“You're Manchester United manager, you can't say things like that”: Impression management and identity performance by professional football managers in the media

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A B S T R A C T
This study applies a discourse analytic lens to media interview communication by professional football managers in order to unpack issues related to language use, identity performance and impression management in this professional context. In particular, this study focuses on a case where attention was drawn to the discursive behaviour of a football manager (David Moyes) during his tenure as boss of Manchester United, a global and highly successful club, with some fans claiming his choices were contrary to (i.e. did not appropriately index) the identity of a Manchester United manager (Jackson, 2014; Stone, 2014a, 2014b). Drawing on a comparative fine-grained analysis of post-match media interviews given by David Moyes and two of his predecessors (Sir Alex Ferguson and Michael Phelan), I attempt to identify linguistic features that motivated such an assessment. The findings reveal Moyes' two predecessors oriented to more assertive language when speaking in post-match media interviews, suggesting that managers of clubs, particularly those with high expectations of success may need to strategically orient to linguistic choices that help them to construct strong and dominant identities. While this study contributes insights into the interactional management of impressions by professional football managers in the media, the broader theoretical contribution of this study is to illustrate the value of a social constructionist perspective on identity (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005a) as a theoretical tool for unpacking issues of impression management, due to its ability to examine complex associations between language use, social meaning and identity construction.

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1. Introduction

This article applies a discourse analytic lens to media interview communication by professional football managers in order to unpack issues related to identity performance and impression management in this profession. Football managers are nowadays expected to conduct aspects of their role in the public eye, often through a range of media interview genres such as the post-match interview. These interviews, as this study will illustrate, can become sites where impressions about a manager’s abilities to manage a football club can be formed, by audiences of football fans and media professionals, from the way they use language.

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In this study, I conduct a detailed analysis of a case in which attention was drawn to the linguistic behaviour in media interviews of a football manager of a global and highly successful club, Manchester United. The manager in question is David Moyes who was appointed after the retirement of the club’s previous and highly successful manager, Sir Alex Ferguson. Pejorative evaluations were given by fans and fan representatives through media reports (more details provided below in the methodology section) regarding the way Moyes spoke, with some claiming his choices were contrary to what is expected of a Manchester United manager (Jackson, 2014; Stone, 2014a, 2014b). These evaluations suggest that in his media interview performances Moyes did not appropriately enact the expected managerial identity of a manager in charge of Manchester United, which in turn contributed to an unfavourable impression being formed.

The analytical goal of this article is to unpack this case through a fine-grained analysis of the ways this manager spoke in his media interviews to identify what it can offer us in terms of insights into the interactional management of impressions by football managers in the media. In particular, I argue that football managers of clubs with high expectations may need to strategically orient to linguistic choices that help them to construct strong, dominant identities when attempting to manage their impressions in the media. However, more broadly, this study aims to illustrate the value of employing a social constructionist perspective on identity (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005a), as a theoretical construct, to help unpack issues of impression management. This is due to its ability to examine complex associations between language use, social meaning and identity construction, and scrutinise these in relation to valued identity portrayals that can attract favourable impressions in a given context.

2. Impression management: using language to manage impressions in media interactions

Attempting to achieve a positive impression in interaction with others is a pervasive human goal, one that speakers orient to in both personal and professional encounters. Researchers from a range of theoretical backgrounds have attempted to understand the skills and strategies speakers employ or need to employ when attempting to manage their impressions (Berger, 2005; Bolino et al., 2008; Bolino and Turnley, 1999; DuBrin, 2011; Landtsheer et al., 2008; Metts and Grohskopf, 2003; Raghuram, 2013; Spencer-Oatey, 2000; Stapleton and Hargie, 2011; Tedeschi, 1981). For pragmatics researchers, the focus has been on exploring how micro features of language and interaction are implicated in this process (Bilbow, 1997; Fuoli, 2017; Gordon, 2004, 2011; Hobs, 2003; Lorenzo-Dus, 2005; Simon-Vandenbergen, 1996).

On the whole, pragmatics researchers have not extensively explored the topic of impression management in the media. This may be due to perceived shortcomings in a pragmatics research agenda to be able to account for the interpretation processes of a broadcast audience. For researchers interested in questions of impression management in the media, the reactions of a broadcast audience are an important piece of the impression management puzzle. Yet these interpretation processes are hard to obtain and are typically unseen, unheard or unutilised by researchers. These issues with the implementation of audience reaction data may make it harder for those engaging in a pragmatic approach to support claims linking linguistic choices with positive or negative impressions and may have deterred some researchers from exploring topics in this domain. It may also reflect concerns by pragmatics researchers that the concept of impression management promotes a simplistic model of communication, one in which a speaker is seen to deploy linguistic choices that garner them favour with an audience. For pragmatics researchers, and others engaged in the detailed analysis of language use in situ, meaning making is a much more complex process.

Several pragmatics researchers have focused on the way speakers employ language to manage their impressions in media interactions (Gordon, 2011; Simon-Vandenbergen, 1996). This body of research has highlighted the idea that impression management is a complex and context-dependent process that involves the deployment of macro level social knowledge by speakers and audiences that contributes to the formation of an impression. For example, Simon-Vandenbergen (1996) explored the way politicians answered challenging questions in BBC radio interviews. While other studies have shown politicians to be evasive, vague and non-committal in the face of challenges from interviewers (Clayman, 2001; Clayman and Heritage, 2002), meanings which perhaps contribute to wider discourses on politicians as untrustworthy, Simon-Vandenbergen shows how politicians draw on a wide range of lexical and grammatical resources, in particular modal resources, to also express certainty when responding to some questions in an attempt to persuade audiences of the rightness of their claims. This linguistic action can be linked to concerns with constructing an identity or image as a trustworthy, knowledgeable and reliable politician, values positively associated with politicians. While being vague and non-committal are strategic actions for addressing the constraints of challenging questions, doing so all the time is unlikely to create a positive and desirable impression with audiences (Simon-Vandenbergen, 1996, p. 390).

Gordon (2011), explored the way linguistic forms were employed by parents on an intervention-based reality television show that aimed to confront them about the bad eating and exercise habits of their children. As with political interviews, this media show, titled Honey We’re Killing the Kids, threatened the impressions of those parents being interviewed, as it is their children’s health, and by extension their parenting that is being called into question. In one part of the show, parents interact with an expert nutritionist whose role is to confront parents about their children’s health and present hypothetical future images of their children if their current eating and exercise habits are continued. In addressing the expert nutritionist in these often confronting and face-threatening interactions, parents draw on a range of forms, primarily apologies and excuses, and paralinguistic strategies such as crying and expressing shock, in an attempt to manage their impressions as good, competent parents. They use apologies to accept blame for the potentially troublesome path they have put their child on, but also employ excuses that try to foreground their unawareness as to the damage they were doing. Both of these actions by parents attempt
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