

PERFORMING THE REAL: AUTHENTICITY, IDENTITY AND AUDIENCE DESIGN IN UK REALITY TELEVISION DISCOURSE

James Bowden
BA English Language, 2026

Abstract: This dissertation analyses the linguistic construction and performance of authenticity and identity through stylisation in UK reality television programmes, with a focus on how individual speakers deploy three specific features, namely discourse markers, self-defining copular phrases, and terms of endearment, across varying communicative contexts. The study examines four speakers across two programmes, *Big Brother UK* (2023) and *The Traitors UK* (2024), analysing variation in both interactional and confessional contexts as well as across temporal position within each series. The quantitative analysis evaluates the distribution of all three features across speakers, contexts, and episodes, before a qualitative analysis of illustrative extracts considers the interpersonal and identity-indexing functions of each feature in greater depth. The results of the quantitative analysis suggest that discourse markers are the most frequently occurring feature across speakers and are predominantly distributed across interactional contexts, while self-defining copular phrases occur almost exclusively in confessional segments. Terms of endearment are found to be overwhelmingly interactional in their distribution. The study concludes that authenticity in reality television discourse is a contextually situated and strategically constructed accomplishment rather than a transparent reflection of genuine selfhood. These findings provide support for Bell's (1984) audience design framework and Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) authentication model and offer a contribution to existing scholarship on authenticity, identity and audience design in reality television.

Keywords: Sociolinguistics, Reality Television, Identity construction, Style-shifting, Audience design, Linguistic variation

Supervisor: Mary Robinson

1. Introduction

1.1 Language and Reality TV

Publicly broadcasted language is a field of linguistic study that has been extensively researched over the past six decades. However, the speech produced in reality television, particularly UK reality TV programmes, remains relatively understudied in comparison to scripted language. Sometimes called popular factual television, reality TV is located in border territories, between information and entertainment, documentary and drama (Hill 2007). Previous research into the language of reality TV highlights its significance for linguistic study due to its complexity as a hybrid genre of naturalistic speech and carefully constructed, produced storylines for entertainment value, resulting in more recent studies such as Lorenzo-Dus and Blitvich (2013: 2) stating that “even though appearing natural, (reality television) has significant departures from natural unprepared speech”. Several other studies from the 21st century present similar viewpoints on the nature of speech in reality TV, for instance the stance that reality TV creates entertainment through its likeness to what audiences recognize as real, where Culpeper & Holmes (2013: 169) argue that this sense of ‘real’ can be enhanced by the use of language that is unscripted (not predictable), unstandardized (not conforming to prestige dialects or styles) and personal (not selected for a public audience).

The richly interactional contexts of reality TV environments make them uniquely interesting sources of data for discourse analysis, especially when concerned with authenticity and audience design, as participants are required to construct identities and manage relationships and alliances, all whilst under public surveillance. Language plays a crucial role in how the contestants frame their identities, conflicts and alliances, and the distinct contrast between ‘natural’ and ‘performative’ speech becomes evident in a common element of the format of the reality TV genre; the “confessional”. “Confessions” allow participants to project explicitly their self-image onto the audience. They can be understood as an asynchronous planned performance (Werner 2021, cited in Karpenko-Secombe 2023) in which contestants “perform versions of themselves for the audience” (Edwards 2013, cited in Karpenko-Secombe 2023). This factor further solidifies the relevance of reality TV

as a communicative environment for sociolinguistic analysis through its requirement of speakers to shift between interaction types and their awareness of multiple audiences. Contestants' speech styles are reflective of their chosen performance of identity, as described by Bucholtz and Hall (2005), and language stylisation is dependent on social setting (Coupland 2007). Thus, this instability of 'performed' vs 'natural' speech variation provides a valuable site for examination of linguistic behaviours.

1.2 Research Aim

While previous research into language in reality television has examined its discourse across a wide range of social variables such as gender, regional dialect and socio-economic class, the analytic lens of this study aims to focus its attention to a gap in past literature, the idiolects of specific speakers in reality TV. Less investigation has been carried out thus far into how individual speakers adapt their linguistic behaviour across varying contexts within the RTV setting, this study therefore analyses speaker-level variation, rather than programme-level representation. Such an approach is grounded in sociolinguistic understandings of variability at the level of the individual, recognising that "no one speaks the same way all the time and people constantly exploit the nuances of the languages they speak for a wide variety of purposes" (Wardhaugh 2010: 5).

To ensure depth of linguistic discourse analysis, it is of particular interest to analyse participant's language variation across both contexts and interaction types, in the case of this study, a comparison between contestants' speech in both public and private interaction, the latter being the confessional or "diary room" segments where speakers perform their self-constructed image and identities to the audience (Edwards 2013). This study will therefore identify varying speech styles of individual speakers in group or face-to-face interactions as well as private, monologic utterances through analysis of a number of linguistic features.

Essential to the present language variation analysis, this paper also evaluates the effect of temporal position on a speaker's language use within a season of reality television. Sociolinguistic literature has long noted that more naturalistic speech styles tend to emerge over time as participants acclimatise to interactional settings and reduce attention to their own speech (Labov 1972; Eckert 2000; Coupland

2007). Several ethnographic and longitudinal studies have suggested that stylistic relaxation and authenticity often develop across repeated encounters and sustained interaction, rather than being immediately observable at initial contact (Mendoza-Denton 2008; Holmes 2013). This study therefore examines both early and later episodes to allow for exploration speakers' shifts in linguistic behaviour as familiarity with the interlocutors and environment increases.

1.3 Data Overview

The data consists of broadcast speech collected from two UK reality television programmes; *Big Brother* and *The Traitors*. Both programmes are examples of established, popular reality television competitions in which a group of the UK's general public compete to win a cash prize, providing interaction-rich environments in which participants must construct identities and manage relationships in a documented competition setting.

1.3.1 *Big Brother*

The concept of *Big Brother*, as a TV programme originally airing in the USA, provides an insight into a dystopian future society where the public's every move is watched and monitored by a totalitarian figure "Big Brother", based on George Orwell's 1949 book "Nineteen Eighty-Four". It operates as a cohabitation based social experiment in which 16 contestants live in a house together, completely disconnected from the outside world, and compete in daily games and tasks whilst being constantly observed for 24 hours of each day. Participants gain access to a diary room which they are regularly encouraged to sit down in to share their thoughts and opinions about their fellow housemates and experiences in the house to "Big Brother". This element of the process is done in private, producing honest, reflective speech alongside the spontaneous interactions with other contestants. Each week, the housemates are told to name a number of their peers whom they wish to put up for eviction, either privately in the diary room or face-to-face. The viewers then vote for the housemate(s) they want to save before a contestant is evicted from the *Big Brother* house. This format creates tension between the participants, bringing forth conflict and raw, emotional confessions of their thoughts and feelings. Equally, the speakers must strategically select their language in a way that appeals not only to

each other, but also to the audience at home to avoid being eliminated from the programme.

1.3.2 The Traitors

The Traitors, contrastingly, is formatted as a game of deception, requiring participants to engage in persuasive, accusatory and defensive discourse, making the reality TV programme an ideal data source for analysing language in authenticity. 22 competitors enter “The Traitors’ castle” in the hopes to win the cash prize. On the first night, the programme’s host selects 3 people to become “The Traitors” whose aim it is to secretly “murder” their fellow competitors (“the faithful”) during the night in order to take home the money for themselves. The goal of the faithful is to identify the traitors and attempt to banish them each night in a voting at the round table. The participants take part in missions as a team to build the prize pot, forcing them to use their language to build relationships and alliances with one another, despite differing motivations. Despite minor structural differences, *The Traitors*, similarly to *Big Brother*, incorporates private confessionals where contestants reveal their inner thoughts, producing “natural and honest” speech to convey their strategies and suspicions about their peers. This format justifies the programme’s use as discourse data, as it creates genuine conflict talk and naturalistic interaction, as well as self-presentation of authenticity through speech to multiple audiences; the viewers and each other.

1.4 Study Rationale

The dataset contains 4 episodes of reality TV programmes, 2 from the reboot of the civilian *Big Brother UK* series 20, which aired in 2023, and 2 from *The Traitors UK*’s second season, released early 2024. Justification of the selection of these seasons in particular lies in their equally recent production but more importantly their following of previous editions of the respective programmes’ formats, where contestants have an understanding of the nature of the show, providing them with an extra layer of strategic identity construction in their speech that is moreover interesting for this analysis.

1.5 Outline of Structure

This dissertation is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews existing sociolinguistic and discourse-analytic research relevant to reality television, with particular focus on authenticity, audience design, stylisation and identity construction. Section 3 outlines the methodology adopted in the study, including the selection of data, speakers and episodes, and the coding of linguistic features. Section 4 presents the results of the analysis, with quantitative figures alongside illustrative examples, highlighting patterns across interaction types and temporal position within each series. Section 5 discusses these findings in relation to the theoretical frameworks earlier introduced, with reference how contestants construct authenticity, negotiate audience relationships and perform identity through language. Finally, Section 6 summarises the key findings of the study, reflects on its limitations, and suggests directions for future research into language variation in reality television contexts.

2. Literature Review

The following section outlines the relevant literature that motivate the investigation of language in reality television, with reference to authenticity, audience design, stylisation and identity performance. This review also provides justification for the inclusion of the specific linguistic features selected for this analysis based on their functions identified in previous research.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the ways in which reality TV participants use their language to signal authenticity in their speech, whilst presenting their identity performances through the stylisation of their language to multiple audiences. This focus stems from research into decades of past studies which have highlighted the unique discourse environment that the reality television composition supplies to the field of sociolinguistic study. However, fewer studies have examined how these broader social meanings are realised through the use of specific linguistic features at the level of the individual speaker. In particular, limited attention has been paid to the way in which micro-level choices such as discourse markers, pronoun positioning and relational language contribute to the construction of authenticity and interpersonal alignment within reality TV settings. This review therefore synthesises

theoretical and empirical studies on reality television discourse, sociolinguistic style and interactional identity in order to establish a framework for analysing how such features operate within contestants' speech and how they may shift across interactional contexts and over time.

2.1 Language in Reality Television

In spite of previous research into this genre often highlighting its generic ambiguity (Bednarek 2010: 14; Ouellette 2014: 4; Neale 2015: 5) and an overall lack of agreement as to its definition (Hill 2015: 161), this study attributes these past consensuses to its development as an evolving genre which has incorporated a variety of different formats (Neale 2015: 4-5). The key linguistic point of interest of reality television is its unique ability to display a hybrid of natural and constructed speech from its participants. Many past investigations into the language of reality TV have identified this rarity of format and the fascinating nature of its variety of uses as data for linguistic analysis. Lorenzo-Dus and Blitvich (2013), in their paper "Real Talk: Reality Television and Discourse Analysis in Action," treat reality TV discourse as "naturally occurring" interactions that are simultaneously "a mediated cultural artefact" produced for entertainment and commercial purposes (Lorenzo-Dus and Blitvich, 2013: 34;10). This literature informs the present study's choice to focus on linguistic shifts between interactional spontaneous speech and the private, carefully constructed speech of confessional segments.

This concept of what is 'real' with respect to the language of reality television is one that has been consistently built upon over the years within the surrounding literature. Tolson (2006) raises a related point, noting that the placement of participants within artificially constructed programme environments complicates straightforward understandings of what 'reality' can meaningfully signify within the genre. While much of the previous analysis into the language of reality TV has noted the concept of "natural" and "performed" or "constructed" speech, this study evaluates the effect of extralinguistic factors on the language behaviours found within the mediated discourse, specifically the notion of performativity of contestants through linguistic construction and the resulting impact on audiences. This choice is rooted in the works of other scholars who have identified the impact which the genre and structure of reality TV has on sociologic study. Specifically, Thompson claims "as individuals

gain access to mediated forms of communication, they are able to draw on an expanding range of symbolic resources for the purposes of constructing the self" (1995: 212-213, as cited in Bondebjerg 2002).

By using these symbolic resources to construct a "self" for the camera, participants navigate a thin line between their true identity and a televised persona. This process of self-construction raises the question of how much "truth" remains in their speech, which leads directly into the next section's focus on the performance of authenticity.

2.2 Authenticity

Authenticity is a theme that has been pinpointed across a wide range of academic fields as a key phenomenon of the reality television industry. Within the context of reality TV programmes, as a sub-genre of 'non-fiction' broadcast television, the authenticity of the contestants' public personas is a topic widely debated amongst previous literature on the subject. As Hill states, "Factual television is performative and reflexive. In this performative environment, audiences judge the claims of authenticity within various factual programmes" (2007:17). Authenticity has been identified as a central paradox to both the production and reception of reality television, with viewers actively seeking moments in which participants appear to be their "real" selves, despite the constructed nature of the format (Hill 2002; 2004; Rose and Wood 2005). Equally, several scholars have posited that this authenticity is not inherent but performatively achieved through linguistic and behavioural cues, shaped by audience expectations and broader social norms (Biressi and Nunn 2004; Tyler and Bennett 2010; Lorenzo-Dus and Blitvich 2013). This theory of the desire to appear authentic being a result of participants' thoughts on audience expectations is also supported in the works of Bondebjerg (2002) who, in observation of reality TV viewers' perceptions, suggests that "generally the voting procedure seems to indicate that authenticity on a personal and emotional level is valued more than extreme role-playing" (Bondebjerg, 2002: 181). However, some scholars caution against treating authenticity as a stable or directly observable quality, arguing instead that it is discursively constructed and interactionally negotiated rather than transparently displayed (Bucholtz 2003; Coupland 2007). From this perspective,

what audiences interpret as “authentic” is not simply revealed behaviour but the outcome of socially recognisable linguistic and stylistic performances.

Indicators of authenticity can be analysed across each of the contexts examined in this study, as linguistic constructions utilised to convey this sense of ‘real’ can be observed in both interactional as well as private ‘to-camera’ language choices and behaviours. It is, however, important to a qualitative analysis from the variationist approach of this study, to note key differences between the social contexts, as it is expected that these opposing environments would influence the variation of signals of authenticity in linguistic behaviours. Karpenko-Sacombe (2023) provides a poignant reminder of this factor in their linguistic case study of reality TV programme *Love Island UK*, stating that “conversations are not exclusively oriented towards the viewers – in order for the show to take place, the participants need to communicate between themselves in an authentic way.”. Here, it is highlighted that interactional elements of reality TV do not operate in the same way as confessional moments with respect to authenticity. In this case, it can be argued that confessional ‘diary room’ sections are examples of performed, explicit authenticity, whereas conversational linguistic behaviours represent genuine, natural and unplanned authentic pieces of language choice.

2.3 Audience Design

The notion that motivations behind participants’ desire to appear authentic within a reality television setting lie in an effort to meet certain preconceived, believed audience expectations makes clear the impactful role that audiences play in shaping the speech of those they are watching. Although it has been understood from a surveillance perspective that the language of speakers who are aware they are being watched differs from speech in regular settings, past research into language under audience observation has showcased that in the case of reality TV, it is not solely public viewers at home who have this effect.

It is likely that most research into this phenomenon stems from Bell’s (1984) ‘Language style as audience design’, as this study can be considered amongst the most influential works on the subject. Bell proposed several models as a means of decoding motivations behind a number of linguistic tendencies in mediated contexts. Bell’s (1984) model of audience design proposes that speakers systematically adjust

their linguistic style in response to their audience, suggesting that variation is not random but socially motivated. He distinguishes between addressees, auditors and overhearers, arguing that speakers primarily accommodate to those they directly address but may also orient to wider, less visible audiences. In broadcast contexts, this framework highlights how communicators design their speech for both immediate interlocutors and an imagined mass audience. This model is directly relevant to the present dissertation, as reality television contestants operate within a dual-audience environment: they interact with fellow participants while simultaneously addressing viewers at home. Analysing stylistic shifts through this lens allows for an examination of how authenticity and identity are strategically constructed in response to layered audience expectations.

Within the present study, linguistic variation is expected to be influenced primarily by immediate interlocutors, as the addressee has the greatest influence on a speaker's linguistic choices, while auditors, overhearers and eavesdroppers exert progressively less influence as the speaker's relationship with them becomes more distant and communicative goals less clearly defined (Bell 1984, cited in Meyerhoff 2019). Applied to reality television, this suggests that contestants are likely to adapt their speech primarily in response to fellow participants as immediate addressees, while viewers at home function as overhearers toward whom contestants may simultaneously display awareness of when constructing their on-screen identities. This dual-audience context highlights how linguistic behaviour in reality television may involve both interactional accommodation to fellow contestants and performative identity construction for the viewing audience.

2.4 Stylistic, Identity and Performance

The interplay between linguistic stylisation and the construction of identity and performance can be decoded through the tactics of intersubjectivity proposed by Bucholtz and Hall (2005). Their paper, *Language and Identity*, conceptualises identity as a byproduct of speech that is constructed relationally in interaction, in alignment with concepts put forward by Bell (1984). Within this model, it is argued that identities emerge through a range of discursive processes, namely authentication, performativity and distinction. Drawing upon previous theories of performativity, Bucholtz and Hall claim that identity is actively produced through

linguistic practice, with argument that speakers may stylistically perform particular identities through the adoption of specific linguistic features or speech styles. This study makes a clear distinction between the idea of authentication as opposed to the priorly heavily analysed authenticity, highlighting that while authenticity implies identity is a facet naturally possessed or inherent, authentication refers to the interactional process through which an identity is made to appear credible or legitimate within a specific social context. In this sense, identities need not be inherently authentic, rather they become socially meaningful when participants successfully authenticate them through linguistic and social cues. This distinction can be considered relevant to the present study's analysis of reality television, where, from this perspective during interactional contexts in particular, participant's linguistic behaviours can be interpreted not as reflection of an inherent identity, but rather as strategic efforts to authenticate specific personas through interaction, using recognisable linguistic styles that align with audience expectations.

Further sociolinguistic research into broadcast media justify the present study's use of reality TV extracts as discourse data, especially for the purpose of analysis of indicators of construction of identity. (Tajfel 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979, as cited in Mendoza-Denton 2007) further posits that in cases of identity construction, groups are motivated to compare each other and strive to evaluate the in-group more positively and out-groups more negatively, shedding light upon the possibility of instances of 'us' vs 'them' tendencies emerging in linguistic choices amongst reality television programme contestants. In the case of the present study, it may be observed that language behaviours of interlocutors may reflect convergence of stylisation towards one another, particularly within groups of those who have formed close relationships, and by the same merit, divergence of speech styles from those considered 'out-groups', including audiences, with indicators of reference to the 'other'.

2.5 Discourse Markers

Discourse markers, sometimes referred to as fillers or hedges, are linguistic features that primarily function to organise discourse in interactional settings, rather than to contribute propositional meaning (Brinton 1996). As defined by Schiffrin, discourse markers are elements of speech which bracket units of talk and are used to help

structure relational segments of discourse (Schiffrin 1987). The English language yields a plethora of instances of this feature, with common examples including items such as *like*, *you know*, *well*, *so* and *I mean*, which are often act as signals of speaker stance and discourse organisation over grammatical necessity. From a sociolinguistic perspective, discourse markers have also been analysed as variables that exhibit patterned variation across contexts and speakers, reflecting broader processes of stylistic and pragmatic choice (D'Arcy 2017), justifying their use within the present variationist study, where the analysis of the language of several speakers across differing contexts aims to reveal patterns of linguistic choice which fulfil their desired personal outcomes of perception.

In interaction, discourse markers perform several key communicative functions. They are able to organise conversational flow by signalling topic shifts, transitions or responses within a single interaction (Schiffrin 1987). The features also play an equally crucial role in managing interpersonal relationships and speaker stance through their ability to allow speakers to soften statements, signal uncertainty, or confirm shared understanding between interlocutors (Kiesling 2004). Here, across the examples provided, markers like *you know* may function to appeal to common ground, whereas *well* might indicate a desire for response, whether dispreferred or requires qualification. Past research into discourse analysis therefore wholly discourages reference to discourse markers as fillers, with many emphasising the significant contribution they supply to pragmatic conversational organisation, rather than simply representing "filler" language, such as Fraser (1999).

Another feature of discourse markers relevant to this study is their association with spontaneous spoken interaction. Due to their frequent occurrence in informal conversations and their nature as a device for real-time speech planning, these markers are often inferred to be signals of conversational authenticity. A number of sociolinguistic studies have displayed that features such as discourse markers can signify spontaneity, informality and natural conversational styles (Coates 2000). Despite the importance of discourse markers in conversational interaction, relatively little sociolinguistic research has examined their distribution and function within reality television discourse. Existing scholarship has largely focused on their role in naturally occurring everyday conversation or other forms of institutional talk. This leaves scope for further investigation into how such features operate within mediated

communicative environments, where speakers interact with co-present participants while simultaneously being aware of a broader broadcast audience. This context is particularly significant for reality television, which presents itself as capturing “natural” interaction despite contestants’ clear awareness that their speech is continuously recorded and publicly broadcast. Linguistic features typically associated with informal, spontaneous conversation, including discourse markers, may therefore play an important role in shaping how authenticity is perceived in these settings. As a result, examining the use of discourse markers within reality television interactions offers a useful means of exploring how participants linguistically construct the appearance of spontaneity and authentic identity both for their fellow contestants and for viewers at home.

2.6 Terms of Endearment

Among the most popular lexical forms used to express affection, familiarity and interpersonal closeness between speakers, terms of endearment most often function as pragmatic marker of social relationships. Some common examples in English include expressions such as *love*, *babe*, *darling*, *honey* or *mate*. Within sociolinguistic research, these linguistic features are regularly viewed as part of broader processes of relational work, through which speakers construct and negotiate interpersonal relationships through language (Fraser 1999). These politeness address forms have more generally been long recognised as significant reflections of several social dimensions such as intimacy, power and solidarity between speakers (Brown and Gilman 1960). It is, however, important to note that these forms may not always straightforwardly reflect genuine intimacy. Studies of relational language demonstrate that affectionate address terms can also be utilised strategically to manage interactional dynamics, for instance to soften disagreement, mitigate criticism or ease moments of interpersonal tension (Locher and Watts 2005). By this understanding, such expressions can be seen to serve politeness functions, working to help speakers save face and maintain positive relationships within interaction (Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson 1987).

One influential study examining address terms in naturalistic interaction is the work of Dunkling (1990), who analysed the use of affectionate and endearing address forms in everyday spoken English. Drawing on naturally occurring conversational

data, Dunkling demonstrates that terms of endearment such as *love*, *dear*, and *darling* foremostly function in conversation as pragmatic devices, serving to manage interspeaker connections and less-so as actual indicators of genuine affection. His analysis shows that such forms frequently occur in informal interaction where speakers seek to establish solidarity, soften directives, or maintain a friendly conversational tone (Dunkling 1990). Importantly, this paper notes that these expressions may also be observed even between speakers who do not share close personal relationships, suggesting that terms of endearment often function as markers of performative friendliness as opposed to legitimate intimacy. This finding further supports the sociolinguistic perspectives which view address terms as flexible interactional features employed to negotiate social positioning within discourse.

In mediated contexts such as reality television, functional qualities of these features become significantly relevant and useful. Participants are expected to interact directly with fellow contestants while simultaneously maintaining awareness of a wider viewing audience. Linguistic expression signalling warmth and familiarity may therefore function both as interpersonal connection building resources and as performative tools through which contestants are able to present socially appealing identities. Prior research into the discourse of reality television discourse specifically has demonstrated that contestants frequently construct authenticity through forms of emotionally expressive or relational language (Lorenzo-Dus and Blitvich 2013; Thornborrow 2015; Bednarek 2018). Terms of endearment may thus be employed strategically to display alliance, reinforce group cohesion, or soften conflict within the socially competitive environment of such programme, making them key markers of social positioning and perceived authenticity in reality TV contexts.

2.7 Self-Defining Copular Phrases

Self-defining copular phrases, typically observed through constructions such as “*I am [X]*”, are cases of key linguistic resources that allow speakers to explicitly construct and communicate chosen identity. Within these statements, the copular verb *to be* links the subject with a complement that attributes an adjective, characteristic or identity category to the speaker. Across discourse-analytic and sociolinguistic approaches, such statements are often understood as definite acts of identity positioning, where speakers linguistically define who they are and how they wish to

be perceived, either by an audience or in an interaction (Bucholtz 2003; Coupland 2007). These constructions therefore provide a particularly direct means through which speakers articulate beliefs surrounding their own personality, social roles or values.

First-person identity declarative statements such as *I am honest*, *I am loyal*, or *I am not that type of person* frequently occur in contexts where speakers seek to justify behaviour, defend their actions, or reinforce a particular self-presentation, specifically in interactional settings. Research on identity presentation in discourse highlights that these declaratives often emerge in moments where speakers must negotiate their social image or respond to perceived threats to their identity (Eckert 2000; Fairclough 1995). In this sense, the use of I-initial copular constructions can be viewed as active attempts by speakers to shape how they are interpreted within interaction in an authoritative manner (Bucholtz 2003; Coupland 2007; Tannen 2007).

The use of first-person pronouns in identity statements has additionally been linked to broader processes of stance-taking and self-positioning in discourse. "Positioning can be defined, provisionally, as the act of situating a social actor with respect to responsibility for stance and for invoking cultural value" (Du Bois 2007:143). This paper, which acknowledges the aptitude of the employment of first person "I" statements for the purposes of stance taking, aligns with the views of much of the sociolinguistic research on the subject which form the consensus that speakers may use said identity claims to align them moral values, social categories, or personalities, thereby projecting a coherent and recognisable personas (Du Bois 2007).

Despite extensive sociolinguistic research examining identity construction and stance-taking in discourse (Bucholtz 2003; Coupland 2007; Du Bois 2007), relatively little attention has been given to how explicit identity claims such as "*I am [X]*" operate within mediated communicative contexts. While these constructions have been recognised as resources for positioning the self and asserting personal values or characteristics in interaction, much of this research is based on naturally occurring everyday conversation. Examining these constructions within reality television discourse may therefore provide insight into how participants linguistically manage

identity presentation within a highly visible and socially strategic communicative setting.

Drawing on previous literature examining authenticity, audience design, stylisation, and identity performance through language, as well as studies exploring the nature of reality television discourse, the following research question emerges for the present study:

RQ1: How do contestants in reality television programmes use linguistic features to index authenticity and perform identities through stylisation in environments that are broadcast to audiences?

To address this research question, the present study conducts a qualitative linguistic analysis of the speech of four individual contestants drawn from two reality television programmes. Two contestants from each programme are examined across two episodes, allowing for comparison of language use across both speakers and contexts. The analysis focuses on three linguistic features identified in previous sociolinguistic research as relevant to identity construction and authenticity: discourse markers, terms of endearment, and self-defining copular constructions. By examining how these features are employed in interaction, the study explores how contestants stylistically construct identities, present themselves as authentic, and orient their speech toward both fellow participants and a wider viewing audience. The following methodology section outlines the data selection and analytical procedures used in this investigation.

3. Methodology

3.1 Data Source and Programme Selection

The data for this study consist of broadcast speech drawn from two UK reality television programmes: *Big Brother UK* and *The Traitors UK*. Both programmes are competitive reality formats broadcast on mainstream UK channels and involve

groups of contestants interacting intensively while completing tasks and navigating social relationships, providing extensive examples of conversational interaction within a mediated and publicly broadcast environment. Both programmes incorporate confessional-style segments in which contestants speak directly to the camera, the “Diary Room” in *Big Brother* and interview-style confessionals in *The Traitors*, allowing for comparison of speech produced in private, reflective settings with speech occurring during group interaction.

The specific seasons selected for analysis were *Big Brother UK* Series 20 (2023) following the programme’s reboot, and *The Traitors UK* Series 2 (2024), chosen because they were produced within a similar time period and represent recent examples of the genre. As both programmes follow established formats that had appeared in previous series, contestants are typically familiar with the structure and expectations of the shows, which may encourage more strategic self-presentation and in their speech.

3.2 Episode Selection

Two episodes from each programme were selected for analysis. For *Big Brother*, Episodes 1 and 16 of Series 20 were analysed; for *The Traitors*, Episodes 1 and 10 of Series 2 were selected.

Premiere episodes were chosen because they contain contestants’ first interactions with one another, providing rich examples of initial self-presentation in which contestants introduce themselves and attempt to establish favourable impressions among both fellow participants and the viewing audience. A later episode from the middle stages of each series was also selected to capture interaction after relationships, alliances, and conflicts had begun to develop, providing data for examining language use in contexts of interpersonal tension and strategic interaction. Analysing both early and later episodes additionally allows for exploration of whether linguistic behaviour shifts over time, consistent with sociolinguistic research suggesting that speakers become more relaxed in their speech following repeated interaction with the same interlocutors (Eckert 2000; Holmes 2013; Mendoza-Denton 2008).

3.3 Data Extraction and Transcription

Data were collected through detailed transcription of the selected episodes. For *Big Brother*, transcription was conducted manually with dictation software used as an aid; however, all extracts were checked and edited manually to ensure accuracy. For *The Traitors*, transcripts were obtained from the online database *Springfield!* *Springfield!* (www.springfieldspringfield.co.uk) and verified by simultaneously viewing the episodes to ensure correspondence between the transcript and televised speech.

3.4 Dataset Organisation

Following transcription, the collected speech data were organised using Microsoft Excel. In confessional contexts, rows contained longer stretches of monologic speech; in interactional contexts, rows represented single conversational turns. Additional columns recorded contextual information for each utterance, including programme, episode number, speaker, and interactional context. An initial stage of familiarisation with the dataset was then undertaken, involving review of the transcripts and use spreadsheet filtering tools to examine patterns in the data.

3.5 Speaker Selection

Four speakers were selected for closer analysis due to the size of the present study, two from each programme, on the basis of the amount of conversational data available and the relevance of their speech to the themes of the study, including identity presentation, authenticity, audience awareness, interpersonal nor conflict. All selected speakers appeared in both analysed episodes of their respective programmes, allowing language use to be examined across different stages of the series. The subsequent stage of analysis involved identifying and coding specific linguistic features within the speech of the selected speakers, the results of which are presented in the following section.

4. Results

This section presents the results of the analysis carried out as describes in Section 3. To begin, the socio-demographic backgrounds of the 4 speakers are provided

alongside the total number of tokens analysed for each speaker. For further detail relevant to the present study, the distribution of tokens between confessionals and interactions, as well as both temporal points of interest, are also presented. Section 4.2 presents the quantitative results of this study, by reviewing the overall frequency of linguistic features by speaker, as well as investigating the effect of temporal position on the frequency and distribution of the linguistic features analysed. Due to the qualitative nature of the present study, Section 4.3 provides several illustrative examples of each of the relevant features in context across speakers.

4.1. Speaker Overview

Table 1. *Big Brother*: Speaker Demographics & Token Distribution.

Speaker	Programme	Age	Region	Occupation	Confessional Tokens	Interactional Tokens	Total Tokens
Jenkin	Big Brother	25	Bridgend, Wales	Barman / Cleaner / Bingo Caller	4	23	27
Olivia	Big Brother	23	Glasgow, Scotland	Dancer	5	25	30

Table 2. *The Traitors*: Speaker Demographics & Token Distribution.

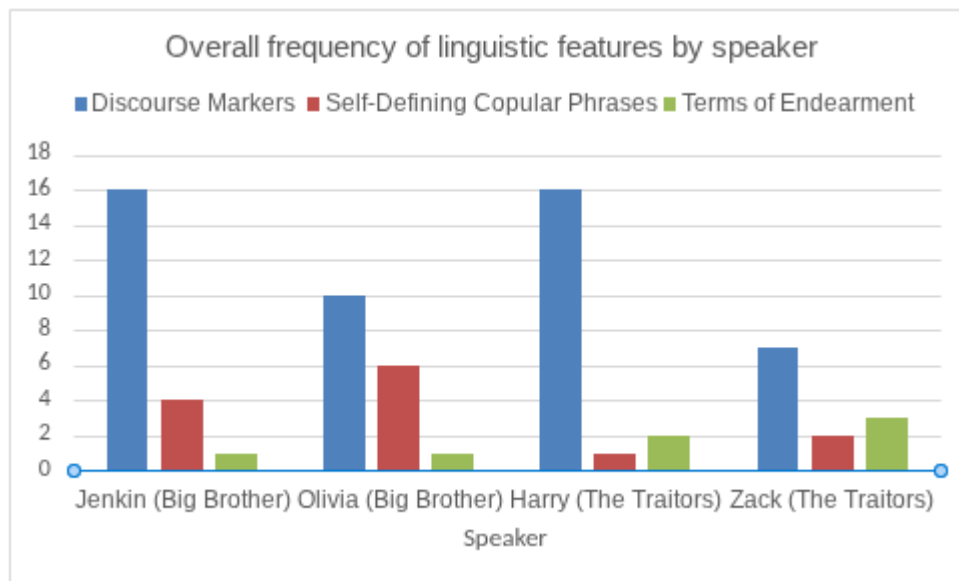
Speaker	Programme	Age	Region	Occupation	Confessional Tokens	Interactional Tokens	Total Tokens
Harry	The Traitors	22	Slough, Berkshire	British Army Engineer	5	22	27
Zack	The Traitors	27	London, Greater London	Parliamentary Affairs Advisor	2	41	43

The total token figures here reveal that following the coding process, the distribution of tokens across speakers is broadly comparable, with three of the four participants yielding similar totals. The exception being Zack, whose comparatively elevated token count may reflect either the programme's editorial construction, with the later episode affording him greater screen time and thus a larger analytical corpus, or his frequent turn-taking and extended floor-holding across interactional contexts.

4.2 Quantitative Results

4.2.1 Frequency of Linguistic Features

Figure 1: Overall frequency of linguistic features by speaker.



The clustered column chart presents the frequency of discourse markers, self-defining copular phrases, and terms of endearment for each speaker. Raw counts are used to highlight relative variation in feature use and to provide a comparative overview of individual linguistic patterns across participants and programme contexts.

This chart showcases variation in overall feature use across speakers, with discourse markers emerging as the most frequently used feature for three of the four participants. *Big Brother* contestant Jenkin and *The Traitors* contestant Harry display the highest frequencies of discourse markers (sixteen each), suggesting a stronger reliance on this feature in their speech. In contrast, Olivia demonstrates a comparatively higher use of self-defining copular phrases (six), implying having the greatest tendency towards explicit self-positioning. Terms of endearment are the least frequent feature overall, with minimal use across speakers, although Zack shows the highest relative use of this feature (three).

4.2.2 Contextual Distribution of Linguistic Features

Figures 2a–2c present the percentage distribution of each feature across confessional and interactional contexts, with normalised data allowing for clearer comparison independent of raw frequency differences.

Figure 2a: Percentage distribution of discourse markers across confessional and interactional contexts by speaker.

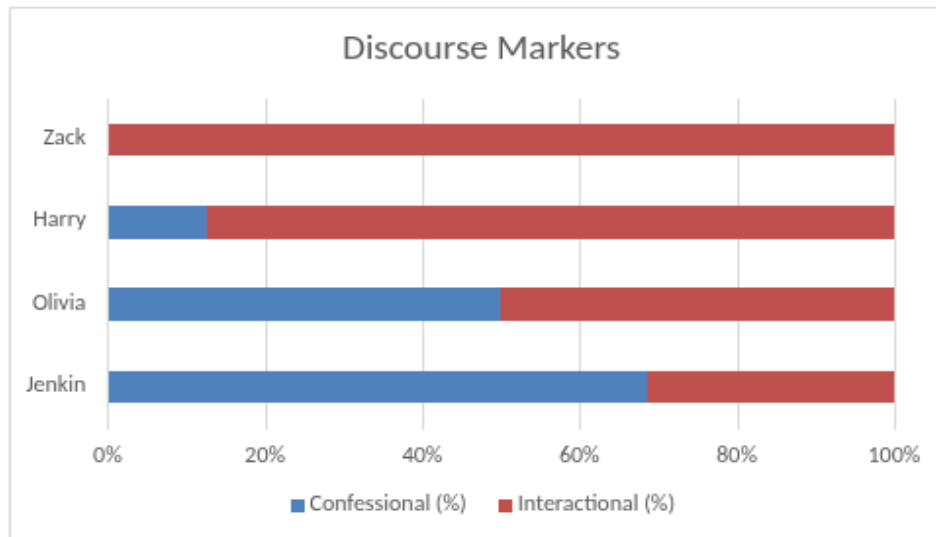


Figure 2b: Percentage distribution of self-defining copular phrases across confessional and interactional contexts by speaker.

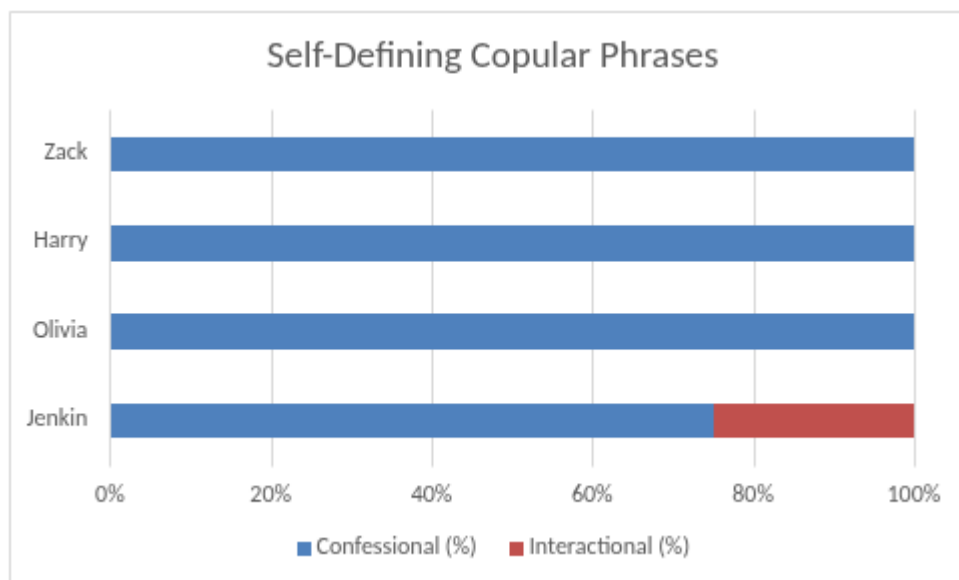
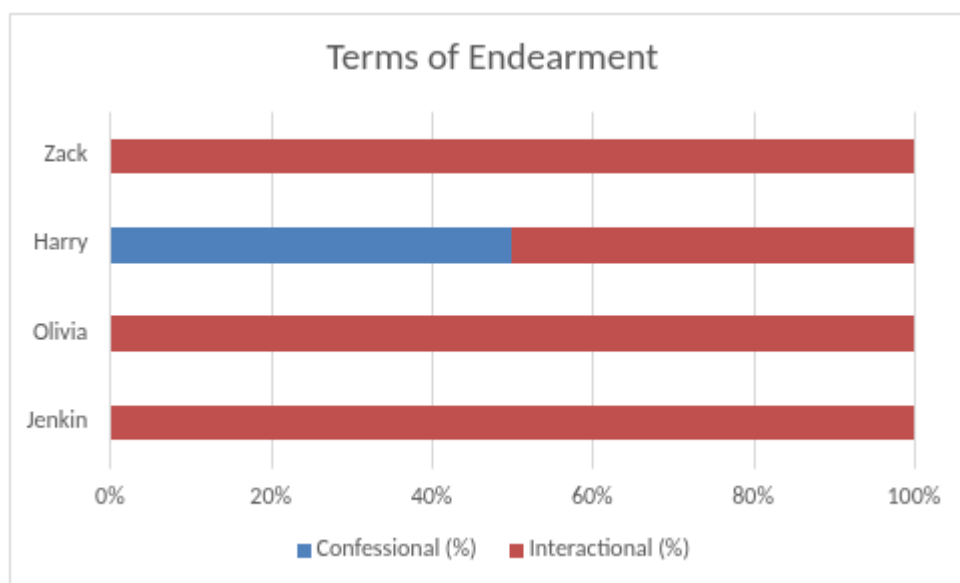


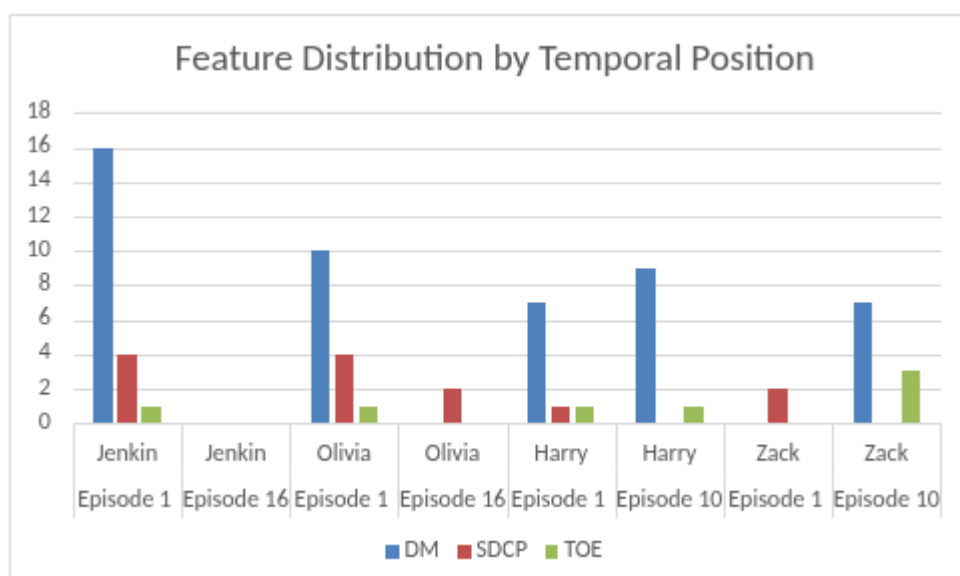
Figure 2c: Percentage distribution of Terms of Endearment across confessional and interactional contexts by speaker.



Taken together, these figures highlight a clear influence of interactional context on linguistic feature use, despite variation across features and speakers. Discourse markers show a strong tendency towards use in interactional contexts for most speakers, whereas self-defining copular phrases are more closely associated with confessional contexts, often appearing exclusively in these settings. Terms of endearment, by contrast, are overwhelmingly interactional, reflecting their interpersonal function. While individual variation is evident, particularly in the extent to which speakers rely on each context, the overall patterns suggest that context plays a significant role in shaping the distribution of linguistic features across the dataset.

4.2.3 Distribution of Linguistic Features by Temporal Position

Figure 3: Distribution of linguistic features across temporal position within the season by speaker and episode.



The chart illustrates a clear shift in the distribution of linguistic features across speakers between earlier and later episodes. For Big Brother participants, feature use is concentrated almost entirely in the earlier episode, with both Jenkin and Olivia showing little to no use of discourse markers and terms of endearment in the later stage, alongside a reduction in self-defining copular phrases. In contrast, The Traitors participants display a more sustained or redistributed use of features over time, with Harry maintaining relatively consistent usage and Zack showing an increase in both discourse markers and terms of endearment in the later episode.

4.3 Qualitative Results

The following subsection presents several illustrative examples of the relevant linguistic features in use, across speakers and varying contexts.

4.3.1 Discourse Markers

(1) Jenkin - *Big Brother*, Episode 1, Confessional

1 *I'm feeling overwhelmed. I think I just feel guilty about **like** the Olivia thing, you know, I didn't come here to **like** put someone up for nomination on the first night.*

2 *I know it's part of what we're doing, but. It just feels shit, her reaction and... I had to go with what I thought was right.*

3 *I think they're all everyone seems to be going on at the minute, which is nice. It's really **like** weird.*

4 *It's **like** we've all lived together for ages, but then it's **like** you can sort of see little **like** cliques forming and **like** little friendships blossoming, which is cool.*

5 ***Like** I can see **like** Dylan and Trish, **like** cooking together and then you've got **like** some of the girls are **like** coming together...*

This extract demonstrates a high density of discourse markers in *like*, which function to structure the narrative and mitigate the speaker's stance in a confessional context.

(2) Olivia - *Big Brother*, Episode 1, Interaction

1 **See** if he comes, I can't be arsed to talk to him. I don't want to talk to him.

Here, *see* operates as a discourse marker introducing a conditional stance, reflecting a context-specific usage associated with interactional speech.

(3) Harry - *The Traitors*, Episode 10, Interaction

1 Maybe you should, **like**, maybe not at breakfast, though, **innit**?

This example illustrates the use of multiple discourse markers (*like*, *innit*) to soften directives and seek alignment within an interactional setting.

Notably, later confessional speech from Jenkin (Episode 16) shows an absence of discourse markers, contrasting with the dense usage observed here.

4.3.2 Self-Defining Copular Phrases

(4) Harry - *The Traitors*, Episode 1, Confessional

1 **I'm just a typical lad.**

(5) Olivia - *Big Brother*, Episode 1, Confessional

1 I just wanted like be away from people for a minute.

2 **I'm not a crier**, I'm getting angry at myself for even letting it get to me.

3 **I'm an angry crier** so I'm getting annoyed at myself for fucking crying.

(6) Zack - *The Traitors*, Episode 1, Confessional

1 I like to think **I'm perceptive, quite intelligent**, and **I'm just so big-mouthed**.

These extracts illustrate the use of self-defining copular phrases to construct and negotiate speaker identity in confessional contexts, often through explicit self-categorisation and evaluative stance-taking.

4.3.3 Terms of Endearment

(7) Zack - *The Traitors*, Episode 10, Interaction

1 Go, **mate**, just keep going!

2 Sorry, **mate**.

(8) Jenkin - *Big Brother*, Episode 1, Interaction

1 Hello **my love**.

(9) Harry - *The Traitors*, Episode 1, Interaction

1 I'm from, er, Windsor, **darling**. That's what I tell everyone.

Extracts (7) and (8) demonstrate the use of terms of endearment to index familiarity and maintain interpersonal rapport within interactional contexts. In contrast, (9) appears to use a term of endearment more performatively, contributing to the construction of a playful or humorous identity.

5. Discussion

The present study's aim is to examine the ways in which individual speakers participating in UK reality television programmes utilise linguistic features to index authenticity, perform chosen identities and navigate audience design across varying contexts and temporal positions. Thus, the following section will address the previously formulated research question: *How do contestants in reality television programmes use linguistic features to index authenticity and perform identities through stylisation in environments that are broadcast to audiences?*. This will be carried out by firstly reviewing the quantitative results yielded from the data analysis through a more thorough assessment of the statistical patterns revealed across these figures. The subsequent subsections will then further interpret the study's

qualitative results in individual illustrative examples. Discussion and analysis of said figures and extracts aims to evaluate their theoretical implications on the background literature outlined in Section 2 of this paper, forming new understandings of the semantic functions of the relevant features within mediated environments. Broadly, the following analysis will build to illustrate that employment of the linguistic features analysed, particularly when used alongside one another showcase the nature of authenticity as often performed and interactionally negotiation, aligning with the views of Bucholtz & Hall (2005) and Coupland (2007), rather than former essentialist accounts of authenticity by whom it was conversely claimed more to be a stable quality, such as Hill (2002; 2004), providing further insight into how multiple audiences are accounted for in the mediated environment of a reality television programme. More in-depth investigation into the features within context reveal how speakers' choice of stylisation is direct reflection of their effort to perform identities, similarly consistent with the works of Bucholtz and Hall.

5.1 Overview of Quantitative Patterns

Before examination of individual features and illustrative examples in detail, it is first useful to consider what patterns across Figures 1, 2a-2c and 3 suggest at a primary level, as several overarching tendencies are observable across speakers and contexts that could carry significant theoretical implications.

Prior review of the literature surrounding the notability of discourse markers in their aptness and frequency in utilisation for structuring of speech in interactional contexts warranted the present study to hypothesise that it would be observed throughout natural speech patterns that discourse markers would appear most dominantly amongst items sharing this management function. This hypothesis is supported by the data obtained. It should be noted that Figure 1 presents raw frequency counts rather than normalised rates and therefore does not control for the differing corpus sizes across speakers, a limitation that is addressed in Figures 2a–2c through the use of percentage distribution. Nevertheless, at the level of individual linguistic tendency, the raw counts remain informative. Figure 1 reveals that discourse markers make up the most frequently occurring feature for all 4 of the speakers analysed, with *Big Brother* contestant Jenkin and *The Traitors* contestant Harry producing the highest raw counts of sixteen instances respectively. This

convergence across speakers from both programmes suggests that discourse markers function as the primary vehicle for interactional and expressive management within this dataset, a finding consistent with Schiffrin's (1987) conceptualisation of discourse markers as structurally indispensable features of spoken interaction and with D'Arcy's (2017) observation that such features exhibit patterned, socially motivated variation across speakers and contexts rather than representing idiosyncratic or incidental speech behaviour.

Of equal theoretical significance, several other findings emerge from the quantitative data, such as the evidently systematic relationship between linguistic feature type and interactional context, as illustrated in Figures 2a-2c. Across the dataset, discourse markers demonstrate a strong tendency toward occurrence in interactional contexts, self-defining copular phrases are distributed almost exclusively within confessional segments, and terms of endearment are overwhelmingly interactional in their distribution. When examined collectively, these patterns provide considerable support to Bell's (1984) audience design model, which proposes that speakers adjust their linguistic behaviour in response to the audience they are orienting toward. Within this framework, it is possible to read the contextual distribution of features as a reflection of an awareness of two distinct audience orientations across participants, where their fellow contestants, functioning as immediate addressees, appear to elicit discourse markers and terms of endearment, features associated with interactional management and relational solidarity, whereas the imagined broadcast audience, functioning as overhearers by Bell's (1984) definition, appears to be the primary orientation for explicit self-definition in confessional contexts.

A further notable pattern concerns the distribution of features across temporal position within each season, as presented in Figure 3. The data showcases a marked divergence between the two programmes, with *Big Brother* participants demonstrating a substantial reduction in feature use across all three categories in the later episode, while *The Traitors* participants display either sustained or increased use of certain items such as discourse markers over the same period. This divergence partially aligns with previous sociolinguistic literature surrounding stylistic relaxation over time, which predicts that speakers become less self-conscious and more naturalistic in their speech following interaction with the same interlocutors (Mendoza-Denton 2008; Holmes 2013). This phenomenon is perhaps most strikingly

illustrated in the aforementioned omitted, later confessional data of Jenkin, in which the near total absence of discourse markers stands in contrast to the extreme *like* saturation observed in Extract (1) from Episode 1, this is a divergence central to the qualitative analysis in Section 5.4. Overall reductions in feature use observed are notably abrupt rather than gradual, suggesting that temporal familiarity alone may not be sufficient as an explanatory framework.

5.2 Interactional Contexts: Audience Design and Relational Language

The quantitative patterns outlined in Section 5.1 establish that both discourse markers and terms of endearment are predominantly distributed across interactional contexts, a finding that, as Bell's (1984) audience design model would predict, reflects the significance of the immediate addressee in shaping a speaker's linguistic choices. The following section examines how these features function across speakers to manage interpersonal relationships, negotiate social alignment, and construct relational identities within interactional environments.

5.2.1 Discourse Markers in Interaction

Within interactional contexts, discourse markers emerge as the primary linguistic resource through which speakers organise conversational flow and manage interpersonal dynamics. Extract (2), in which Olivia produces *see* as a discourse marker introducing a conditional stance, is particularly noteworthy in this regard. The use of *see* in this function is a regionally marked feature associated with Scottish English, and its occurrence in an interactional rather than confessional context is consistent with Coupland's (2007) theorisation of style as a socially meaningful resource through which speakers draw on available linguistic repertoires to position themselves within interaction. This instance similarly aligns with the sociolinguistic findings of Wardhaugh (2010) which recognises that "no one speaks the same way". Here, rather than functioning merely as an organisational device or "filler", Olivia's use of *see* simultaneously indexes her regional identity and frames her emotional stance towards a co-contestant, demonstrating that discourse markers versatility in interactional contexts, operating as vehicles for both conversational management

and stylistic self-presentation. This supports the broader observation of Culpeper and Holmes (2013) that non-standard speech contributes to a sense of authenticity within reality TV contexts, suggesting that Olivia's choices, whether consciously deployed or otherwise, may reinforce genuineness to both her immediate interlocutors and the wider viewing audience.

Extract (3), in which Harry produces *like* and *innit* within a single softening utterance, offers an alike example of discourse markers functioning interpersonally rather than purely organisationally. As Kiesling (2004) identifies, discourse markers in interactional settings frequently serve to mitigate face-threatening acts and signal seeking of alignment between speakers. In the context of *The Traitors*, where the social environment is structured around strategic deception and shifting alliances, this becomes analytically significant, where Harry's use hedging discourse markers to soften a directive directed at a fellow contestant can be read as a deliberate management of interpersonal rapport in an environment where relational trust is both valuable and often unstable. This tension between performed relational rapport and underlying strategic motivations reflects what Biressi and Nunn (2004) and Holmes (2005) identify as a central paradox of authenticity in reality television, the idea that contestants are required to appear genuine in their interpersonal conduct whilst also navigating explicitly competitive social dynamics.

5.2.2 Terms of Endearment

Interpersonal functions of relational language in interactional contexts is further evidenced by the distribution of terms of endearment across the dataset, which Figure 2c confirms as near exclusively interactional. This could be inferred to be a reflection of the lack of meaningful function carried by the feature towards secondary overhearers in comparison to self-defining copular phrases when employed in confessional contexts.

Extract (8), in which Jenkin produces *hello my love* during an early interactional exchange in Episode 1 of *Big Brother*, illustrates the use of terms of endearment relationship building devices in the context of initial self-presentation. As established in Section 3.2, early episodes are characterised by contestants' first encounters with one another, and linguistic choices made in these interactions tend to reflect attempts to establish social warmth and interpersonal familiarity in an otherwise

unfamiliar environment. These features mirror Karpenko-Seccombe's (2023) observation that interactional elements of reality television require participants to communicate authentically with one another as a functional necessity of the format and are not only present for the benefit of audiences. The use of *my love* in this case therefore operates as a solidarity marker, enhancing the construction of perceived intimacy between speakers.

Equally, a separate function of this item is observable in Extract (9), in which Harry produces *darling* within an interactional exchange during Episode 1 of *The Traitors*. Unlike Jenkin's use of *my love*, which straightforwardly indexes relational warmth, Harry's *darling* carries a particularly performative quality, functioning less as a genuine expression of interpersonal solidarity and more so as a vehicle for stylistic identity construction. Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) concept of identity as actively produced through linguistic practice is directly applicable here, Harry's use of *darling* contributes to the construction of a comedic, self-aware persona that is understandable not only to fellow contestants but also to the broadcast audience as overhearers. This dual audience awareness complicates a straightforward addressee driven understanding of terms of endearment in this instance, suggesting that even within interactional contexts, speakers may simultaneously orient toward the wider viewing audience in their linguistic choices, particularly when those choices carry recognisable performative or stylistic value.

In contrast, Zack's use of *mate* across Extract (7) demonstrates a more conventionally solidarity-oriented function. The repetition of *mate* across two consecutive turns in *go, mate* and *sorry, mate* in Episode 10 of *The Traitors* indexes interpersonal alignment and group membership, functioning as what Tajfel and Turner (1979, cited in Mendoza-Denton 2007) would identify as in-group convergence language. The fact that this usage occurs in a later episode is consistent with the temporal pattern observed in Figure 3, in which Zack's feature use increases rather than decreases over time, which is a finding that will be examined in greater depth in Section 5.5. It is key to note that Zack's sustained use of relational language in later interactional contexts suggests that terms of endearment function not merely as early-stage rapport-building devices but as

ongoing markers of alliance maintenance, particularly within the strategically complex social environment of *The Traitors*.

5.3. Confessional Contexts: Authentication and Identity Performance

Where interactional contexts elicit language oriented primarily toward immediate addressees, confessional segments represent a fundamentally different communicative environment in which the present interlocutors are absent and the imagined broadcast audiences now assume the role of the primary recipient. As (Werner 2021, cited in Karpenko-Seccombe 2023) observes, confessionals are asynchronous, planned speech events, however they are linguistically constructed to appear spontaneous. It is within this conflict between performance and perceived authenticity that the most analytically vital data of the present study lay.

The self-defining copular phrases analysed in this section offer a distinct characteristic of identity performance. Extract (5), where Olivia produces the sequence *I'm not a crier / I'm an angry crier* within a single confessional is one instance within the dataset that is conceptually key. The self-correction mid-utterance, in which she shifts from definitive denial to a self-categorisation exemplifies the nature of spontaneous and unplanned speech that can be considered a further instance of performed spontaneity similarly identified in Jenkin's data. In accordance with the findings of (Werner 2021, cited in Karpenko-Seccombe 2023), the apparent spontaneity of Olivia's self-correction must therefore be understood as itself a constructed effect rather than an unmediated glimpse of authentic selfhood. The framework of Bucholtz and Hall (2005) is also applicable here, as Olivia's self-positioning through negation and subsequent qualification constitutes an authentication device, producing a self-image that appears nuanced and emotionally honest due to its resistance of simple self-description.

A more elaborated instance of confessional self-definition is observable in Extract (6), in which Zack produces a sequence of stacked self-categorisation in *I like to think I'm perceptive, quite intelligent, and I'm just so big-mouthed*. The strategic organisation of this sequence is noteworthy in structure, as positive self-assessments are introduced following the hedging epistemic marker *I like to think*, while the negative self-characterisation of *big-mouthed* is presented without hedging,

creating an impression of candid self-awareness that supports the concept of a balanced, credible self-image that Rose and Wood (2005) identify and central to audience perceptions of authenticity in reality television. Bondebjerg's (2002) observation that authenticity on a personal and emotional level is valued over extreme role-playing in reality TV contexts is equally relevant here where Zack's confessional self-presentation linguistically signals this value, performing relatability and self-awareness as markers of genuine character.

Harry's confessional self-definition in Extract (4), in which he describes himself as *just a typical lad*, represents a different but equally deliberate strategy. The down-grader *just* functions to perform ordinariness and resist any impression of self-promotion. In doing so, Harry actively panders to the audiences perceived desires outlined by Hill (2002;2004) in which it is argued that they seek out moments in which participants reveal their 'real' selves despite the constructed nature of the reality TV format. This can be considered to have similar impact to that of Zack's previous example, in the sense that both cases manage and construct credibility of one's own image, yet in Harry's case this sense is created via minimisation of self-character, whereas Zack employs a separate linguistic route to do so in a balancing of both positive and negative self-categorisation.

This collection of confessional data across speakers accurately demonstrates the complexity of presentation of authenticity via linguistic construction, highlighting that within this context, the process is neither incidental nor uniform, rather a range of speaker-specific strategies utilised towards a common goal of a relatable and authentic self-image to a wider viewing audience. Speakers evidently draw upon a variety of available linguistic resources in order to construct what Bucholtz (2003) terms a positioned self, defined as an identity produced through discursive practice rather than transparently revealed through it. That these strategies are observable across the entirety of the speaker sample and across both temporal positions suggests that the confessional format itself serves as a structural prompt for authentication and eliciting careful, audience-aware self-presentation as predicted by the theoretical literature reviewed.

5.4 Temporal Position and Programme-Level Variation

The analyses presented in Sections 5.2 and 5.3 have thus far proposed interactional and confessional contexts as the primary variables shaping speakers' linguistic behaviours. However, the temporal data presented in Figure 3 introduce a further dimension of variation across both contextual categories, revealing that the trajectory of feature use over the course of each series also carries significant theoretical implications.

5.4.1 *Big Brother* Temporal Patterns

Within the *Big Brother* dataset, both Jenkin and Olivia demonstrate a substantial reduction in feature use across all three categories between Episode 1 and Episode 16. At first glance, this pattern appears consistent with sociolinguistic literature on stylistic relaxation, which predicts that speakers become progressively less self-monitoring in their speech following repeated interaction with the same interlocutors as performative pressure of initial self-presentation recede (Labov 1972; Eckert 2000; Holmes 2013; Mendoza-Denton 2008). In this case, reduction in all three linguistic features of focus would reflect a natural decline in use of authentication strategies identified in previous sections, as contestants become more socially embedded within the house environment, the need to actively construct credibility and relational warmth through linguistic performance diminishes accordingly.

However, as flagged in Section 5.2, the reduction observed in the *Big Brother* data is notably abrupt rather than gradual, a quality contradictory to a straightforward stylistic relaxation view. A more nuanced account must consider the social conditions that characterise later *Big Brother* episodes, in which cumulative pressures of nominations and intensifying conflicts greatly contrast the context of Episode 1. Under conditions of genuine emotional stress, the performative linguistic features that dominate earlier interactions may be suppressed, not because speakers have relaxed their self-monitoring but because the strategic and emotional demands of the situation deem feature-rich spontaneity less viable. This reading finds support in Culpeper and Holmes' (2013) theory that unscripted, personally pressured speech carries its own authenticity marks, thus when emotional stakes are high, less visibly constructed speech takes place over carefully authenticated structures.

5.4.2 *The Traitors* Temporal Patterns

Temporal trajectories observable in *The Traitors* dataset present figures that, contrastingly to *Big Brother*, directly challenge the stylistic relaxation prediction, where rather than demonstrating a reduction in feature use over time, Zack in particular displays some increased utilisation of linguistic features in the later episode. Zack's increase in use of both discourse markers and terms of endearment challenges the works of Labov (1972) and Eckert (2000), among others and could imply an alternative explanation. Given the deception-based format of *The Traitors*, it can be inferred that it is required that strategic self-monitoring of speech intensifies rather than relaxes over time as alliances become increasingly consequential.

Taken together, the divergent temporal patterns across the two programmes suggest that their formats function as variables that shape not only immediate linguistic choices of participants, but also the broader trajectories of their self-presentation over time. The distinction between social stakes of the two programmes maps onto Wardhaugh's (2010:5) findings that speakers constantly exploit available linguistic resources in response to shifting social demands. Temporal patterns observed in this dataset suggest demands are shaped by not only interpersonal familiarity, but by the specific competitive and emotional logic of the respective programmes' formats. These findings also carry implication for the authenticity and audience design frameworks applied throughout this discussion. Bell's (1984) model and Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) authentication framework were not developed with the specific conditions of reality television in mind, and the temporal data here suggest that the strategic dimensions of self-presentation in this genre introduce a degree of complexity that neither framework fully anticipates.

5.5 Synthesis and Theoretical Implications

The analyses of Section 5 collectively demonstrate that authenticity in reality TV discourse is neither a stable nor transparent quality, rather a contextually situated phenomenon produced through strategic selection of linguistic features across varying communicative environments. In each context examined, speakers draw on available resources to construct rather than reveal authentic identities, supporting Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) authentication framework, Bell's (1984) audience design model, and Coupland's (2007) theorisation of style as socially meaningful practice. Programme-level divergences identified in Section 5.4 further suggest that previous

literature regularly require qualification where strategic self-presentation is an explicit demand, extending existing scholarship on authenticity in reality television discourse (Lorenzo-Dus and Blitvich 2013; Karpenko-Seccombe 2023; Tolson 2006) through a focus on individual speaker-level variation that broader genre analyses have not yet fully addressed.

6. Conclusion

This dissertation set out to examine how individual speakers in UK reality television programmes construct authenticity, perform identity, and navigate audience design through the use of three specific linguistic features: discourse markers, self-defining copular phrases and terms of endearment. Drawing on a dataset of four speakers across two programmes, being *Big Brother* and *The Traitors*, and analysing variation across interactional and confessional contexts, as well as temporal position within each series, this study has demonstrated that linguistic self-presentation in this genre is a contextually sensitive and strategically motivated process rather than a spontaneous or transparent one.

The results of this study provide consistent support for Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) authentication framework, Bell's (1984) audience design model, and the broader theoretical position that authenticity in mediated contexts is discursively constructed rather than inherently possessed. The divergence between programme contexts further suggests that programme format functions as a structural determinant of linguistic self-presentation, a dimension that existing frameworks do not fully account for, warranting further investigation.

This study is not without limitations. The relatively small dataset of four speakers and two programmes necessarily restricts the generalisability of its findings, and the reliance on broadcast footage means that editorial decisions may have influenced the spoken data available for analysis. Future research might expand the corpus to encompass a wider range of reality television formats or apply ethnographic methods to access the speaker perspectives that corpus-based analysis alone cannot capture.

Nevertheless, through analysis of speaker-level variation, and individual linguistic features across varied contexts, this study offers a valuable contribution to the growing body of sociolinguistic research on reality television discourse, one that affirms the value of applying variationist and interactional frameworks to a genre where linguistic complexity continues to reward close analytical attention.

List of References

Bednarek, M. 2010. *The Language of Fictional Television: Drama and Identity*. London: Continuum.

Bednarek, M. 2018. *Language and Television Series: A Linguistic Approach to TV Dialogue*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bell, A. 1984. 'The language of news media'. *Language in Society* 13: 145–204.

Biressi, A. and Nunn, H. 2004. *Reality TV: Realism and Revelation*. London: Wallflower Press.

Brinton, L. 1996. *Pragmatic Markers in English: Grammaticalization and Discourse Functions*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Brown, P. and Levinson, S.C. 1987. *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Brown, R. and Gilman, A. 1960. 'The pronouns of power and solidarity'. *American Anthropologist* 62: 253–276.

Bucholtz, M. 2003. 'Sociolinguistic nostalgia and the authentication of identity'. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 7: 398–416.

Bucholtz, M. and Hall, K. 2005. 'Identity and interaction: a sociocultural linguistic approach'. *Discourse Studies* 7: 585–614.

Coupland, N. 2007. *Style: Language Variation and Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Culpeper, J. and Holmes, O. 2013. '(Im)politeness and exploitative TV in Britain and North America: the X Factor and American Idol'. In N. Lorenzo-Dus and P. Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (eds.) *Real Talk: Reality Television and Discourse Analysis in Action*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 169–198.

- D'Arcy, A. 2017. *Discourse-Pragmatic Variation in Context: Eight Hundred Years of LIKE*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Du Bois, J.W. 2007. 'The stance triangle'. In R. Englebretson (ed.) *Stancetaking in Discourse*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 139–182.
- Dunkling, L. 1990. *A Dictionary of Epithets and Terms of Address*. London: Routledge.
- Eckert, P. 2000. *Linguistic Variation as Social Practice*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Fairclough, N. 1995. *Media Discourse*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Fraser, B. 1999. 'What are discourse markers?'. *Journal of Pragmatics* 31: 931–952.
- Hill, A. 2002. 'Big Brother: the real audience'. *Television and New Media* 3: 323–340.
- Hill, A. 2004. *Reality TV: Audiences and Popular Factual Television*. London: Routledge.
- Hill, A. 2007. *Restyling Factual TV: Audiences and News, Documentary and Reality Genres*. London: Routledge.
- Hill, A. 2015. *Reality TV*. London: Routledge.
- Holmes, J. 2013. *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*. 4th edn. London: Routledge.
- Karpenko-Secombe, T. 2023. *Language and Identity in Reality Television*. London: Routledge.
- Kiesling, S.F. 2004. 'Dude'. *American Speech* 79: 281–305.
- Labov, W. 1972. *Sociolinguistic Patterns*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Locher, M.A. and Watts, R.J. 2005. 'Politeness theory and relational work'. *Journal of Politeness Research* 1: 9–33.
- Lorenzo-Dus, N. and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, P. (eds.) 2013. *Real Talk: Reality Television and Discourse Analysis in Action*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Mendoza-Denton, N. 2008. *Homegirls: Language and Cultural Practice Among Latina Youth Gangs*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Meyerhoff, M. 2019. *Introducing Sociolinguistics*. 3rd edn. London: Routledge.

Neale, S. 2015. 'Television and genre'. In G. Creeber (ed.) *The Television Genre Book*. 3rd edn. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Ouellette, L. (ed.) 2014. *A Companion to Reality Television*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

Rose, R.L. and Wood, S.L. 2005. 'Paradox and the consumption of authenticity through reality television'. *Journal of Consumer Research* 32: 284–296.

Schiffrin, D. 1987. *Discourse Markers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Tannen, D. 2007. *Talking Voices: Repetition, Dialogue, and Imagery in Conversational Discourse*. 2nd edn. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Thornborrow, J. 2015. *The Discourse of Reality Television*. London: Routledge.

Tolson, A. 2006. *Media Talk: Spoken Discourse on TV and Radio*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Tyler, I. and Bennett, B. 2010. 'Celebrity chav: fame, femininity and social class'. *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 13: 375–393.

Wardhaugh, R. 2010. *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*. 6th edn. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.