

Football managers must talk the talk as well as walk the walk, research finds

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Football managers must choose their words and their interview strategies with care if they want to win over the fans and project a successful image, according to University of Warwick linguistics expert Kieran File.

In a new paper published in the Journal of Pragmatics, Dr. File, from the University's Centre for Applied Linguistics, explores how the language used by Manchester United manager David Moyes in his post-match interviews may have affected the fans' confidence in his ability to govern the team.

Unlike most professionals in management roles, football managers face regular media scrutiny, and are obliged to give interviews in circumstances that are quite face-threatening, such as after a match has been lost. Dr. File argues that this makes football management "probably one of the most difficult managerial contexts in the world."

Dr. File said: "What first caught my eye were comments by fans and fan groups that suggested David Moyes didn't speak in the way they believed a Manchester United manager should speak.

"I wanted to see whether David Moyes actually used language differently to other Manchester United managers when speaking to the media. And it turns out that he did speak differently."

Dr. File analysed 28 interviews given by David Moyes and his

predecessors Sir Alex Ferguson and assistant manager Mike Phelan to the BBC after losing matches. He found that

- While all three managers would compliment teams that had beaten them, only Moyes was willing to compliment the team's fiercest rivals – even Manchester City.
- When asked to sum up the team's feelings about a loss, Ferguson and Phelan used strongly negative words, like 'terrible', 'horrible', and 'suicidal.' Moyes used less judgemental words like 'disappointment.'
- All three managers expressed the wish to do better after a losing game, but while Ferguson and Phelan would declare that the team "will" recover, Moyes would typically say the team would 'try' and that he 'hoped' they could turn things around.

Commenting on his findings, Dr. File said: "Sir Alex Ferguson and Mike Phelan used strategies which presented themselves as assertive, strong, confident and uncompromising, while, in the interviews which I analysed, David Moyes creates an image of himself as magnanimous, tolerant and cautious.

"Media strategies like being complimentary of the opposition, being less critical of your team and trying to avoid over-promising are used by football managers and managers of other sports teams across the world every day – but it is all about the context.

"Fans of big clubs like Manchester United expect their manager to speak in ways that show they are confident that they can fix mistakes and right wrongs. They have high expectations of their team and expect the manager to hold players to account when they fall short.

"The need to adopt and perform a strong, assertive identity in interviews – perhaps even if this threatens relationships with the team—may be part

of what makes managerial jobs like Manchester United high-pressure ones.

"Being able to linguistically navigate the back and forth of an interview in ways that help you maintain a positive impression is a crucial skill and one football managers should be actively working on.

"For any manager or anyone in a professional role, your impression is something that needs constant and careful attention. Using language appropriately for the context you are operating in is going to contribute a lot to successfully managing that impression.

The paper, "'You're Manchester United manager, you can't say things like that': Impression management and identity performance by professional [football](#) managers in the media," is published in the *Journal of Pragmatics*.

More information: Kieran File. "You're Manchester United manager, you can't say things like that": Impression management and identity performance by professional football managers in the media, *Journal of Pragmatics* (2018). [DOI: 10.1016/j.pragma.2018.01.001](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2018.01.001)

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