

Extreme Case Formulations

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Abstract

Extreme case formulations (ECFs) are semantically extreme formulations that invoke the maximal or minimal properties of events or objects, such as “everyone,” “nobody,” “always,” “never,” “completely,” “nothing,” and so on. This entry reviews seminal work on ECFs, identifying their key features and interactional uses. These include their uses in defending against or countering challenges to the legitimacy of complaints, accusations, justifications and defenses; in proposing the objective (rather than circumstantial) nature of a phenomenon; in proposing that some behavior is right or wrong by virtue of being widespread; and in producing designedly non-literal (and thus not accountably accurate) descriptions that display various kinds of investment on the part of speaker, and can also be used in actions such as joking, teasing and irony. In addition, the entry describes some of the applied interactional research in which ECFs have been shown to be an important resource for participants, and thus for analysts.

The term “extreme case formulations” (or ECFs) was coined by Pomerantz (1986), but the phenomenon it refers to was initially observed by Sacks in a 1964 lecture. Sacks’ observations were based on a call to a suicide prevention center in which a caller to a suicide prevention center has revealed that there is a loaded gun in the house (belonging to the caller’s husband). Following questioning from the call-taker about the husband’s warrant for having a gun, the caller responds by suggesting that “Everyone does, don’t they?” In his discussion of this utterance, Sacks notes how it “cuts off the basis of the search for an account” thereby enabling the caller to avoid providing an account of the sort that the call-taker was pursuing, and to do so without offering evidence for her claim about the widespread nature of gun ownership (Sacks, 1992, p. 23-24).

Building on these observations, Pomerantz’s (1986) seminal paper on ECFs identifies the central features of this device. She locates ECFs within a broader class of “practices of description,” and provides a number of examples (including “brand new,” “completely innocent,” “he was driving perfectly,” “he didn’t say a word,” “I really don’t know who he is,” “no time,” “forever,” “every time,” and “everyone”). As Edwards (2000, p. 349) notes, 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.*).

The common feature of all ECFs is thus that they are semantically extreme, invoking the maximal or minimal properties of objects or events (Sidnell, 2004). As such, ECFs can be seen as a type of hyperbole, although Norrick (2004) distinguishes them from other hyperbole in terms of the ways in which they are produced, understood, and responded to. In keeping

with the traditional conversation analytic focus on participants' orientations and categories, ECFs are best seen as a common-sense participants' category to be examined empirically in situated interactions, rather than seeking a precise *a priori* definition (Edwards, 2000).

Pomerantz (1986, p. 219-220) identifies three uses of ECFs in the course of actions such as complaining, accusing, justifying, and defending, namely:

- (1) to defend against or to 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.

With respect to the first of these uses, Pomerantz describes participants' orientation to the possibility that a complaint could be responded to as illegitimate, or the impact of the offense on the complainer could be treated as minor. Presenting the strongest possible case through the use of ECFs thus offers a means by which participants can portray a situation as a "legitimate complainable", and thereby pre-empt or address challenges to the worthiness of the complaint. The second use of ECFs relates to the problem participants face in attributing causes of complainable, conflictual, or praise-worthy states of affairs, with one's comparison to other similar cases serving as a method for making attributions in such cases. Thus, using ECFs such as "everyone," "all," and "every time" serves as an indication that responsibility cannot be attributed to the characters or personalities of the individual actors involved, but instead should be attributed to the features of the targeted object. In discussing the third use of ECFs, Pomerantz notes the assumption that people's behavior serves as an indication of what can be taken to be acceptable or right ways of behaving. Following this reasoning, ECFs that propose how frequently or prevalently people behave in particular ways (e.g., "all the

time,” “never,” “everybody,” “no one”) can be used to indicate whether behaviors are acceptable or unacceptable.

Importantly, Pomerantz notes that ECFs can be challenged by challenging the degree to which they serve as valid or accurate measures of the proportions of people, prevalence of events, etc. that they refer to. This is demonstrated in the telephone call on which Sacks’ observations were based, as the call taker in that case subsequently challenges the validity of the caller’s claim that “everyone” has a gun. In response, the caller responds by reformulating the claim in a non-extreme way (“a lot of people have guns...I mean it’s not unusual”), thus backing down from the extreme character of the original claim and conceding that its accuracy was questionable. As a result, the claims that the use of ECFs serve to legitimate can be undermined by challenging the literal accuracy of the ECFs employed for this purpose.

In a second seminal paper on ECFs, Edwards (2000) explores the implications of the challengeable and non-literal character of ECFs, and in doing so extends Pomerantz’s findings in a number of ways, beginning with a set of observations on the use of what he calls “softeners”. Edwards describes ECFs as “factually brittle” as a result of the ease with which they can be refuted by a single exception. One way in which speakers can manage this brittleness is by producing “softened” formulations through the use of qualifiers such as “mostly,” “almost,” “few,” and so on, which are weaker claims by virtue of being less extreme, but may be more robust rhetorically and interactionally as a result of not being as easy to refute by citing counterexamples. This can be seen in the way in which the call taker in Sacks’ data challenged the caller’s original, extreme, claim, but displayed agreement with the first of her subsequent weaker claims, and tacitly accepted the second. Building on these observations, Edwards demonstrates a recurrent sequential pattern of *ECF – challenge* [by a co-participant] – *softener*, and notes that speakers may also (even in the absence of an explicit

challenge) orient to the questionable validity of ECFs and the relative defensibility of softened claims in the course of producing formulations. This finding is consistent with Antaki and Wetherell's (1999) analysis of three part sequences in which a single speaker 1) produces an ECF, then 2) concedes that it is not strictly accurate, before 3) reprising the original ECF. This has the effect of acknowledging the overstated nature of the ECF, thereby pre-empting potential challenges relating to its validity, while retaining the force of the claim to which it contributes.

Edwards (2000) observes, however, that despite these advantage of using softeners, the majority of ECFs are produced without accompanying softeners. This suggests that ECFs may serve other functions in addition to their uses in legitimating claims described by Pomerantz (1986). Edwards identifies two further functions of ECFs, both of which relate to their recurrent treatment as "*essentially* true or what can be *taken to be* the case as a basis for proceeding" rather than being designed to be literally or accountable accurate, or being responded to as such (p. 359-360; emphasis in original). The first of these additional functions of ECFs involves indexing a speaker's "investment" in a claim. This provides for affiliative uses of ECFs, in contrast to the primarily oppositional or argumentative uses identified by Pomerantz. For example, ECFs can be employed to upgrade prior assessments – where doing so is, as Pomerantz (1984) has shown, an important way of displaying full agreement. In addition, the role of ECFs in displaying investment in a claim can contribute to the force of actions such as denying and insisting by displaying an extreme stance or attitude toward versions of facts and events, regardless of the strict (in)accuracy of the ECF being employed. This use of ECFs is shown in analyses of their deployment in contexts in which ideologically charged matters, such as expressions and denials of prejudice, are at stake. For example, Whitehead and Wittig (2004) examined how student participants of focus group discussions conducted to evaluate a multiculturalist prejudice-reduction intervention rejected

the relevance of the intervention to them by (among other practices) denying that they were prejudiced. In some cases, the students mobilised ECFs in the service of these denials, as shown in the following excerpt:

(1) [STOP FG, 04/23/03, p. 4]

- 1 Student D: I didn't like the racist one because I've never been racist. That was useless to me. The racist
2 one, where we had to watch a TV show of a different race and see how they would be in that
3 show.
- 4 Facilitator: Yes. That was a homework assignment. It was to go home and watch a program and write
5 about it.
- 6 Student D: I never judge a person because of their skin color or their race.

In this case, Student D produces an extreme negative evaluation of the value of a homework exercise involving observation of representations of different race groups in the media, describing it as “useless to me” (line 1), and basing this claim on denials of racism (line 1) and prejudice (line 6) that he produces using the ECF “never”. These ECFs thus contribute toward the student’s extreme negative stance toward this component of the intervention, and to the force of his denials of racism and prejudice.

The second function of ECFs resulting from their treatment as non-literal involves the production of actions such as exaggerating, teasing, ironizing and joking, with the metaphoric deployment of ECFs contributing to such actions being “not only done but *seen-to-be-done* or interactionally brought off” (Edwards, 2000, p. 365). ECFs can thus be produced as designedly and recognizably non-literal (or “as if”) formulations in the service of such actions, with participants in these cases treating them as such rather than orienting to their vulnerability to challenges.

In light of the range of uses of ECFs described above, it is not surprising that dozens of studies have demonstrated their deployment not just in ordinary conversational interactions, but also in the pursuit of a wide range of institutionally relevant agendas. For example, Íñigo-Mora's (2007) analysis of the use of ECFs in pre-election debates examines how politicians employ them as persuasive devices, in conjunction with other well-known rhetorical devices such as hyperbole and repetition. In addition, she shows how ECFs can be used in the course of argument and refutation between political opponents, and how the same ECF may be repeated multiple times in the same turn at talk in such contexts. A second example is Sidnell's (2004) analysis of the use of ECFs in testimony to a legal inquiry into seven deaths resulting from water contamination in Ontario, Canada. Sidnell demonstrates how the Ontario premier relied heavily on ECFs in his defense against the attempts of lawyers for various public interest groups to hold him accountable for the events surrounding these deaths. Specifically, the premier used ECFs to re-characterize the events as unremarkable, to reformulate and challenge the appositeness of the lawyers' questions, and ultimately to diffuse responsibility for the actions (or failures to act) invoked by the lawyers. A final example can be found in Voutilainen et al.'s (2010) analysis of how ECFs contribute, in combination with other devices, to therapists' practices for speaking "from within the patient's problematic experience" (p. 92). Thus, by using idiomatic formulations, including ECFs, in recognizing and interpreting a patient's description of an emotional experience, a therapist can both display an understanding of the patient's account, and adopt the same affective stance as the patient, thereby treating the patient's experience as valid.

Uses of ECFs in ways consistent with those described above have also been observed in a number of languages apart from English, including Cypriot Greek, Danish, Finnish, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Mandarin, and Spanish. For instance, Voutilainen et al.'s (2010) analysis of therapist-patient interactions was based on Finnish speakers, while Íñigo-Mora's

(2007) study compares the use of ECFs in Spanish pre-election debates and English panel interviews.

Based on the foregoing discussion, it is clear that ECFs constitute a robust and flexible practice that can be employed in the production of numerous ordinary actions, and in a wide range of interactional settings and languages. This makes them a potentially important interactional resource for participants, and thus a significant analytic resource for researchers.

See Also: Agreement, disagreement → argument discourse → conversation analysis → discursive psychology → formulations → ideology in discourse → language and social interaction → rhetorical devices → stance-taking → strategic maneuvering

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