sion] [(it was okey it wa]s-)=
15	(): [ÎHH] ÎHH [hî hî hî h]	(): [UHH ] UHH [hu hu hu hu ]
16	BH: =< <u>A</u> ți văzut vreodată televizor alb	BH: =< <u>H</u> ave you ever seen a black and white
17	negru?	television?
	((23 secunde omise))	((23 seconds omitted))
46	BH: <u>Ă::m</u> (.) deci eram într-n dormitor cu=o	BH: <u>Uh::m</u> (.) so I was in a bedroom with=a

47 sută douăzeci de paturi °suprapuse  
 48 și=în capăt undeva vă dați seama cam  
 49 ce:: ce- ă:m vizibilitate=aveam. În  
 50 capăt era un televizor (0.4) Diamant  
 51 (0.1) sau ce nebunie din ăstea că  
 52 oricum era foarte vechi. Și unde:: am  
 53 vazut-o pentru prima oară pe °Oana  
 54 Sîrbu (.) (la TElevizor (.) cântând).  
 55 (0.1)  
 56 (OS):( )  
 57 BH: N-a fost î: a fost într-o ( )  
 58 OS: O ( ) (de ani)  
 59 (0.9)  
 60 BH: Ă: și este neschimbată  
 61 OS: E:[: (0.1) °neschimbată]  
 62 (): [( )]  
 63 BH: Așa încâ:tî:- (0.1)

hundred and twenty °bunk beds and=at the  
 rear end somewhere you can imagine what  
 so::rt sort- uh:m of visibility=I had. At  
 the rear end there was a television (0.4)  
Diamond<sup>2</sup> (0.1) or something of that sort  
 cause anyway it was very old. And there::  
 I saw for the first time °Oana Sîrbu  
 (.) (on TElevision (.) singing).  
 (0.1)  
 (OS):( )  
 BH: It wasn't uh: it was in a ( )  
 OS: A ( ) (years)  
 (0.9)  
 BH: Uh: and she is unchanged  
 OS: We:[:11 (0.1) °unchanged]  
 (): [( )]  
 BH: Therefo:ruh:- (0.1)

<sup>2</sup> Brand of television sets



22 de aer nu?=  
 23 Eva: =Îhî:m (.) Puțin.  
 24 (0.1)  
 25 ( ): HM °hîh° .hhh  
 26 (.)  
 27 Eva: De când o știu ieo fată-  
 28 (0.1) super suplă da nu suplă la modul  
 29 Vai slabă băț ↑are forme  
 30 știi¿=Are puțin fund sâni=super ok  
 31 zici că e <siliconată> deși  
 32 nu °e.(.) ((înghițind)) O știu  
 33 de mică, știi?  
 34 (0.4)  
 35 Eve: Întreținută, așa°ăm¿ deș=f- (0.1) Ș-  
 36 tot m<sup>↑</sup>ă ↑intrebam măi dA: ce face  
 37 că de c- ↓e și mai mare decât mine  
 38 e altă generație ș-am revăzut-o  
 39 anul trecut deopă mulți ani la nunta

draft, right?=  
 Eve: =Uhu:m (.) A little.  
 (0.1)  
 ( ): HM °huh° .hhh  
 (.)  
 Eve: Ever since I've know her shesa girl-  
 (0.1) very slender bu not slender like  
 Oh thin as a rake ↑she has curves you  
 know¿=She has a butt breats=very okey  
 you'd say she has <implants> but she  
 does°n't. ((swallowing)) I've known her  
 since she was little, you know?  
 (0.4)  
 Eve: Taken care of, like°uhm¿ so=v- (0.1) An-  
 ↑I kept ↑asking man bU:t what is she doing  
 sin- ↓she's older than me she's a  
 different generation an I saw her again  
 last year after several years at her

40 | sorăsii ↓undeam fost. (0.1) Când a  
41 | intrat ea pentru că a și ajuns mult  
42 | mai târziu î- toată lumea a fost  
43 | <u:au:>  
44 | Marcella: Îihhi hîi

| sister's wedding ↓whery went. (0.1) When  
| she entered because she also arrived much  
| later u- everybody was  
| <w:ow:>  
| Marcella: Uihhi hui

Fragment 4 - Anna, Tania's role model, 1-17

	Romanian	Idiomatic English
1	Maria: hhhh (.) >Odată și-od[at=T]ot=	Maria: hhhh (.) >Eventu [ll-S]till=
2	Anna: [Da: ]	Anna: [Ye:s]
3	Maria: =°tre=să >vă vedeți<.	Maria: =°you'll haf=tuh >meet<.
4	(1.0)	(1.0)
5	Anna: Da:=	Anna: Ye:s=
6	Maria: =Da:.	Maria: =Ye:s.
7	Anna: .h >A da vrea neapărat; nu vrea să ne	Anna: .h > Uh but she really wants; she doesn't
8	vedem împreună, vrea neapărat să ne vedem	want to meet alone, she really wants to meet
9	cu <u>Gabi</u> . >Ea a făcut o <u>fixație</u> pentru <u>Gabi</u> .	with <u>Gabi</u> .>She has <u>developed</u> a fixation on <u>Gabi</u> .
10	(0.2)	(0.2)
11	Anna: ă:: (0.2) Mi- a spus la un moment dat	Anna: uh:: (0.2) She told me once she
12	c-o <u>vede</u> pe <u>Gabi</u> un <u>model</u> . Senzațional.	<u>sees</u> <u>Gabi</u> as a <u>role model</u> . Sensational.
13	(0.7)	(0.7)
14	Anna: <ș:(h) a venit la <u>cabinet</u> ; cu <u>Gabi</u> ::> acu	Anna: < A:n(h) she came to the <u>office</u> ; with <u>Gabi</u> ::>
15	vr[eo două săptăm <sup>o</sup> âni G]abi::(.)	appro[ximately two wee <sup>o</sup> ks ago G]abi:::
16	Maria: [>Care <u>Gabi</u> (.) <u>Gabi</u> : aia:<]	Maria: [>Which <u>Gabi</u> (.) tha:t <u>Gabi</u> :<]

17 | Maria: A(h) da. (.) Aşa.

| Maria: O(h) yes. (.) so.

Fragment 5 - Anna, Tania's role model, 50-77

	Romanian	Idiomatic English
50	Anna: Și::-ă:: (0.2) †a venit cu ea::	Anna: A::nd-u::h (0.2) †she came with
51	acu vreo două trei săptămâni la cabinet;	he::r about two three weeks ago to the
52	>Întâmplarea a făcut să fiu acolo pentru că	office; >As it happens I was there because
53	am avut-am avut de făcut rapoarte în urma	I had-I had to do some reports after
54	examinărilor; (0.9) Ş Gabi era îmbrăcată în	examinations; (0.9) An Gabi was dressed in a
55	nişte blugi largi (0.7) <tăiați>	pair of baggy jeans (0.7) <cut>
56	(0.9)	(0.9)
57	Anna: >Apropo de impresii(0.6) ştii?	Anna: >Speaking of impressions (0.6) you know?
58	(0.7)	(0.7)
59	Anna: Aşa (.) <cu coada:::(0.7) ă:::(0.6) în	Anna: So (.) <with a pony tai:::l (0.7) uh:::(0.6)
60	mintea mea era vorba de-o <femeie::> (.)	in my mind it was supposed to be a <woma::n>
61	care lucrează la departamentul de resurse=	(.)who works in the human=resources department
62	umane pe <recrutare>, o femeie::(0.4)	in <recruitment>, a matu::re (0.4) woman
63	matură °responsabilă de treizecişisase de	°responsible thirty-six years old (0.3)
64	ani (0.3) căsătorită ( ) >°Trebuia	married ( )°>She should h-ve looked totally



65	s-arate cu totul altfel. O asociam direct	different. I instantly associated her <with
66	<cu (.) băieții din: (0.1) parc care se	(.) the boys from: (0.1) the park who ride the
67	dau cu skateboard-ul=avea bascheți d-ăia:	skateboard=she had tho:se (.) like-huge
68	(.) așa-imenși (0.3) ă:: (0.4) părul	sneakers (0.3) u::h (0.4) her hair strapped on
69	într-o parte prins aici (.) micuț-o: așa;	a side here (.) a-sma:ll right; (0.2) a:: uh
70	(0.2) o::î (0.1) un hanorac (.) d-ăla (.)	(0.1) one of those (.) large huge (.) hoodies.
71	larg imens. Parcă era luată de pe	(0.1) Like she had been picked up from the
72	[stradă Gabi]	[street Gabi]
73	Maria: [hî hî hi] hî hî h[î]	Maria: [hu hu hi] hu hu h[î]
74	Anna: [A]sta a fost prima	Anna: [T]his was
75	impresie; °am z's doa::mne dumnezeule°	the first impression; °I s'd o::h my god°
76	(0.3)	(0.3)
77	Anna: ↑Mă rog; (.) am stat de vo:rbă da(h) (0.2)	Anna: ↑Well; (.) we have ta:lked ye(h) (0.2)