

“I don’t feel like much of a gentleman (.) if I don’t pay (.) you know”: A metapragmatic perspective on constructing gender identities in *First Dates Ireland*

Anne Barron

Solvejg Wolfers-Pommerenke

Leuphana University

Leuphana University

Abstract

Reality TV shows, such as *First Dates Ireland*, represent a site of gender co-construction which potentially influence audience language use conventions. At the same time, as largely unscripted discourse, such gender co-constructions may be claimed to mirror discursive patterns in Irish English. Research on Irish English in the media, particularly on unscripted media discourse, represents a research gap. Similarly, research on the interactional co-creation of gender roles in dating, and specifically in payment interaction, is limited, and represents a gap in the study of Irish English. The present paper explores gender co-construction as portrayed in payment negotiation interactions and experiential interview snippets broadcast on *First Dates Ireland*. Specifically, the study takes a metapragmatic perspective on heterosexual gender co-construction, with a focus on daters’ use of gendered categories, on their mobilisation of gender and on their indexing of stances towards discursive gender reproductions. Findings reveal both men and women to explicitly co-construct a traditional gendered identity and for these co-constructions to focus above all on men and their active role in extending payment offers. Men use metapragmatic references to gender and gender roles as objective grounders in payment offers. These serve a negative politeness strategy protecting women’s negative face. They also protect men’s positive face, ensuring that payment offers are not seen as social pleading, but rather dictated by social norms. Women use metapragmatic references to gender in offer acceptances, via compliments and gratitude, framing offers as socially appropriate. These references enhance men’s positive face, while protecting women’s negative face. Finally, challenges to norms, although not rejected outright, were negatively framed. The paper closes with a discussion of the implications of traditional gender reproduction in the media.

Keywords: *First Dates Ireland*, dating, payment negotiation, metapragmatics, gender construction, speech acts

1. Introduction

Recent scholarship on Irish English in the media has offered valuable insights into media representations and Irish English use. Within scripted television, for instance, research has focused on comedies, such as *Father Ted* (Walshe, 2011), and soap operas (e.g. Palma-Fahey, 2015). However, research on Irish English language use in the media remains in its early stages,

with scholarship on unscripted formats, particularly reality TV, still representing a research gap (Walshe, 2023).

Like scripted TV formats, reality TV programs such as *First Dates Ireland* are highly edited media products shaped by time constraints and entertainment goals. Yet, unlike scripted genres, they feature largely unscripted interactions between ordinary individuals in real situations (Chu, 2020). As such, interactions largely mirror discursive reproductions of cultural language patterns (Garfinkel, 1967). In addition, reality TV commonly includes experiential interview snippets designed to elicit personal reactions (Montgomery, 2010), offering metapragmatic insights into awareness of language use.

Dating is a popular focus of reality TV shows (Denby, 2021; Hsiang, 2019). The *First Dates* format, first broadcast on Channel 4 in 2013 and since adapted internationally (cf. Barron, 2025b), shows ordinary people meeting on blind dates. Given that dating is a socially sensitive context and difficult to research empirically, media representations provide valuable insights into patterns of language use in dating (cf. Romaniuk & Terán, 2022). For Irish English, Clancy and Vaughan (2023) examine the creation and performance of intimacy in *First Dates Ireland*.

Payment negotiation is frequently an important part of a first date. Prominent among the speech acts recorded in such negotiations are payment offers and suggestions to share expenses. These play a pivotal role in gender co-construction, with payment offers in *First Dates* (UK) constructing a masculine identity and suggestions to share expenses a feminine identity (Barron, 2025a, 2025b). Gender construction via speech act choices manifests on an implicit level, without gender roles being an explicit topic. Gender construction may, however, also manifest on a metapragmatic level, where gender becomes an explicit focus (Holmes, 2006; Schnurr, 2008).

The present article takes a metapragmatic perspective, addressing explicit gender mobilisation in payment negotiation in dating (Verschuere, 2004). We focus on the way language users display awareness of gendered language use, particularly regarding speech act

use. Specifically, we examine how heterosexual daters construct a gendered identity for themselves and/or their dating partner in payment interaction and in the experiential interview snippets on payment in *First Dates Ireland*. In addition, we examine stances toward traditional dating scripts in which a masculine identity is constructed via an active male paying role (cf. Cameron & Curry, 2020; Lamont, 2021; cf. . 2.2).

The paper attempts to fill a research gap in language use and gender representation in Irish English on reality TV shows and add to wider scholarship on the discourse of reality TV shows (cf. Hsiang, 2019). As unscripted discourse, it also adds to scholarship on payment negotiation in dating in Irish English. The analysis is guided by three overriding research questions. First, do speakers of both or either gender mobilise gender metapragmatically in heterosexual payment negotiation in a first-date context; and if they do, how are these gendered identities performed, in what speech-act context do such mobilisations occur, and who constructs gender for whom? Second, are gendered identities co-constructed during payment negotiation in ways that align with traditional assumptions about gender roles and expectations? Finally, the third research question explores dater indexing of stances toward challenges to conventional norms of payment negotiation.

In the following sections, we turn to the literature on gender constructions, particularly in the dating context and on reality TV dating shows (section 2). Focus then turns to methodological and analytical issues (section 3). The analysis and findings (section 4), discussion (section 5) and conclusion (section 6) follow.

2. Gender constructions, representations and stance on dating reality TV

In this section, gender identity construction is first discussed in section 2.1., before turning to scholarship on gender construction in a dating context, and to gender construction in reality TV dating (section 2.2.). Finally, section 2.3. addresses gender and payment negotiation in the reality TV dating context.

2.1. Gender identity construction

Identity is the view individuals construct of themselves. Linguistically, the construction of identity can manifest itself both implicitly and explicitly. Implicit gender constructions include, for instance, when women assert their femininity by using less forceful expletives associated with a feminine rather than masculine register (e.g. “poo” rather than “shit”) (Schnurr, 2008; cf. also O’Sullivan et al., 2025). Similarly, men may engage in competitive humour associated with a masculine register, unlike the supportive humour more common in interactions with women (Holmes, 2006). Gender identity may also be discursively challenged when women or men adopt language patterns associated with the other gender (e.g., women using stereotypically masculine control behaviours like silencing subordinates with humour) (Schnurr, 2008; cf. also Holmes, 2006).

Explicitly, gender is constructed on the metapragmatic level where gender becomes content, for example when men are mocked as over-communicative and thus unmanly (cf., e.g. Holmes, 2006). A further example is a woman leader overtly and assertively communicating her awareness of the exceptional nature of women’s status in the male-dominated managerial profession saying “you can tell the girly office can’t you” to construct a feminine identity for herself and her team (Schnurr, 2008, p. 311). Gender stereotypes can also be challenged explicitly. Schnurr (2008, p. 310) notes how a woman manager frames herself as “a technical klutz” in a humorous, self-denigrating way that challenges masculine norms.

2.2. Gender, dating and payment negotiation

Researchers across various fields agree gender roles are evolving toward greater equality (Cameron & Curry, 2020; Lamont, 2021). However, psychology and sociology studies show persistent conventional dating roles (e.g. Emmers-Sommer et al., 2010; Laner & Ventrone, 2000; Lever et al., 2015; Rose & Frieze, 1989). Script theory treats scripts as cognitive templates organising expectations and behaviours in social interactions (cf. Laner & Ventrone,

2000). First-date scripts maintain “the traditional gender-power ratio” (Rose & Frieze, 1989, p. 258), assigning men active roles (sexual initiators, planners, economic providers) and women reactive roles (emotional facilitators, sexual objects) (Rose & Frieze, 1989; cf. Emmers-Sommer et al., 2010). Linked to men’s active role is the expectation, tied to the masculine breadwinner norm (Lever et al., 2015), that the man pays on a date (Emmers-Sommer et al., 2010; Rose & Frieze, 1989).

Dating roles in the Anglophone context have also been approached by examining self-reported views and attitudes of daters regarding evaluations and expectations when dating. Laner and Ventrone (2000), in their questionnaire-based study of heterosexual dating scripts among American students, found overwhelming agreement between male and female respondents with regards to the likelihood of a man paying on a date. None of their respondents found it likely that the woman would pay (Laner & Ventrone, 2000). A rare example of findings contrary to the male paying norm is a survey-based project by Lever et al. (2015) who investigated reported behaviours and attitudes by anonymous online respondents on American websites with regards to “who does and who should pay for dates”. They show that “across age, income, and educational variations, many people’s behaviours – and more so their attitudes – are disrupting old gendered assumptions about ‘who pays,’” (Lever et al., 2015, p. 10) thereby undoing gender. However, despite these reported behavioural changes, women in the study still appeared to hold paradoxical views as they associated splitting the bill with a loss of “female privilege” (Lever et al., 2015, p. 11). While 56% of female respondents reported not to be bothered by men’s expectations to share costs, they still expected to choose whether they wanted to contribute financially or not (Lever et al., 2015). However, Lever et al. (2015) argue that choice would only be coherent with egalitarian ideology if both men and women were able to choose. Their study shows that in the dating context women may be more likely to resist change with regards to gender inequality and difference.

2.3. Gender construction and payment negotiation in dating reality TV shows

Research on the construction and representation of gender roles in the media, and particularly on reality TV shows, is limited, but growing (cf. Hsiang, 2019). Many studies are qualitative multimodal analyses in Cultural Studies and Sociology that critique portrayals of women reproducing traditional subordination (cf. e.g. Denby, 2021 on *Love Island*). Turning to linguistic scholarship, Romaniuk and Terán (2022) highlight implicit gender construction via verbal and non-verbal differences in initial interactions on *The Bachelor/The Bachelorette*. Hand-kissing is performed only by men, while hair-tossing, shoulder-twisting, waving, mutual gaze with forehead bow, winking, breast-touching, and face-covering occur only by women. In addition, men were more likely to pay compliments and address the possibility of further romantic relationships; women more likely to use non-verbal communication, especially submissive non-verbal cues (e.g. head tilts). The authors argue that televised representations of feminine identity serve as scripts for viewers, potentially encouraging adoption and reproduction of unequal gender behaviours.

In the context of payment negotiation and gender construction, Barron (2025a, b) analyses implicit gender constructions in payment negotiation on *First Dates*, with Barron (2025a) examining speech-act patterns in *First Dates* (UK) and Barron (2025b) comparing the UK and German versions. Focusing on dates ending in a desire to meet again romantically, both studies find that payment negotiation reflects traditional conventions: Full payment offers implicitly construct masculinity, while ritualised suggestions to split the bill (especially in the British context) implicitly construct femininity (Barron, 2025a, 2025b).

3. Method

The current analysis is a metapragmatic analysis of gender construction in payment negotiation on the Irish reality TV series *First Dates Ireland*. We detail the data (section 3.1.), and describe analytical procedures (section 3.2.).

3.1. First Dates Ireland – A reality TV show

The present analysis takes payment negotiation in a first date context as a site of gender construction. The dating context activates a dating frame, defined as “cognitive conceptualizations of forms of appropriate and inappropriate behaviour...” (Locher, 2011, p. 193). The dating frame triggers expectations about action sequences, roles, and identity.

In *First Dates Ireland*, individuals from across Ireland apply to share a blind-date meal at Coda Eatery in Dublin. Each date is recorded by over 20 hidden cameras; although daters are aware of filming, the set-up is claimed to “allow the daters to forget they are being filmed” (COCO Content, 2020). Nonetheless, awareness of cameras and the home audience may still influence interactions. Excerpts from the dates are supplemented with experiential interview snippets conducted by the host/producer before or after the date to elicit personal insights and reactions (Montgomery, 2010).

The present analysis is based on 31 episodes broadcast on RTÉ2 between 23.3.2020 and 9.5.2021. Each episode included several dates. During the date, the restaurant bill is settled by the couples themselves, with daters given only a token toward the meal (Earley, 2018). The gender of speakers was defined in terms of sexual orientation, with a focus on heterosexual dates, where gender identity is commonly assumed to be cisgender. It is acknowledged that sexual orientation does not necessarily equate to gender, and that individuals who are not cisgender may also participate in heterosexual dating (cf. GLAAD Media Reference Guide).

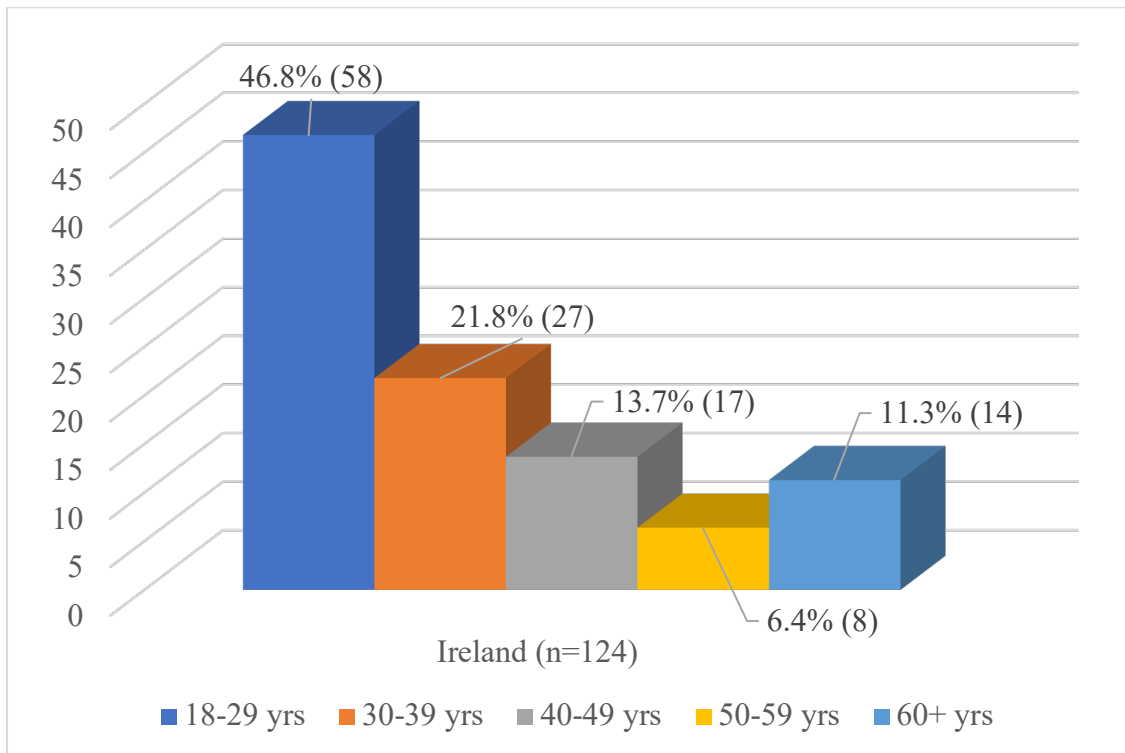
TABLE 1

First Dates Ireland heterosexual payment corpus

	<i>Date interactions</i>
Dates with payment interaction	65
Dates with experiential interview snippets on date payment	12

FIGURE 1

Age range of daters in First Dates Ireland (n=124)¹



In the 31 episodes, 65 heterosexual dating interactions included a payment scene. Twelve of these also included experiential interview snippets on the topic of date payment. In total then, the analysis focuses on transcriptions of 65 dates (130 daters), and 12 interview snippets (cf. Table 1). Daters were 18 years upwards, with most daters between 18-29 years old (46.8%), and with 82.3% of daters under 50 years of age (cf. Figure 1).

3.2. Analysis

The focus of the analysis is on the metapragmatic construction of gender identities around the payment event and in the experiential interview snippets on payment negotiation. The study focuses only on talk between daters, excluding talk by the host, servers or other guests in the restaurant, as well as talk by narrators. A bottom-up approach was adopted, with categories of

¹ Dater age was not available for six of the 130 daters. Hence, the total of 124.

the metapragmatic mobilisation of gender emerging from the data and coded using the qualitative text analysis program *f4analyse*. These codes were ‘gendered categories’, mobilisation of ‘societal standards/traditions’ and ‘explicit stance-taking towards gender and modernity’ in payment negotiation. We explain and deal with each category in turn in section 4. On occasion, these codes overlapped within a speaker’s turn (cf. section 4.2. for illustration).

4. Findings

We examine metapragmatic mobilisations of gender in payment negotiation via three foci: ‘gendered categories’ (section 4.1.), ‘societal standards/traditions’ (section 4.2.), and ‘explicit stance-taking toward gender and modernity’ (section 4.3.).

4.1. Metapragmatic mobilisations of gender in payment negotiation via gendered categories

The ‘gendered categories’ code captures explicit gendered terms that mobilise gender. Table 2 lists the gendered terms found in the payment interactions and interview snippets. Masculine categories dominate (e.g., “man/men”, “lads”, “gentleman”, “emasculated”, “dick”); only one feminine term (“women”) appears, and only once.

TABLE 2

Explicit use of gendered categories on payment negotiation in First Dates Ireland²

	Payment interactions (n=130)	Experiential interviews (n=130)	Total: interactions & interviews (n=130)
<i>Man/men</i>	1W	1W	2W

² Here and elsewhere, M denotes man and W woman.

<i>Lads</i>	-	1M	1M
<i>Gentleman</i>	7(W:6; M:1)		7(W:6; M:1)
<i>Emasculated</i>	1M		1M
<i>Dick</i>	1M		1M
<i>Women</i>	-	1W	1W
TOTAL gendered categories	10 (9.7%) (3M; 7W)	3 (2.3%) (1M; 2W)	13 (10%) (4M; 9W)

Overall, explicit gendered terms were used by 10% (13/130) of individuals (cf. Table 2), or in other words, in 20% of dates (13/65). Analysis of verbal actions linked to these ‘gendered categories’ shows that both women and men assign men the active role of looking after women, especially paying for the meal (cf. Table 2). Examples (1), (2), (3) and (4) show some of these ‘gendered categories’ in use.

(1) *After a payment offer by M:*

W: No (.) I will [(We are gonna do halvesies)]

M: [No (.) eh eh] eh eh.

W: Uh (.) I do like masterful men (FDIre_Ma/Ri, 61/62 years)³

(2) *After payment insistence by M:*

W (alone): Like I can definitely get the man vibe off him now (FDIre_Am/Se, 27/26 years)

(3) *After payment insistence by W:*

M: I feel so emasculated

W: Don’t be ridiculous (FDIre_La/Lu, 23/24 years)

³ FDIre denotes *First Dates Ireland*. The initials of the daters’ first names follow, starting with the woman’s name. Dater ages follows in the same order.

(4) *After a payment offer by M and a refusal by W:*

M: No (0.6) I insist (.) I don't feel like much of a gentleman if I don't pay you know

(FDIre_Sh/Jo, 24/28 years)

In examples (1) and (2), women link “man/men” to caring for women and paying for both meals, praising such men as “masterful” and sexy (“man vibe”). Men likewise link paying the full bill to masculinity. In example (3), when the woman paid, M reports feeling “emasculated”, later saying “I feel like an absolute dick” for not being allowed to split the bill (FDIre_La/Lu). Example (4) echoes these associations, with the male dater saying, “I don't feel like much of a gentleman if I don't pay you know.”

4.2. Metapragmatic mobilisations of gender in payment negotiation via societal standards/traditions

The ‘societal standards/traditions’ code invokes social norms that reinstate traditional gender roles. It comprises three sub-codes: ‘old school’, ‘upbringing/manners’, and ‘proper/self-evident way’ (cf. Table 3). We discuss each sub-code firstly in the payment interactions and then in the experiential interviews. ‘Old school’ denotes “old-fashioned or traditional” (Oxford Learner’s Dictionary), covering references to traditions, e.g., calling payment behaviour “fierce traditional” or “old-fashioned” (examples (5)–(6)). These references were used by 3.8% of all individuals (7.6% of interactions) (Table 3). Although small, occurrences were roughly balanced by gender.

Notably, while both genders use the sub-code, it mobilises gender primarily for men, not women. In examples (5)–(6) men self-identify as old school, calling themselves “fierce traditional” or “old-fashioned.” Similarly, in example (7) the woman labels her date’s offer “chivalrous,” attributing old-school behaviour to him. “Chivalrous” is defined as “(of men) polite, kind and behaving with honour, especially towards women” (Oxford Learner’s

Dictionary), thus explicitly gendering the behaviour and linking maleness to paying for a woman's meal. Notable also are the speech acts in which the 'old school' sub-code is employed differ across genders. Women mobilise old school conceptualisations in acceptances of a payment offer/expressions of gratitude, as in example (7), while men mobilise it in the context of payment offers (examples (5) and (6)).

(5) M: Okay (.) I'm gonna be <-> what you think <-> I'm gonna be fierce traditional and get this (FDIre_Or/Da, 44/46 years)

(6) *Following payment by M and suggestion by W:*

M: [Absol<]>utely not (.) I'm old-fashioned (FDIre_An/Jo, 32/36 years)

(7) W: Well (.) thank you very much and I will graciously acce<[>pt that (because I think) tha<]>t's very very chivalrous of you

M: [Yeah (.) well, thank you () yeah] (2.7) Thank you (FDIre_Lo/Mi, 75/81 years)

Using the 'old school' sub-code, men align with and reproduce the convention that males take the active payment role. They thereby present themselves as well-brought-up while also signalling awareness of newer payment conventions (examples (5)–(6): “fierce traditional”, “old-fashioned”).

'Upbringing/manners', the second sub-code, invokes upbringing to reinstate traditional gender roles. It is used by 6.7% of individuals (8/130), i.e., is present in 12.4% of interactions (8/65). Both women (5/65) and men (3/65) employ the sub-code (cf. Table 3).

TABLE 3***Mobilisation of societal standard/tradition in payment negotiation in First Dates Ireland***

<i>Societal standard/tradition</i>	<i>Payment interactions (n=130)</i>	<i>Experiential interviews (n=130)</i>	<i>Total: interactions & interview (n=130)</i>
Old-school/traditional	5 (3.8%) (W:2; M:3)	1 (0.8%) (W:1; M:0)	6 (4.6%) (W:3; M:3)
Upbringing/manners	8 (6.2%) (W:5; M:3)	2 (1.6%) (W:2; M:0)	10 (7.7%) (W:7; M:3)
Proper/self-evident way	- (W:0; M:0)	1 (0.8%) (W:0; M:1)	1 (0.8%) (W:0; M:1)
Total societal standard/tradition	13 (10%) (W:7; M:6)	4 (3.1%) (W:3; M:1)	17 (13.1%) (W:10; M:7)

Like ‘old school’, the ‘upbringing/manners’ sub-code mobilises action for men only. In all cases it aligns with the norm that men should offer to pay the bill. Example (8) shows M saying his ‘Mammy’ would view letting his date split the bill as unforgivable.

(8) *Following a suggestion to split expenses by W, a payment offer by M and a reinstatement of the suggestion to split expenses by W:*

W: [[A<:>h]] no, don't - don't be - don't be like that now () we're
 [[[just gonna split it down the middle like-]]]

M: [[[(Come here (.) come here (..))]]] My Mammy will never forgive me
 if I let you pay (FDIre_AI/Ja, 27/27 years)

Mothers (‘Mammy’) as caregivers play a major role in upbringing, linking this statement to the ‘upbringing/manners’ sub-code. This is especially true in Ireland, where scholarship documents

the traditional stereotype of the “Irish Mammy” as parent and homemaker. TV shows, such as *Mrs. Brown’s Boys*, play on shared knowledge of the Irish Mammy, where she is depicted “...as a loving parent, a homemaker and her lack of control when it comes to abstaining from interfering or trying to regulate her children’s lives” (Murphy & Palma-Fahey, 2018, p. 324).

Example (4) in section 4.1. is a further example in which the man aligns his wish to pay the bill with upbringing. In example (4), the man talks of a wish to be a “gentleman.” A “gentleman” is “a man who is polite and well educated, who has excellent manners and always behaves well” (Oxford Learners Dictionary). Thus, the term both represents a gendered category (cf. section 4.1.) and mobilises ‘upbringing/manners’. In the payment-insistence context, M thus aligns himself with traditional dating norms. Being well-mannered is equated with offering to pick up the tab. As such, masculine gender construction is linked with covering expenses on a date. Also, in example (9) the woman accepts the offer and calls her date “a gentleman.” Again, the term functions as a gendered category and invokes ‘upbringing/manners’, implying that a well-mannered man offers to pay. Finally, like ‘old school’, the ‘upbringing/manners’ sub-code shows speech-act patterns: Men use it in payment offers/insistence (e.g., example (8)); women use it in acceptances and expressions of gratitude (e.g., examples (7) and (9)).

(9) *Following offer by M to pay for the complete bill:*

W: Thank [you] (0.7) you’re a gentleman (FDIre_Ga/Gr, 37/34 years)

In the experiential interview snippets, gender is also mobilised via ‘societal standards/traditions’, though less frequently (3.1%) (cf. Table 3). This mobilisation often co-occurs with the ‘gendered categories’ code (e.g., “men”, “women”) (cf. Table 2, section 4.1.). Thus, in example (10), by explaining that she suggested to split expenses (“I whispered (0.6) ‘I pay for my own’”), but that her date insisted on paying the complete bill, the women

comments that “chivalry's not dead”. By doing so she invokes an old-school societal standard: “chivalry” (associated with men’s polite, honourable behaviour, especially toward women; Oxford Learner’s Dictionary (cf. above)), signalling a positive stance toward the traditional norm that the man pays.

(10) W (*alone, after date*): I whispered (0.6) I’ll pay for my own and he was like no no (.) and that was really nice like uh it shows chivalry's not dead ((laugh)) (0.4) and that’s something my granddad has like taught me it’s like good men (0.6) will make a nice woman feel good (.) d’you know? (0.4) (FDIre_Re/De, 27/32 years)

The same woman then goes on to mobilise gender in the same context of payment negotiation explicitly using ‘gender categories’ (“good men” and “a nice woman”) and a reference to ‘upbringing/manners’ and specifically to values that her granddad handed down to her. These are values that dictate that mannerly, well-behaved men will treat a woman.

(11) M (*alone, after date*): She was gorgeous like so I say lads pay for dinner for her all the time ((FDIre_No/Do, 22/27 years)

Finally, the experiential interview clips also mobilised gender in a way not seen in the payment interactions, namely by sketching self-evident societal behavioural norms (‘proper/self-evident’ sub-code) (cf. Table 2, section 4.1.). In example (11) the explicit ‘gender category’ “lads”, is used to frame the fact that a gorgeous woman’s dinner would be paid for (“so I say lads pay for dinner for her all the time”) as self-evident.

4.3. Metapragmatic indexing of stance towards gender and modernity in payment negotiation

The ‘explicit indexing of stance towards gender and modernity’ captures daters’ stances towards challenges to traditional gender conventions whereby the man issues a payment offer and picks up the tab. It involves stance towards either the woman paying the complete bill or both dating parties splitting the meal. This analysis complements the previous analyses in sections 4.1. and 4.2. which implicitly index stance in their reproduction of traditional gender roles (e.g., praising chivalry signals a positive stance toward tradition and a possible negative stance toward modernity; cf. example (10), section 4.2.). Only a few instances explicitly index stance toward gender and modernity (cf. Table 4).

TABLE 4

Stance in references to modernity in interactions and experiential interview snippets in First Dates Ireland

	(n=5/130)
Male comments	3 (Acceptance: 1; Rejection: 0; Ambiguous: 2)
Female comments	2 (Acceptance: 1; Rejection: 0; Ambiguous: 1)

There were two explicit cases of an acceptance of newer equality norms, one by each gender (cf. Table 4). In an experiential interview, this man says splitting the bill is “the fairest thing to do...” (example (12)). His remark follows his date’s surprise at how quickly he accepted her suggestion to split the bill. The woman here does not explicitly reject bill-splitting but she does express her surprise at how quick M took up her suggestion. This comment points to the ritual nature of suggestions to split made by many women.

(12) W (*alone*): I was a little bit surprised (0.8) in fairness (.) um (1.0) because I suppose he (0.3) straightaway just said we will half it

M: (inc.) that's the fairest thing to do (inc.) anyway (FDIre_Ba/Ch, 74/59 years;)

Although no case explicitly rejects newer equality norms, comments like F's "surprise" in example (12) indirectly signal reserve. Similarly, there were several instances in which daters' comments and behaviour appeared to contradict each other (cf. Table 4, ambiguous: 3). In example (13), the woman self-identifies as a "big feminist" yet accepts an offer to pay for her meal. Similarly, in example (14), the man paid for the meal and the woman graciously accepted but demanded after the meal to be allowed to pay the next time. By asserting her ability to pay she protects her negative face (Brown & Levinson, 1987) and possibly her date's, since paying is socially coded as male (cf. above). The phrase "you have to let me pay" attributes decision-power to the man. It is also unclear whether she means to pay both meals next time or only her own. Her date agrees with her request, saying he does not "have any issues" with her paying. Thus, his stance is ambiguous: he pays now but is open to her taking a more active role later.

(13) W: He's being a gentleman ((laugh))

Server: Absolutely (.) very [chivalrous of you]

W: [I'm normally a big] feminist but [[(inc.)]]

M: [[(No no

(inc.)]]

(FDIre_Av/Sh, 35/35 years)

(14) *After the meal:*

W: If we meet again and we have a <-> a meal (.) then you have to let me pay (.)
(wouldn't you?)

M: Well yeah (.) of course (.) I <-> I <-> I <-> I have no (0.5) <-> I don't have any
issues (inc.)

(FDIre_Lo/Mi, 81/75 years)

Example (3) in section 4.1. above is also interesting in this regard. There, the man comments that he feels “so emasculated” because his date paid the bill. He comments elsewhere “God, I wish you would have let me split the bill now. I feel like an absolute dick” (FDIre_La/Lu). As such, he rejects the scenario in which a woman pays for a man’s meal but accepts both paying for their own meals. Thus, again, paying the complete bill appears to be presented as the reserve of the man on a first date.

5. Discussion

The present analysis examines daters’ gender constructions in payment negotiation in heterosexual dates broadcast on *First Dates Ireland* from a metapragmatic perspective. It focuses on uses of ‘gendered categories’, mobilisations of ‘societal standards/traditions’ and ‘explicit indexing of stance towards gender and modernity’. The study reveals that universal gender binary concepts, such as “the man”, “the woman”, are explicitly employed by both men and women and that daters link these to gendered roles making explicit reference to ‘societal standards/traditions’, frequently in an overlapping manner.

Quantitatively, 10% of individuals used ‘gendered categories’ and 13.1% mobilised ‘societal standards/traditions’ (cf. Tables 2 and 3). Thus, per interaction, approximately 20% of payment interactions used gendered categories and 26.2% engaged in gender co-constructions via mobilisation of societal standards in payment negotiations. Underlying these explicit mobilisations of gender was a positive stance to traditional gender roles. The analysis also examined a few cases of ‘explicit stance-taking towards gender and modernity’ regarding payment conventions. Although no outright rejections of modern equality norms occurred, some cases showed ambiguous stances where pro-modern statements contrasted with traditional actions.

Despite social change (cf. section 2.2.) then, the gender co-constructions typically reflect traditional payment negotiation roles in *First Dates Ireland*, in which the man plays the

role of the active breadwinner and the woman that of the person treated. Interestingly, identity constructions by both genders focus on the construction of a male role in payment with women only indirectly mentioned as passive recipients. The findings thus indicate a clear reproduction of traditional gender roles on national TV. These results align with prior work on British and German *First Dates*, which found payment offers to function as masculine identity construction (cf. Barron, 2025a, 2025b). They also support findings in psychology and sociology on dating payment practices (e.g., Emmers-Sommer et al., 2010; Lamont, 2021; Laner & Ventrone, 2000; Lever et al., 2015) and thus potentially also reflect current dating practices outside of the reality TV context in Irish English.

Metapragmatic references to gender and to gender roles in payment negotiation can be suggested to play a role in the construction of face-saving discourse. While men use them in payment offers, women use them in acceptances, often via compliments and gratitude. We discuss both gender perspectives in the following, beginning with male references in payment offers.

Payment offers enhance the offeree's positive face (Brown & Levinson, 1987) because they commit the offerer to a future action benefiting the addressee (commissive force). However, offers also exert directive force, potentially constraining the addressee's freedom and thus threatening the addressee's negative face. Invoking societal standards provides a rationale for why the offerer (typically the man) should pay the bill. These references function as a so-called grounder in offering (Barron, 2005), or more specifically in Bella's (2019:37-38) terms, as objective grounders which highlight the circumstances that make it rational for the offer to be accepted. Such grounders acknowledge the offer's imposition and reduce any perceived debt by providing a rational explanation. They pay attention to the offeree's freedom of action and address the fact that in today's world, women are independent persons with negative face wants. As such they operate as negative-politeness devices protecting the offeree's negative face and decreasing any face-threat for the women to accept the offer. The grounders also protect the

offerer's positive face by framing payment as socially sanctioned (cf. Bella, 2019:38). Thus, the offer is framed not as bribery or grovelling but as socially appropriate behaviour that signals manners and upbringing.

Women's references to societal standards/traditions were recorded in acceptances of offers, typically via gratitude and compliments. Here they frame the offer as socially dictated, endorse it and enhance the addressee's positive face, while at the same time preserving their own negative face. In (7) in section 4.2., for example, the payment offer is explicitly accepted ("I will graciously accept that"), and the societal standard/tradition is framed as socially dictated ("(because I think) that's very, very chivalrous of you"). This society-based reason serves as an objective grounder, minimising any perceived indebtedness resulting from the offer. As a compliment, it also boosts the offerer's positive face that enhances the offerer's positive face, and endorses the societal tradition. In example (9) in section 4.2., the acceptance combines gratitude with a compliment ("Thank [you] (0.7) you're a gentleman"). Thanking supports the hearer's positive face by making the speaker's appreciation of the hearer plain (Brown & Levinson, 1987). This appreciation is further intensified with the compliment intensifies this positive-politeness effect. Thus, "You're a gentleman" Again, any potential debt on the offeree in accepting is minimised with reference to societal standards and norms framing and endorsing payment as the duty of well-brought-up men.

Metapragmatic references to gender and to gender roles also play a role in the construction of face-saving discourse in the experiential interview snippets. Women justify allowing men to pay by invoking societal standards/traditions (example (10)). Men invoke the same standards to justify why they paid (example (11)). Thus, reference to societal norms enhances the face of the offerer (men) and mitigates both the face of the offeree (women) and offerer (men), allowing men to offer and women to accept.

The present findings reveal a desire by daters to behave in socially acceptable and expectable ways in the dating context (Lamont, 2021; Laner & Ventrone, 2000; Lever et al.,

2015). Conforming to stereotypical gender-role norms saves face and constructs socially favourable identities. Chivalrous behaviour (e.g., paying) is valued by women (cf. Lever et al., 2015) and helps navigate the uncertain early dating stages. Aligning with traditional dating scripts thus offers guidance and security (e.g. Lamont, 2021; Lever et al., 2015).

6. Conclusion

The present analysis takes payment negotiation among heterosexual couples on *First Dates Ireland* as a site of ‘doing gender’. It examines daters’ gender co-constructions from a metapragmatic perspective, exploring how daters explicitly negotiate, describe and evaluate payment negotiation in relation to gender norms and practices. It also looks at who mobilises gender and how those mobilisations are constructed. Finally, it explores ‘explicit stance-taking regarding payment and modernity’ and thus stance towards rejections of an active male role.

Findings show that metapragmatic constructions of gender roles in payment negotiation play an important role in gender construction in the data through use of ‘gendered categories’ and mobilisation of ‘societal standards/traditions’. Both men and women use payment offers and bill paying to construct masculine identity on the show. Metapragmatic constructions of gender attend to face in both men and women’s discourse. Men employ metapragmatic references to gender and gender roles as objective grounders which highlight the circumstances which make a payment offer rational and acceptable. In other words, such references act as negative-politeness strategies protecting women’s negative face. In so doing, men recognise the potential imposition of encroaching on women by explaining their motives and identity construction wishes (e.g. being a gentleman; upholding tradition). Similarly, they protect their own positive face by framing the offer as socially appropriate rather than as grovelling. Women use metapragmatic references in compliments and expressions of gratitude when accepting offers. Presenting the offer as dictated by social standards enhances the positive face of the offerer and protects a woman’s negative face from any debt that might be associated with her

acceptance of a payment offer. Thus, despite increasing gender equality, conventional gendered dating scripts persist due to the security and guidance that they offer in the early stages of dating (e.g. Lamont, 2021; Lever et al., 2015).

This article treats *First Dates Ireland* as a media product. Findings indicate that traditional behavioural norms persist and are reproduced on national TV despite social change. Such representations reproduce an active masculine identity associated with money and thus power and a feminine identity of passivity and subordination. Such portrayals conflict with goal five of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aiming for gender equality and empowerment for girls and women (United Nations n.y.) since traditional roles may undermine equal partnerships. In this regard, *Bumble*, a dating internet platform aiming to empower women by ensuring that they play an active role in making dating arrangements, advise, that:

The bedrock of a relationship is formed in the first few months, and if it isn't a level playing field at the start then, as time evolves, areas such as money, childcare and the division of emotional labour are also at risk of being unfairly influenced by gender expectations (<https://thebeehive.bumble.com/the-romance-gap>).

By presenting traditional norms as conventional and framing challenges as problematic, *First Dates Ireland* reproduces rather than contests these norms. Given that TV provides access to otherwise inaccessible dating scripts, the power of gender representation of reality TV shows needs to be critically viewed (Romaniuk & Terán, 2022). However, it is important to note that reality TV does not exist in a vacuum, but is rather received within a particular social context. Indeed, the representation of gender in payment negotiation on *First Dates Ireland* has frequently been debated in Irish newspapers since its first broadcast. Some headlines include “Going Dutch? In the age of equality, who pays for dinner?” (Harris, 2019) or “How is it okay for a man to pay for your first-date dinner because he’s a man?” (Sweeney, 2017) in *The Irish Times*. Such public critique can itself stimulate debate and potential challenges to social norms.

The present study analyses metapragmatic representations of gender in *First Dates Ireland* primarily as a media product. However, because the data are unscripted and overtly recorded, we claim that metapragmatic references to gender and gender roles may potentially reflect language use in Ireland (cf. section 1). Indeed, evidence from participants on *First Dates*, reveals a high level of authenticity of recordings despite the reality TV context. For example, a former participant reports “The cameras are actually hidden! They don’t stop the date to say things like ‘Sorry, could you say that last bit again?’, so it was similar to the natural flow of a date, which was good” (Earley, 2018). Nevertheless, public exposure may heighten participants’ insecurity and face-concerns compared with private dates. Hence, further research is required to explore gender constructions in payment negotiation and beyond in a first date setting in Ireland today.

Transcription conventions

Yeah	[no worries]	Overlapping speech
	[Thanks]	
Over<[>lap		If overlap begins or ends in the middle of a word, the square bracket must be enclosed
(0.5)		Indicates the length of a pause, measured in tenths of a second
(.)		Indicates a pause in the talk of less than two tenths of a second.
(inc.)		Incomprehensible speech
(tomorrow)		Transcriber uncertain of wording
((sigh)) ((cough))		Non-lexical noises. Can also enclose transcriber’s comments on contextual or other features
It <-> it		Rapid repetition of words, stuttering, or sudden change in thought (breaking off one sentence to start a new one)
sou<:>nd		Sustained enunciation of a syllable. The more colons the greater the extent of the stretching

References

- Barron, Anne. (2005). Offering in Ireland and England. In. Anne Barron & Klaus P., Schneider (Eds.), *The Pragmatics of Irish English* (pp. 147–176). Walter de Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110898934.141>
- Barron, Anne. (2025a). “I’ll get it”: Payment offers, payment offer sequences and gender on First Dates. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 235, 4-25.
- Barron, Anne. (2025b). Payment offers, suggestions to share expenses and payment negotiation sequences on initial dates in Germany and the United Kingdom. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 239, 56-76. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2025.01.016>
- Bella, Spyridoula. (2019). Offers in Greek revisited. In Eva Ogiermann & Pilar Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (Eds.), *From Speech Acts to Lay Understandings of Politeness: Multilingual and Multicultural Perspectives* (pp.27-47). Cambridge University Press.
- Brown, Penelope & Levinson, Stephen C. (1987). *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. Cambridge University Press.
- Cameron, Jessica J. & Curry, Emma. (2020). Gender roles and date context in hypothetical scripts for a woman and a man on a first date in the twenty-first century. *Sex Roles*, 82(5), 345-362. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-019-01056-6>
- Chu, Donna. (2020). An (un)romantic journey: Authentic performance in a Chinese dating show. *Global Media and China*, 5(1), 40-54.
- Clancy, B. & Vaughan, Elaine. (2023). *The pragmatics of intimacy: A corpus perspective on First Dates Ireland*. Unpublished paper presented at the 18th Conference of the International Pragmatics Association (IPrA), 9th-12th July, Brussels.
- COCO Content. (2020). *First Dates Ireland*, <https://cococontent.ie/firstdates>
- Denby, Alicia. (2021). Toxicity and femininity in *Love Island*: How reality dating shows perpetuate sexist attitudes towards women. *Frontiers in Sociology*, 6. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2021.641216>
- Earley, Kelly. (2018, March 24). *Here's everything you could possibly want to know about what happens when you go on First Dates Ireland*. <https://www.dailyedge.ie/what-happens-when-you-go-on-first-dates-3917883-Mar2018/>

- Emmers-Sommer, Tara M.; Farrell, Jenny; Gentry, Ashlyn; Stevens, Shannon; Eckstein, Justin; Battocletti, Joseph & Gardener, Carly. (2010). First date sexual expectations: The effects of who asked, who paid, date location, and gender. *Communication Studies*, 61(3), 339-355. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10510971003752676>
- First Dates. (n.d.). <https://www.channel4.com/programmes/first-dates>
- First Dates Ireland. (n.d.). <https://cococontent.ie/firstdates>
- Garfinkel, Harold. (1967). *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. Prentice-Hall Inc., Englewood Cliffs.
- GLAAD Media Reference Guide, 11th Edition. (n.d.). *Glossary of Terms: LGBTQ*. <https://glaad.org/reference/terms/>
- Harris, Arlene (2019, January 21), *Going Dutch? In the age of equality, who pays for dinner?* The Irish Times. <https://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/food-and-drink/going-dutch-in-the-age-of-equality-who-pays-for-dinner-1.3762902>
- Holmes, Janet. (2006). Sharing a laugh: Pragmatic aspects of humor and gender in the workplace. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 38(1), 26-50.
- Hsiang, Vivian. (2019). Constructing the notion of “desirable” men and women in Chinese TV dating shows. In Rosalba Morese & Sara Palermo (Eds.), *The New Forms of Social Exclusion* (pp.57-73). IntechOpen.
- Lamont, Ellen. (2021). The persistence of gendered dating. *Sociology Compass*, 15(11), 1-15.
- Laner, Mary Riege & Ventrone, Nicole A. (2000). Dating scripts revisited. *Journal of Family Issues*, 21(4), 488-500. <https://doi.org/10.1177/019251300021004004>
- Lever, Janet; Frederick, David A. & Hertz, Rosanna. (2015). Who pays for dates? Following versus challenging gender norms. *Sage Open*, 5(4), 1-14. es?
- Locher, Miriam A. (2011). Situated impoliteness: The interface between relational work and identity construction. In Bethan L. Davies, Michael Haugh & Andrew J. Merrison (Eds.), *Situated Politeness* (pp. 187-208). Continuum.
- Montgomery, Martin (2010). Rituals of personal experience in television interviews. *Discourse & Communication*, 4(2), 185-211.
- Murphy, Bróna & Palma-Fahey, María. (2018). Exploring the construction of the Irish Mammy in ‘Mrs Brown’s Boys’: Making and breaking the stereotype. *Pragmatics and Society*, 9(2), 295-326.

- O’Sullivan, Joan; Amador-Moreno, Carolina P. & Barron, Anne (2025). *Corpus Linguistics for Sociolinguistics: A Guide for Research*. Routledge Taylor & Francis.
- Oxford Learner’s Dictionary (n.d.). gentleman. In Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries. <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/gentleman?q=gentleman>
- Oxford Learner’s Dictionary (n.d.). old school. In Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries. <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/old-school?q=old+school>
- Oxford Learner’s Dictionary. (n.d.). chivalrous. In Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries. <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/chivalrous?q=chivalrous>
- Oxford Learner’s Dictionary. (n.d.). chivalry. In Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries. <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/chivalry?q=chivalry>
- Palma-Fahey, María. (2015). “Yeah well, probably, you know I wasn’t that big into school, you know”: Pragmatic markers and the representation of Irish English in fictionalised dialogue. In Carolina P. Amador-Moreno, Kevin McCafferty & Elaine Vaughan (Eds.), *Pragmatic Markers in Irish English* (pp. 348-369). John Benjamins.
- Romaniuk, Oleksandra & Terán, Larissa. (2022). First impression sexual scripts of romantic encounters: Effect of gender on verbal and non verbal immediacy behaviors in American media dating culture. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 39(2), 107–131. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02654075211033036>
- Rose, Suzanna & Frieze, Irene Hanson. (1989). Young singles’ scripts for a first date. *Gender & Society*, 3(2), 258-268. <https://doi.org/10.1177/089124389003002006>
- Schnurr, Stephanie. (2008). Surviving in a man’s world with a sense of humour: An analysis of women leaders’ use of humour at work. *Leadership*, 4(3), 299-319.
- Sweeney, Tanya (2017, January 17), *How is it okay for a man to pay for your first-date dinner because he’s a man? The Irish Times*, <https://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/people/how-is-it-okay-for-a-man-to-pay-for-your-first-date-dinner-because-he-s-a-man-1.2952479>
- Verschuere, Jef. (2004). Notes on the role of metapragmatic awareness in language. In Adam Jaworski, Nikolas Coupland, and Dariusz Galasinski (Eds.) *Metalanguage. Social and Ideological Perspectives* (pp. 53–73). De Gruyter Mouton.

Walshe, Shane. (2011). "Normal people like us don't use that type of language. Remember this is the real world". The language of Father Ted: Examining realism in a fictional world. *Sociolinguistic Issues: Special Issue: Fictionalising Orality*, 127-148. <https://doi.org/10.1558/sols.v5i1.12>

Walshe, Shane. (2023). Irish English in the media. In Raymond Hickey (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Irish English* (pp. 293-313). Oxford University Press. United Nations (n.d.). *The 17 goals*. <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Lena Michelsen, Tessa Niels and Somea Raabe for assistance with data collection and transcription, to Nora Jensen and Johanna Petersen for support in data coding and to Isabel Schulz for formatting support. The usual disclaimers apply.