

Extreme Case Formulations: Softeners, Investment, and Doing Nonliteral

Derek Edwards

Department of Social Sciences
Loughborough University

Extreme case formulations (ECFs) were identified by Pomerantz (1986) as expressions using extreme terms such as *all*, *none*, *most*, *every*, *least*, *absolutely*, *completely*, and so forth, whose uses are to defend or justify a description or assessment, especially in case of challenge. In this study, orientations to the extremity of ECFs are initially shown in how and when they are sometimes qualified or softened. Yet ECFs are overwhelmingly not softened. Further examination shows how ECFs can work as devices for doing “nonliteral,” in the sense of being not accountably accurate descriptions. Rather, their extremity might be taken to display investment in, or stance toward, some state of affairs. In addition to Pomerantz’s observations, therefore, ECFs can (a) display various kinds of “investment” on the part of the speaker (e.g., commitment, certainty, caring, determination, a critical or positive attitude, etc.) and (b) provide for a range of nonliteral, metaphoric uses (interpretable as “it seemed as if [extreme X],” “let us proceed as if [extreme Y],” or “take [extreme Z] as ironic, a joke, a tease, etc.”).

In a seminal article, Pomerantz (1986) drew attention to the conversational uses of *extreme case formulations* (ECFs). ECFs are descriptions or assessments that deploy extreme expressions such as *every*, *all*, *none*,

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Correspondence concerning this article should be sent to Derek Edwards, Department of Social Sciences, Loughborough University, Loughborough, Leicestershire, LE11 3TU, UK. E-mail: D.Edwards@lboro.ac.uk

best, least, as good as it gets, always, perfectly, brand new, and absolutely. Pomerantz identified three uses of ECFs in everyday talk, mainly in complaint sequences:

1. To defend against or counter challenges to the legitimacy of complaints, accusations, justifications, and defenses.
2. To propose a phenomenon is “in the object” or objective rather than a product of the interaction or the circumstances.
3. To propose that some behavior is not wrong, or is right, by virtue of its status as frequently occurring or commonly done. (pp. 219–220)

Inspired by Pomerantz’s (1986) study, ECFs have generally been cited and analyzed as devices used in the rhetoric of factual description and normative accountability (e.g., Edwards & Potter, 1992; Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998; Potter, 1996) in that they are used for defending positions against refutation, making complaints, and justifying factual claims. They have been linked to the fact-making use of “consensus formulations” in discursive psychology (Edwards & Potter, 1992) as well as to various ways of normalizing and pathologizing people’s actions and character (Edwards, 1994, 1995; Hutchby, 1992; Lawrence, 1996; cf. Smith, 1978). The aim of this article is to extend Pomerantz’s observations by pursuing various conceptual and empirical features of ECFs. These include ways in which ECFs can be oriented to in conversational interactions as rhetorically weak (involving the uses of “softeners”), indicative of various kinds of speaker “investment,” and nonliterally meant. This nonliteral notion is not an analytic judgment about the factual accuracy or sincerity of what people say. Rather, it is a demonstrable participants’ orientation to a description as, for example, not accountably accurate, not serious, ironic, exaggerated, joking, teasing, or as a metaphoric “it is *as if* it were so” kind of proposal (see also Torode, 1996).

The main data sets used in the preparation of this article are an extensive collection of British telephone calls recorded by Holt and transcribed by Jefferson (the “Holt” data) and two initial counseling sessions with married couples (see also Edwards, 1995, 1997). The selection of extracts for analysis, from the hundreds of ECFs found in those data sets, is based on their usefulness, and often brevity, in illustrating and developing the main analytic themes that emerged from examining the whole sample.¹

THE CONCEPTUAL AND INDEXICAL PROPERTIES OF ECFs

Pomerantz (1986) defined ECFs by example rather than by logical or grammatical rule. In fact, they cut across a variety of grammatical categories, notably the “superlative” forms of adjectives (*best, most, biggest, least, etc.*); a collection of other semantically extreme adjectives (*total, absolute, whole, etc.*); and various adverbs (*always, never, perfectly, completely, etc.*), nouns (*nothing, everybody, etc.*), and phrases (*as good as it gets, forever, brand new, etc.*). I argue that it is an important feature of how ECFs work that they are generally identifiable in this way, conceptually and out of context (whether by rule or example), as being semantically extreme.

Nevertheless, there are good reasons for not trying to specify a precise definition rule for ECFs. The notion of an ECF is first and foremost a participants’ category, part of common sense, and best pursued as Pomerantz (1986) did, through the empirical study of conversational practices and participants’ orientations. For example, despite the prescriptive efforts of parents and educators, people might move to extrematize ECFs still further, using expressions such as “the very best,” “absolutely everybody,” “nobody whatsoever,” and “very true.”² Similarly, any unqualified statement can be considered logically absolute, especially in the abstract (“tigers have stripes” might be taken, as a logical proposition, to imply all of them), despite the lack of overt markers of extremity.³ In everyday use, ECFs generally refer indexically to something specific and thus are not heard as universalizing logical statements. Indeed, the indexicality of ECFs, as applying to something restricted and specific, is a major basis on which the use of an ECF can be heard as *doing* something not purely descriptive.

Indexical specificity applies to examples such as “I couldn’t get in touch with *anybody*,” “*nothing*’s got through yet,” and “the children’ve *all* gone back to college now” (data from the Holt corpus). In context, these were produced and taken to signify something such as, respectively, “anybody I tried to phone,” “the letter(s) you sent,” and “the children whose colleges we are talking about, excluding any that haven’t gone back for whatever accountable reason.”⁴ They were not challenged, where they occurred, for their accuracy as descriptive generalizations. Thus, although ECFs are generally identifiable as semantically extreme, even out of con-

text, the important thing about them is that they provide for participants' ways of hearably, commonsensically, *going to* extremes, and it is that hearable, discursive activity that is the phenomenon I examine here.

The conceptual and indexical properties of ECFs are evident in extract (1), the opening lines of a married couple's first session in counseling. C is the counselor; the others are W (wife) and H (husband).

(1) DE-JF:C2:S1:1

- 1 C: (So) I understand that you've been (0.8) to::: Relate
 2 before:.=
- 3 W: =Well (.) not really [we just r.egistered,
 4 H: [°(we)°]
- 5 (0.2)
- 6 W: Y'know?
 7 (.)
- 8 C: And you never came
- 9 W: We registered (.) with the problem]=
 10 H: Never went (through with it)]
- 11 W: =and then (.) by the time (0.5) it came up, the
 12 appointment came up we were sort o' sayin och it's
 13 a:ll right we won't bother. .h this time y'know?
 14 (0.6)
- 15 C:: °Right.°
 16 (0.6)
- 17 C:: So:,
 18 (0.8)
- 19 → W: >We [liter]ally know< nothing. about(hh)
 20 C: [Why-]
- 21 C: .hhh
- 22 W: y'kno:w,]
- 23 → C: [y- you] know noth[ing about Relate.] ((smiley voice))
 24 W: [I know nothing.]
- 25 No:, °but a° (.) frend of mine has co:me and I've just
 26 → got bits of information from her but I know nothing
 27 about Relate or-
 28 (0.5)
- 29 C: °Okay.°
 30 (.)

- 31 C: .hhh In which case, (.) let's start by: explorin:g why
32 you've come (.) to Relate >telling me why you've
33 come to Relate< a:nd during the course of that (.)
34 I'll try and explain a little about, (.) how we work,

C starts by proposing, presumably on the basis of some record of a prior visit, that this is not the couple's first time at Relate (the counseling organization), which implies that they might have some relevant prior knowledge of, experience of, or progress in the sort of thing on which they are now about to embark. It is an effort at establishing some common ground for proceeding. The ECFs in the sequence are ways of defining the extent of that common ground and its interactional consequences.

There are a number of ECFs in extract (1), but the ones relevant here are those marked at lines 19, 23, and 26, starting with W's "we literally know nothing (about Relate)." W's "literally . . . nothing" is interesting in several ways. It is clearly not a generalized confession of ignorance but indexically specific to the current business of establishing a shared basis for talking at the start of this first counseling session (cf. the interaction analysis of "insufficient knowledge claims" in Beach & Metzger, 1997). W is proposing that they *proceed as if* she and her husband know nothing. Note the precise location of line 19, following a pause (line 18), after C's "So:," (line 17), which sounds like the start of a turn in which C is about to formulate inferences, upshots, or consequences. This functional (upshot-oriented) reading of W's ECF in line 19 is further supported by the fact that the ECF is qualified in lines 25–26, where W tells how an experienced friend has given her "bits of information," and by the fact that the ECF is nevertheless immediately reiterated in 26–27, "but I know nothing about Relate." The ECF remains sayable, and repeatable, despite having been hearably modified. What makes it worth saying and repeating is evident in its uptake by C, who now receives (line 29) and formulates the upshot of what W has said (lines 31–34), that it provides an understood ("in which case") basis for continuing, indeed for restarting the dialogue ("let's start by"), as a matter of starting from scratch, of H and W explaining why they are there, and of C's explaining what Relate does.

W's "we literally know nothing" is *hearably* extreme, a *doing of* extremity, all the more so because it is asserted and repeated by W and taken up by C, despite it also being available in the talk that W may indeed know something via her prior "registration" visit, what her friend had told her (lines 3, 9, 25–26), and perhaps the otherwise unaccountable fact of

their attending the session (for which payment is required) in the first place (note C's incipient "why" in line 20). C's questioning, "smiley" repetition in line 23 recycles W's initial ECF, picking it out as hearably problematic, perhaps implausible, in need of correction or elaboration, which is precisely what W then offers (cf. "and you never came" in lines 8–10). In any event, W's subsequent return to "I know nothing" is produced and taken up as a performative proposal on how to proceed (lines 29–34), on an *as if it were so* basis rather than, for example, triggering an exploration of what precisely W's friend had told her.

The various ECFs in the extract serve to highlight or direct the hearer to the speaker's "point" (just as vocal emphasis also does). The main business throughout the extract seems to be of the order, "on what basis of shared understanding shall we talk?"—the upshot being something like, "take nothing for granted." It is the ECF's interactional business that is eventually (on repetition, after challenge and mitigation) taken up as consequential rather than its factual accuracy. Yet, it is precisely that absence of literal accuracy (oriented-to and produced in lines 8–10 and 23–27) that permits the interactional, upshot-oriented business to be heard and done.

The subsequent sections of this article explore the nature and uses of ECFs as factually suspect, indexical of the speaker, and potentially nonliterally meant. It is important to emphasize that I use the terms *literal* and *factual* here not as analytic judgments on the factual or intentional status of what people say but as proposals about how *conversational participants themselves* use and orient to ECFs in everyday talk, as shown in extract (1).

SOFTENERS

ECFs are factually brittle, in that an extreme or universalizing statement ("I know nothing," "nobody comes here," "you always say that") risks easy refutation by a single exception, invites being taken nonliterally, and may be treated as an index of the speaker's attitude (subjectivity) rather than as a straightforward description of the world.⁵ Qualified versions (using "mostly," "almost," "few," "hardly any," etc.), despite being weaker claims, can be factually and rhetorically more robust in the sense of less easy to knock over by citing one or two counterexamples. Although there is a certain logic to that (e.g., developed by Popper, 1959), the interesting thing is that it also seems to be something that participants in everyday

talk recognize and orient to in various ways, in how they make and respond to claims, assessments, and descriptions.

The classic example of an ECF, stemming from Sacks's original use of it in a 1964 lecture, is the "everyone does (carry a gun)" sequence from a call to a suicide prevention center (Pomerantz, 1986; Sacks, 1992).

(2a) From Pomerantz (1986: 225–6).

- 1 *Desk:* Do you have a gun at home?
 2 (0.6)
 3 *Caller:* A forty fi:ve,
 4 *Desk:* You do have a forty fi:ve.
 5 *Caller:* Mm hm, it's loaded.
 6 *Desk:* What is it doing there,hh. Whose is it.
 7 *Caller:* It's sitting there.
 8 *Desk:* Is it you:rs?
 9 (1.0)
 10 *Caller:* It's Dave's.
 11 *Desk:* It's your husband's hu:h?=
 12 *Caller:* =I know how to shoot it,
 13 (0.4)
 14 *Desk:* He isn't a police officer:r,
 15 *Caller:* No:.
 16 *Desk:* He just ha:s one.
 17 → *Caller:* Mm hm, It- u- Everyone doe:s don't they?

Sacks's (1992) original interest in the sequence included how line 17 offers a normalizing account for Caller's being in possession of a loaded gun. Sacks called "everyone does" an A3N—an "Account Apparently Appropriate Negativer"—which is to say a device for normalizing or rendering not specifically accountable a questioned activity. In Pomerantz's (1986) terms, and compatibly with Sacks, "everyone does" is also an ECF, performing the third of her three functions: "to propose that some behavior is not wrong, or is right, by virtue of its status as frequently occurring or commonly done" (p. 220). However, the thing of interest here is what happened next.

(2b) (Continued from 2a)

- 18 (1.7)
 19 *Desk:* Yah ee- e:- ah:: ih You have a forty fi:ve and it's
 20 loaded.

- 21 *Caller:* Mm:mm,
 22 → *Desk:* A:nd uh (0.4) I suppose maybe everyone in:hh
 23 evrywuh- in Burnside Park has one I don't kno:w,
 24 (0.7)
 25 *Caller:* Well nō: but I mean- (0.2) a lot of people have guns
 26 *Desk:* Oh su:re,
 27 → *Caller:* I mean it's not- (.) |unusual.
 28 *Desk:* I s::- I: see.

Although Pomerantz (1986) did not pursue post-ECF talk for the most part but focused on what precedes and occasions ECFs, she noted the “challenge” (lines 22–23) to Caller’s ECF and also Caller’s response to it (lines 25, 27).

The challenge calls the Extreme Case formulation to task as a valid and accurate description of the prevalence of people owning guns. In response, the Caller reformulates the description, describing the practice as prevalent with a nonextreme formulation, ‘a lot of people have guns.’ She holds onto the status of owning a gun as normal and accepted by adding, ‘I mean it’s not unusual.’ Disclaiming the contrastive status (‘not unusual’) seems to be a weaker claim for it being accepted practice than ‘everyone does.’ (Pomerantz, 1986, p. 226)

The thing of interest here is this latter point about the softened version (“a lot of people,” “it’s not unusual”) being a “weaker claim.” The ECF “everyone does” (extract 2a, line 17), having failed to cut off Desk’s pursuit of reasons for having a gun, shows the potential brittleness of ECFs as literal descriptions. Note how, in contrast to how the ECF is received (lines 18–23), the softened versions are accepted (at least initially, lines 26, 28—these are all the data available for this sequence). Thus, although a nonextreme generalization is logically and semantically weaker than an ECF, it can be rhetorically and interactionally stronger.

The potential for being softened, in the ECFs of lines 17 and 22–23, is nicely set up in lines 18–21, where a contrastive basis is established of what is jointly known and accepted up to that point. This can be divided for analytic convenience into four components:

1. (1.7)
2. *Desk:* Yah ee- e:- ah::: ih
3. You have a forty fi:ve and it's loaded.
4. *Caller:* Mm:mm,

These are (1) a 1.7-sec delay; (2) an additional period in which some kind of undefined difficulty in Desk's articulating a response is displayed; (3) a reiteration of, or going back to, what Desk and Caller had established to be the case before this point; and (4) the caller's acceptance of that formulation as a basis for continuing. Desk has now established a shared basis against which to problematize in lines 22–23 the literal accuracy of "everybody does." This is an interactional orientation to the factually suspect potential of Caller's ECF in line 17.

Extract (3a) shows the same sequential pattern of ECF–challenge–softener. It occurs early in the first counseling session of a couple and counselor (different people from extract (1)). Again, W is wife, and H is husband. W is telling of problems in her relationship with H that preceded her having an extramarital affair.

(3a) DE-JF:C1:S1:12

- 1 → W: But u::m, (0.3) and I always used to fi:nd that (0.2) um
 2 → he'd never ever listen to (.) how I ↑fe:lt.
 3 (0.5)
 4 O:r he'd he'd think I was being silly:. (0.5) about my
 5 fee:l:ings. .h If I tried to descri:be something (.) to him
 6 about how I felt about him, .h he'd lau:gh and say .h
 7 youknow these ↑thi:ngs.
 8 (0.2)
 9 And it would frustrate me so much I'd g- end up getting
 10 so a:ngry:., (0.4) that (0.6) youknow I'd think wh:at is
 11 the poi:nt.
 12 (2.6)
 13 → H: I didn't laugh at everything.
 14 (0.5)
 15 → W: °Yehh. (.) But most things though.°
 16 (.)
 17 H: Huhhh. ((*jocular exasperation*))
 18 W: Huhh. ((*similar tone*))

W's ECFs are in lines 1 and 2 ("always," "never"). They formulate, as a recurrent pattern, H's extreme lack of interest over a long period of time in anything W had to say. The forcefulness of W's complaint is brought off via the extremity of her descriptions. Yet, it is that same extremity that

enables H to counter W's claims as excessive and inaccurate (line 13, "I didn't laugh at everything"). W counters that denial with a softener (line 15, "but most things though") that acknowledges H's objection still maintaining the force of her generalized complaint.

A significant feature of ECFs is that they remain worth saying and retain their performativity, despite being refutable and despite being refuted. It is not the case that softer kinds of generalizations are simply preferable. Note that W's softener "but most things though" (line 15) implies acceptance of H's objection in line 13. In addition, H's exasperated receipt (line 17) of W's softened version continues to treat it as objectionable. Extract 3b shows how participants might orient to the rhetorical rather than literal force of ECFs.

(3b) (continued from 3a; "Jeff" is H; "Karen" is C)

- 19 C: Can I: (0.3) see if I can rephr_a:se ↓that an' an' and say that
 20 you (.) in shor:t you didn't think that your (0.5) opinions
 21 and feelings mattered. = That your: (.) and that they were:n't
 22 being validated (.) by Jeff. =
 23 W: =Ye::h.
 24 (1.0)
 25 C: [But ()]
 26 → W: [Bu:t ↑Karen] uh he never list↓ened to me.
 27 (0.8)
 28 → C: And when he did, (0.5) he would make comments that made
 29 you feel as if they were:n't r() valuable.
 30 W: ↓Yeh (.) li:ke a little chi:ld.

In lines 19–22, C formulates in nonextreme terms what W has been saying. It is offered as a "rephrase" of that (cf. Heritage & Watson, 1979, on "formulations"), not as an independent version given by C herself. This is itself a notable feature of counseling (cf. the uses of "formulations" in other kinds of mediation and interview settings), as an orientation to the nature of W's version, having been challenged by H as requiring, or being helped or elucidated by, such a reformulation. W accepts C's version (line 23). However, interestingly, at line 26, W then *reiterates* the ECF she first used in lines 1–2, despite having heard and accepted both H's and C's nonextreme revisions of it (cf. the reiteration of "I know nothing" in extract (1)).

Again, note C's response at line 28—"And when he did . . ."—which treats W's reiterated use of "never" as nonliteral, given that there were

occasions “when he did” listen to her. The word *and* helps here, marking “when he did” as a compatible continuation or instance of, rather than refutation of, what W is saying. It elaborates W’s “he never listened to me” as the functional complaint it is rather than countering it as a literal, logical, refutable-by-exception kind of proposition. Thus, C’s nonextreme glosses (lines 19–22, 28–29) formulate the rhetorical point of W’s complaints while treating her ECFs as nonliteral. Despite W’s acceptances (lines 15, 23, 30) of the various softened and glossed versions of what she is taken to be saying, her reiteration of “he never listened to me” (line 26) remains available as a way of making her complaint forceful and hearable as such.

In addition to ECFs being softened following a challenge by another party, speakers might orient to the extremity of ECFs and the comparative acceptability of softeners in the course of producing them. This is shown in extract (4), where M and D are talking about the high costs involved in getting married.

(4) Holt:M88:2:4:43–44

- 1 M: Yeh: well it doesn' go fa:r does i:t.
 2 D: └No: (.) well as we have
 3 ↓said they've got- they've got the house they've got a
 4 very nice house (0.7) they've gotta reasonable amount'v
 5 furniture cz Mike's having iz hou- iz own home before
 6 eez got lovely furniture
 7 (0.8)
 8 ≡ D: His ca::rpets are (.) braa- virtually bran' n[ew ()]
 9 M: └eYe::h?hh

D’s self-repair (line 8) softens “brand new” to “virtually” so. Given that Mike is bringing furniture from his current house (lines 4–6), the status of his carpets as “brand new” is potentially problematic as a literal description. But D is at pains (“very” nice house, “lovely” furniture, and the ECF “brand new”) to emphasize their *essentially* new condition, the upshot being, in this discussion of high costs and expenses, that Mike does not have to buy new carpets. The ECF “brand new” helps display those pains and secure that upshot, but being factually suspect by dint of what precedes it, it is nicely softened by “virtually.”

Extracts (5), (6), and (7) are further examples of speakers’ orientations to the requirement of ECFs to be occasionally weakened, softened, or qualified.

(5) DE-JF:C1:S1:4

1 W: (. . .) now personally I feel, .hhh that thi this othe- othe(h)r
 2 → f(h)ell(h)a (.) is out of my mi- >well he's not completely
 3 out of my mind .hhh but he's i- he's uh out of my mind
 4 emotionally:.<

(6) Holt:M88:1:2:6

1 L: (. . .) But the ↑thing was I couldn't get eh:m .p.t I couldn't
 2 get a (.) cott'n (.) petticoat or (.) p- cott'n slip any↓where.
 3 J: Could ↓d'n you? :
 4 → L: .h h h [No: they're all: this polyester mostly,
 5 .hhhphhhhhhh
 6 J: .tch Oh:.....:

(7) Holt:88U:2:4:35–36 [talking about pictures of Steven's new baby]

1 C: (. . .) Yes Steven wz sayin:g you know he didn't take any
 2 toda:y but he's goh- he's got a a film of prints: ()=
 3 L: .hhhhhh ihYes.
 4 Lovely.hh
 5 → C: =so he says he will roll the:m pretty well straight o:ff
 6 but he'll get two sets done when 'ee is doing (...)
 7 L: [Y e s. h h]

In extract (5), W denies and softens an ECF she has not actually uttered. She seems to be attending to the capacity noted earlier, for simple, unmodified generalizations (“X is out of my mind”) to be taken as logically equivalent to an ECF. In any case, W’s denial of “completely” and the restriction to “emotionally” allow her to make both a more plausible and a more targeted claim. It is her possibly continuing *feelings* for her ex-lover that concern her husband (overtly, in talk not presented here), not the fact that she might still merely remember him.⁶ In extracts (6) and (7), the softening is done in phrase, again restricting the ECF in the course of its production. L’s “all this polyester mostly,” like C’s “pretty well straight off,” manages to incorporate the point of the story (the difficulty of finding cotton slips, the urgency with which Steven will print off and provide pictures of his new baby) while avoiding the unlikelihood or implausibility that there were no such items anywhere, or that Steven should be expected to go and “roll them off” that very second.

ECF softeners work by (a) providing for a sequential response to a challenge; (b) indexing the speaker as reasonable, taking account of empirical realities, not making excessive claims;⁷ and (c) retaining the generalizing work that ECFs perform while being immune from easy rebuttal by countercases. However, although the essential *logic* of the sequence ECF–challenge–softener still applies, that is not the only sequential order in which those elements occur. ECFs can follow, as well as precede, softened or less extreme versions. One basis for that, as seen in extracts (1) and (3b), is that ECFs retain their rhetorical, performative uses (e.g., as a way of hearably and forcibly making a complaint), even when a more acceptable, less extreme version is available. Another basis for ECFs to follow softer versions is that they provide ways of upgrading and taking to extremes what has been said, whether in signaling emphatic agreement (Pomerantz, 1984) or alternatively in setting something up for irony and disagreement. Examples of the latter occur among Hutchby's (1992) cases of how the hosts of call-in "talk radio" programs "engender skepticism" about callers' claims, such as when a caller's complaint about what "usually" happens (when dogs foul the pavement) was glossed and upgraded to "every time," as a way of raising doubt about it as an accurate generalization (see also Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998, p. 107). The same kinds of reformulations occur in the couple counseling data, where H or W reformulates in extreme terms something the other has said.⁸

Although the uses of softeners or qualifiers of ECFs have proven interesting, there is a quantitative feature of the data that remains puzzling. It is not meaningful to present a statistical count, but far fewer softened ECFs were found than expected, given their rhetorical and interactional uses. ECFs themselves were plentiful but mostly unsoftened. The remainder of this article is the fruits of pursuing, through the data sets, why that might be so.

The notions of "investment" and "nonliteral orientation," examined in the sections that follow, help explain the relative infrequency of softened ECFs. As I noted with "we literally know nothing" (extract (1)), ECFs can be challenged and softened as literal descriptions but also offered and taken up in a metaphoric sense, as proposing what is *essentially* true or what can be *taken to be* the case as a basis for proceeding. Similarly, with "everyone does" (extract (2)) and "he never listened to me" (extract (3)), these are also understandable, not as failed efforts at accurate description but as *it seemed as if*, or *it is essentially so* kinds of proposals.⁹ Note that softeners propose the same thing but more explicitly. Expressions such as

“a lot of people,” “but most things though,” and “virtually brand new” say that something is *essentially*, if not absolutely, the case. Softeners, as responses to challenges to ECFs, are understandable therefore as a kind of other-initiated self-repair (Schegloff, Jefferson, & Sacks, 1977), correcting or reformulating what was meant, just as self-initiated repairs (see extracts (4) and (5)) anticipate and fix any such problems before they arise. Many ECFs do not require softening because they are taken, in the context of their production, as doing something other than offering accountably accurate descriptions.

INVESTMENT

Pomerantz’s (1986) three uses of ECFs (cited earlier) are basically oppositional or argumentative, occurring in environments where descriptions and assessments are being strengthened or resisted. This applies to much of the counseling data, where W and H produce and defend opposed versions of facts and events (Edwards, 1995). These are environments in which the extremity of a viewpoint or version might be taken as an index of a person’s stance, prejudice, clouded vision, emotional state, irrationality, or whatever. However, I have noted that ECFs also occur in affiliative sequences, as upgrades and displays of affiliation *being done*, of agreement being full, and so on—as in Pomerantz’s (1984) demonstration of how upgraded “second assessments” display agreement. ECFs make excellent upgrades. Extracts (8) through (12) are examples where extremity is agreeably arrived at, in a series of escalating assessments.

(8) Holt:M88:1:5:4 (R and L are talking about their teacher colleagues)

- 1 R: Well I wonder you know I don’t always know what to ma:ke
 2 of mih- Cynthia Pelch, what do you: . I don’t kno:w.
 3 L: .hh No, I
 4 think she- (.) ↑aa- well. b-di-Quite honehstly .hh I think
 5 she c’n be ru:de. An’, an’ I think Freddie Masters can too:.
 6 R: °Oh:.
 7 I kno:w.° I mean I haven’t run up against them but I do:n’t find
 8 th’m overhelpful.=

- 9 → L: =.hhh No, (.) nuh- (.) no help at all fr'm Freddie Masters an'
 10 a:n' sometimes I've f- almost to be:g. .hhhh for things.
 11 R: └─┬─┘ Yes

R invites an assessment from L of their colleague Cynthia Pelch (lines 1–2). Although displaying tentativeness (“I don’t know”) about offering any concrete judgment of her own, R manages to introduce Pelch as problematical in some way. L then also displays tentativeness (lines 3–4) and prefaces her eventual assessment “rude” with “can be” (line 5), which softens it against defeat by exceptions, and with “quite honestly,” which selects honesty as a basis for saying it rather than, for example, some kind of bad feeling on L’s or R’s part. L’s eventual ECF “no help at all from Freddie Masters” (line 9) upgrades R’s prior “(not) overhelpful,” itself an uptake from L’s comment in the previous turn (line 5), linking Masters to Pelch. This is an escalating set of affiliated assessments, initially tentative, with L and R effectively sounding each other out before concluding with the ECF “no help at all” and the softened “almost to beg.” L’s ECF “no help at all,” with its emphasis on “no,” highlights both the negativity of the assessment and, indexically, the built-up *commitment to it* by L and R.

(9) Holt:M88:1:5:8

- 1 R: Yes I've had Ca:rrie Fitzhugh I've ↑moved o:ver to her
 2 table to think .hh thinking that she'd enjoy the-u-the:
 3 ┌──────────┐
 4 L: └──────────┘ [N o : : , neh it doesn't work ou:t does it.
 5 → R: Not at all (n[one of it])
 6 L: ┌──────────┐ I did u I did move Carrie over
 7 └──────────┘ there'n moved her back again,

In extract (9), line 2, R’s emphatic “thinking that” sets up the decision to move Carrie Fitzhugh as potentially mistaken or futile. L upgrades that to the status of a general rule (line 4, “it doesn’t,” not “it didn’t”) and feeds it back as such to R (“does it”). R agrees via an ECF upgrade (line 5). The ECF “not at all (none of it)” is a kind of last-logical-position formulation, signaling the solidity of both the assessment and the *agreement* with that assessment—confirmed by L’s immediate “no” (line 6) and her provision of a further confirming instance of the rule with the same pupil (lines 6–7).

(10) Holt:88U:2:4:10–11 (L and C are talking about C’s daughter Megan in the aftermath of a family bereavement)

- 1 C: She’s been very he:lpful
 2 (0.2)
 3 L: Qh: ↓good. An’ she’s ↑comp’ny for you isn’ʃshe.
 4 C: Qh she i:s.
 5 Ye:s.
 6 L: Grea↑t ↓comp’ny.
 7 → C: Definitely ye:’s.
 8 L: Mm:’n.
 9 C: Ye::s,

Extract (10) is a condensed series of escalating affiliative assessments culminating in an ECF (line 7). There is a relevant rhetorical context for this sequence. Megan’s being “very helpful” and “great company” is counter to what might be expected, given that it is Megan’s father who has died and that Megan is mentally disabled (these points are made clear prior to the start of the extract). Again, the ECF “definitely yes” (line 7), in which C upgrades her own prior “Yes” (line 5), highlights not only what Megan is like but also the act and extent of affiliation between L and C. Note that the word *definitely* is not merely an ECF but a particular word that attends to its rhetorical context, that these judgments are “definite”—that is, beyond doubt, as if doubt were relevant. “Definitely” shows how conceptually specific ECFs perform specific work—it is not equivalent to, for example, “absolutely” or “the best.” It is not only the extremity of ECFs that provides for their selection but their conceptual content, too. The choice of “definitely” rather than, for example, “perfect (company),” attends directly to the *certainty of the assessment* rather than of the qualities being assessed.

(11) Holt:M88:1:5:24

- 1 R: (. . .) Nick’s bought heavy duty stock
 2 t’la:st ()
 3 → L: [Ye:s.] [It’s g’nna last for ever ye:’s.
 4 R: Ye:s

Again, the specific ECF “for ever” (line 3), like “definitely” in extract (10), is semantically important—in this case, more obviously so, bearing

directly on Nick's motive for buying heavy duty stock—"to last" (line 2). However, again, its extremity serves to highlight the action being performed, that agreement is done, point taken.

Extract (12) is a longer sequence showing how descriptions, assessments, and particularly the uses of ECFs might be treated by participants as not only describing and assessing the objects they are applied to, but also *indexing the speaker's stance or attitude*. Again, this trades on the capacity of ECFs to be heard as going to extremes and thus as saying, perhaps, more than mere accuracy requires. L's mother M is saying of L's mother-in-law, "Mrs. Field," that she would have no right to complain, should she find out that she is not being invited to a memorial service for Louisa, a person she treated badly.

(12) Holt:X(C)1:1:1:30

- 1 M: ↑How dare she expect t'be there.
 2 L: I kno:w ye:s,
 3 M: She wz so wicked to Lou:isa.
 4 (0.6)
 5 L: Mm hhm hm
 6 → M: All those years ago.
 7 L: Ye:s.
 8 (.)
 9 L: O↑[kə:y love]
 10 M: [(A : : s u]sual.) If Louisa had (know:n) she wouldn't
 11 've uh (0.5) carted Missiz Field about like she did (.)
 12 → all the time,
 13 (0.2)
 14 L: No:,
 15 M: Taking 'er to to:wn an' to do ()- do 'er shopping
 16 → (0.3) everywhere she wanted to go Louisa used to take 'er
 17 in the ca:r,
 18 (0.2)
 19 L: Ye:s th't's ri:ght,
 20 M: Yep
 21 (0.2)
 22 L: °M[m°
 23 M: [Got quite a lot'v (0.4) service out'v Louisa,
 24 L: Ye(h)es ↓hn hn↓ °hhhh

and indexical of their producers, underpins the subtlety of extract (12), where M's emphatic descriptions of Mrs. Field are available for participants as both indications of *what Mrs. Field is like* and indexes of M's *investment* in those descriptions.

DOING NONLITERAL

I have noted that the sheer extremity of ECFs makes them available for a range of "as if," "essentially so," nonliteral or metaphoric uses and uptakes. In this section, ECFs are shown to help make actions such as exaggerating, teasing, emphasizing, ironizing, joking, and so on,¹¹ not only done but *seen-to-be-done* or interactionally brought off (cf. Clift, 1999).

Extract (13) is from near the end of a couple's first counseling session. The irony being pointed up, first by C (lines 4–7) and then by W (lines 8–12), is that the husband eventually did what he feared his wife might do, which was to have an extramarital affair. The analytic theme here is the role of ECFs in how the irony is done and what it does.

(13) DE-JF:C2:S1:28

- 1 C: I'm say:in::g you come here:, (0.2) becau:se (.) >y'r marriage
 2 is in a ↑mess:.<
 3 (0.5)
 4 It was: (0.4) what you ((referring to W)) would (.) descri:be as
 5 → rock ↑sol↓id. Then all of a sudden, you've ((referring to H))
 6 gone off, (0.2) the thing you fear:, (1.2) of: (.) Connie, (.) you
 7 actually wen' off (.) and did, (0.2) be[cause of the pain-
 8 W: [That's another thing] (.) I
 9 → used to say to myself (.) y'know, (.) ↑my husband would never
 10 have an affair because he is so: (0.2) strict and such HI:gh
 11 → MOOrals an' everything else about what ↑I would do:, (0.3) he
 12 → has gone o:ff and done eXACTly, (0.4) y'know,
 13 (.)
 14 C: But what's happened is there's a kind of vicious circle that's
 15 going around.

C sets up the ironic contrast at line 5, with the ECF “rock solid,” which quotes an earlier description by W.¹² The idiomatic extremity of “rock solid” (i.e., as stable as a marriage can be) maximizes the contrast against H going off “all of a sudden” (line 5) and “actually” (line 7). W picks up C’s observation that, despite H’s expressed fears and apparently high principles, he was the one who had the affair. W points out and drives home the irony of that by using a further series of vocally emphasized ECFs (“never,” “everything else,” “exactly”) along with other indefinitely maximizing terms (“so” strict, “such” high morals), generating maximum contrast between H’s high principles for what he expected of W and his own personal conduct. A further ironic twist is developed by C, that not only did H’s behavior contrast with his principles for W, but it was precisely his “pain” (line 7), which is to say his fear that she might go off with somebody (line 6), that drove him to do it himself—the “vicious circle” referred to idiomatically¹³ in line 14.

The use of ECFs to ironize a description is evident in C’s quoted (rather than W’s original) use of the description “rock solid” (extract (13), lines 4–5)) and in W’s ECFs in lines 9–12, which are offered as “echoic” quotations of what she used to say to herself (line 9). Extract (14), involving a different couple and counselor, shows that ironic quotations, along with their *formulation as* ECFs, can be a way of saying things, a participant’s way of “doing” irony rather than simply a matter of quoting and disagreeing.

(14) DE-JF:C1:S1:9–10

- 1 W: [BUT YOU DON'T belie:ve me:.,
 2 H: |No, no what I'm tryin'
 3 to: (0.7) to (.) sort'v ascertain is:, (2.5) u::m: (0.2)
 4 → W: 'cos ↑you think I'm the wor:st ↓person on this
 5 ↑plan ↓det. (.) At the mo:ment.= ((*plaintively*))
 6 H: |↑No ↓I do:n't,|
 7 H: =That's not fai↑:r, no- (.) I ↓don't,
 8 W: °That's what you've been telling me.°
 9 → H: Hheh heh.
 10 (0.9)
 11 H: ↑No I haven't said ↓tha↑:t,
 12 W: |°Yeh you have.°
 13 (0.5)
 14 H: I might have said I didn't- I haven't- (.) there are times
 15 when I can't respect you, and I ca:n't,

20 → D: Yah:-ah well ee ee:z (.) [sitting right nex't me=
 21 M: .t .h h h h h h h h]

In extract (17), D takes a call from M, whom D takes to be calling “mum” (M’s cousin) who is out, and D offers to hand M over to “dad” instead. M’s reaction (line 3) is probably jocular, but the interesting thing is what D then does with it in lines 6–12, and M’s responses in 7–13, the series of ECFs and accompanying laughter. The thing to note here is that D’s father is apparently sitting within earshot, at least of what D is saying (line 20, where the ECF “*right next to me*” makes that close proximity relevant), but that M seems unaware of it (lines 15–18). We can see that D’s ECF upgrades in lines 6 and 8 (“*all the miserable things*,” “as you *always* do”) formulate M’s prior description as more obviously not to be taken seriously. M’s initial formulation is thus solidified as a bit of teasing, not only for D and M but also, presumably, for the overhearing “dad.”

CONCLUSION

Pomerantz (1986) showed how ECFs are used in complaining, accusing, justifying, and defending the descriptions and assessments in which they occur. As part of a complaint sequence, for example, an extreme description helps in “portraying a situation as a legitimate complainable” (Pomerantz, 1986, p. 227). Nevertheless, the very extremity of ECFs makes them rhetorically brittle, occasioning the use of softeners as responses to, or forestallings of, actual or potential challenges. And yet, ECFs are overwhelmingly used, across the different data corpuses drawn on here in non-softened, unqualified ways. Analysis of a range of examples provides a possible explanation for that pattern. It is that ECFs may not *require* softening, insofar as they may *already* be hearably nonliteral, performative, or indexical of investment—that is, offered and received as something other than accountably accurate proposals about the world.

Softeners are useful in providing for responses to challenges to ECFs and self-repairs or modifications of extreme utterances in progress. Considered as repairs, softeners say what is *essentially* asserted, or perhaps was meant in the first place, by the ECFs they qualify. Various empirical observations show that nonsoftened ECFs also can be taken to have that

same “essentially so” property. First, it was noted that ECFs *remain sayable* even shortly after being successfully challenged and softened. Second, ECFs are *overwhelmingly unsoftened*, despite the rhetorical and interactional advantages of softeners. Third, ECFs can be taken to display a speaker’s *investment* rather than a description’s literal accuracy. Fourth, ECFs are used and oriented to in *metaphoric*, “essentially so,” “as if it were so” ways, performing irony, teasing, and joking.

This study has demonstrated how ECFs might be used and oriented to in ways that exploit their potential as invested or nonliteral descriptions. The initially observed pattern ECF–challenge–softener, rather than turning out to be a standard or frequent sequential format in which ECFs generally occur, is better understood as reflecting a kind of logic or practical reasoning that participants use and orient to in various ways, even in non-softened cases. The logic depends on the factually suspect nature of extremity and, hence, the uses of ECFs in signaling, or making available for inferences and uptakes, a range of nonliteral intent, such as formulating an “as if” basis for proceeding, displaying investment, being ironic, teasing, joking, and so forth.

NOTES

- 1 Although there are some interesting differences in what the ECFs are used to do, between the telephone and the counseling data, these are not pursued here. The use of both data sets primarily is to extend the range of examples and interactional contingencies rather than to perform a comparative study.
- 2 There are various interactional contingencies for such ostensibly (logically) unnecessary embellishments. For example, they provide a way of “upgrading” a prior assessment (Pomerantz, 1984) that is already extreme, where “doing an upgrade” is something that has its own interactional business to perform, and has to be seen to be done.
- 3 This can happen in the concrete too, of course. At the time of writing (October 12, 1998), a British government official, former Chief Medical Officer Sir Kenneth Calman, was attempting to explain why he had declared British beef to be “safe” during the notorious Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy, or ‘mad cow disease’ crisis, despite knowing its dangers. He explained that people had been mistaken to take “safe” as meaning “absolutely safe.”
- 4 These interpretative glosses are not proposals about what the speaker and hearer are actually thinking or understanding. Rather, they are the *kinds* of indexical constraints

that operate locally on each ECF's range of reference, such that it would be strange or awkward for a recipient to start looking for exceptions, like that a child they know who lives two streets away has measles and is not back at school yet, or that there may be some people in the world that the phone caller had not tried to get in touch with. Of course, such pursuits of the literal are therefore available for being done ironically, which is also a way of exploiting the nonliteral candidature of ECFs.

- 5 The ways in which discourse formulates and manages relations between subject and object, mind and world, attitude and fact, perception and reality, and so forth, are a major focus of discursive psychology (Edwards, 1997; Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter, 1996).
- 6 Note also in this regard, the ironic (laughed-over) "this other fella," a nicely distanced, impersonal category for denying fond thoughts of him (rather than, say, "Andy" or "lover"). It is also specifically the category relevant to H and her marriage, and seen from that viewpoint—the "other fella."
- 7 This is presumably the rhetorical basis of a long-running advertisement for Carlsberg lager, that it is "*probably* the best lager in the world."
- 8 For example, W tells how, prior to her affair, "I started going round with my friends *quite a bit*, (1.6) u:m, (0.4) ↑*just* to get out of the house." H's subsequent version was: "Mary was *a:ways* going out now" (DE-JF:C1:S1).
- 9 Thanks to Anita Pomerantz for suggesting this "seems as if" formulation of what is going on in many nonliteral orientations to ECFs.
- 10 I am indebted to Celia Kitzinger for the following quotation, which nicely shows the author's sense of his own ECFs as nonliteral ways of "making a point":

I couldn't think of anything worse than living in a place where you could buy a \$200 sweater but not a can of baked beans. Actually, I could think of a lot of worse things—cancer of the brain, watching every episode of a TV mini-series starring Joan Collins . . . , and so on. But I think you get my point. (Bryson, 1989, pp. 164–165)

- 11 These are nontechnical, commonsense categories; there is no suggestion that exaggerating, emphasizing, teasing, and so on, are discrete types of speech acts.
- 12 See Sperber and Wilson (1995) for a cognitive–pragmatic analysis of "echoic mention" in irony; and Clift (1999), Holt (1996), and Hutchby (1992) for relevant conversation analysis treatments of ironic quotation. W's prior use of "rock solid" is analyzed in Edwards (1995).
- 13 There are interesting connections between ECFs and idioms not explored here. Some ECFs are themselves idiomatic—"rock solid," "clean as a whistle." However, idioms also possess the quality, even more obviously than ECFs do, of being hearably nonliteral descriptions and assessments of whatever they are applied to, which also makes them useful in performing and being heard to perform discursive actions of various kinds (cf. Drew & Holt, 1995; Sacks, 1992).

- 14 ECFs are clearly not the only ways of signaling exaggeration, irony, humor, and so forth, and are likely to occur with other features of talk including specific lexical selections, contrasts with known facts, mocking intonation, deadpan delivery, various facial expressions (raised eyebrows, forced smiles), and so on.

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