

NARRATIVE AS (SELF-)PORTRAIT: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE ON GENDER IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

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Abstract: *Narratives are crucial for sharing cultural knowledge, moral lessons, and personal experiences, serving as a fundamental aspect of human connection and understanding across different cultures and time periods. This paper offers a qualitative analysis of naturally occurring stories in conversations told by Romanian women and men with a view to showcasing how conversationalists construct their gendered identities in everyday interactions with friends. Mundane family events and routine experiences are transformed by “narratives” into a new meaning, allowing thus storytellers to give salience to particular facets of their identities. The analysis demonstrates that gender identity is not categorical or fixed, but is locally situated. Speakers are constantly constructing their gender identities through stories in ways that may reinforce the dominant societal ideology concerning gender roles or may display more liberal identities that deviate from these societal norms.*

Keywords: *narrative; self; identity; gender; talk-in-interaction.*

The stories that we tell about our own and others’ lives are a pervasive form of text through which we construct, interpret, and share experience by creating a unified sense of self and providing meaning to life’s events. As Hardy (1968:5) puts it, “we dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative”. This narrative construction allows people to process past experiences, shape their future, and connect with others by fostering understanding and empathy, ultimately influencing identity and well-being.

The prevalence and variety of stories across human societies makes narrative form, meaning, and use a subject of academic study in fields ranging from developmental psychology, (e.g. J. Bruner 1986, 1990, Bamberg 1987, Nelson 1989), social psychology (Harre 1987, Gergen and Gergen 1988), and clinical psychology (Polkinghorne 1988), to literary theory (Bal 1990, Prince 1990), folklore (Bauman 1986), sociology (Riessman 1993), and sociolinguistics (Labov 1972, Labov and Waletzky 1967, Jefferson 1978, Coates 1996, Holmes 2009, Oancea 2016).

Stories cover a wide spectrum, ranging from culturally significant myths and legends to conversational accounts of mundane everyday experiences, with forms like folklore, fairy tales, fables, and personal anecdotes bridging the gap between these two ends of the continuum. These diverse narratives are crucial for sharing cultural knowledge, moral lessons,

and personal experiences, serving as a fundamental aspect of human connection and understanding across different cultures and time periods. This paper focuses on the latter end of this continuum, on naturally occurring stories in informal conversations of Romanians. In particular, the analysis explores the ways in which Romanian women and men use stories in their daily interactions.

1. What counts as a story?

Sociolinguistics frequently analyzes narratives as data, and *elicited stories* - personal narratives told to researchers in an interview or storytelling setting - are a primary method for collecting this data. These are stories produced in response to a question or request for an account of some experience. For instance, the “danger of death” question, developed by the sociolinguist William Labov for his New York City study, has been used with varying degrees of success in various social dialect surveys. By engaging in a personal, engrossing narrative, speakers are less likely to be conscious of the tape recorder or observer, allowing the sociolinguist to collect data on spontaneous language that would otherwise be difficult to obtain. The structure of such elicited narratives is fundamentally influenced by their function as ‘answers’ to a question in a sociolinguistic interview (see, for example, Wolfson, 1976; Schiffrin, 1994). Thus, these narratives are not free-form stories but rather contextualized responses tailored to the interviewer’s prompt.

The stories analysed in this paper were not elicited as part of a sociolinguistic interview; they occurred spontaneously in conversations. Analyzing spontaneously occurring, rather than elicited, stories raises the issue of “what counts as a story”. Narrative analysis is a well-developed field with a vast body of research which I do not intend to review here. Instead, I start from Labov’s (1972) classic model of narrative structure, since it was developed to account for oral narratives of personal experience, and has proved the most useful for studying naturally-occurring spoken data. The Labovian model allows researchers to identify and analyze the structure and features of natural narratives, distinguishing them from other forms of speech and offering insight into everyday experiences. Thus, according to Labov (1972: 359-60), a narrative of personal experience is:

one method of recapitulating past experience by matching a verbal sequence of clauses to the sequence of events which (it is inferred) actually occurred.

In other words, a narrative uses a sequence of clauses which are arranged in the order the events happened to effectively mirror the actual flow of events and recap past experiences for an audience. Minimally, the structure of a story involves two narrative clauses which provide the story with a beginning, a

middle section, and an end. This classic framework, also known as the *three-act structure*, helps organize plot events to create a satisfying and comprehensible narrative. Excerpt 1 is an example with three clauses.

Excerpt 1

I went down the shops yesterday
but I forgot my wallet
so I ended up back home without buying anything

A monologic story presenting a personal experience, told by a single narrator in an elicited interview was shown to include all of the six components identified by Labov (1972): *abstract*, *orientation*, *complicating action*, *resolution* or result, *evaluation* and *coda*.

Abstract: is the structural component including one or two initial clause(s) in a narrative which summarize(s) the entire story. Sacks (1992:18) proposed the term ‘story preface’ which corresponds to Labov and Waletzky’s (1967) notion of ‘abstract’ of a narrative. A story preface has the role of announcing that a story is going to be told by one of the interactants. Thus, the story preface signals this shift in narrative authority, indicating the storyteller will hold the floor and maintain narrative control until their story is complete. Additionally, the preface also signals the sort of evaluative response the narrator expects from the recipient at the end of the story.

Orientation: provides the initial background information about the story’s setting (time and place), the main characters, and their initial behaviour before the main conflict begins. Its function is to establish the context, setting the stage for the recipient to understand the narrative that will unfold. Listeners are usually provided with orientation components at the beginning of the narrative, however, this is not necessary the case, as we may find subsequent orientation clauses, often called reorientations, at any point in the narrative, whenever the teller feels it necessary to refresh or elaborate on the setting and characters as the plot develops and the audience requires more information to follow the story. Similarly, Schiffrin (1981:48) points out that, sometimes, the narrator needs to introduce orientation clauses into the *complicating action* component, so as to “add information which the hearer needs in order to understand, or interpret the significance of adjacently reported events”. Moreover, embedded orientation clauses may be evaluative, if the provided information is indicative of the value of the recounted events relative to the point of the story. Orientation clauses are not temporally ordered which means that, were they to be rearranged, the recipients’ understanding of the background and of the narrative events would not change. Orientation usually refers to “existing states and extended processes (e.g. *we were all going out*

for lunch) which may begin before the narrative action itself, and continue during the action” (Schiffrin 1981:49).

Complicating action: consists of narrative clauses that inform the recipients about what happened. It contains the *climax* or *high point* of the story.

Resolution or result: informs the hearer about how the complicating action was resolved. In other words, it is the concluding section of the story. Moreover, resolution is indicative of the ending of the events by releasing the tension created by the succession of events in the complicating action.

Evaluation: consists of comments made by the speaker about the event that he/she experiences. It represents the emotional aspect of a story or narrative emotion, which encompasses the emotional resonance, tellability (why it is worth telling), and the narrator’s involvement with the story. It often interrupts the main action, for thoughts and feelings, expressing the storyteller’s involvement and highlighting what is interesting to the narrator or to the recipients. Among the linguistic structures functioning as evaluation devices one can mention emphasis, parallel structures and comparatives, intensifiers, modals, negatives and future ranging among the most important. Schiffrin (1981) distinguishes between two types of evaluative clauses: internal and external evaluation. External evaluation clauses “comment on and interpret events for the audience from a perspective outside the narrative action” (Schiffrin 1981:48) whereas internal evaluation consists of clauses in which “narrative events convey their own importance, and make obvious contributions to the point of the story” (Schiffrin 1981:59). The evaluative component does not hold a fixed position in the narrative structure since the storyteller has the freedom to interject their opinions, judgments, or commentary on the events as they unfold (Pridham 2001:15). The role of the evaluation is crucial, as it indicates the way the teller intends the story to be perceived by the listeners.

Coda: functions as a concluding section that provides the narrator’s ultimate comment, such as a summary of the events, a reflection on the story’s themes, or a moral for the story recipients. This concluding commentary adds a final layer of meaning or perspective, effectively rounding off the narrative. The coda also has the function of returning the recipients to the present moment, by highlighting the relevance of the narrated events to the present situation (Schiffrin 1981:48). In other words, the coda acts like a bridge that connects the realm of the story to the teller-recipient present.

While the Labovian model of the internal structure of stories has been widely adopted (for example, Polanyi, 1985, 2005; Johnstone, 1993; Linde, 1993; Coates, 1996), it is clear that the issue of what counts as a meaningful narrative differs across cultures and social groups due to varying cultural contexts, values, and communication practices. For instance, some cultures

prioritize detailed descriptions, while others focus on concise narratives or non-linear structures, and these differences are often reflected in the types of stories, the preferred mediums (oral, written, digital), and the very purpose of storytelling within that group. Goodwin (1991), for example, notes that the ‘instigating’ stories told by working class young black girls do not fit Labov’s model. She describes them as emerging from the social action in which talk is naturally embedded, and argues that stories might better be described as “cultural objects designed to operate in ongoing social projects” (1991: 275-6). Moreover, not all components in the Labovian framework are equally important. Thus, a conversational story might not contain all the elements evinced by the Labovian model – however, if it does, the elements, except for the evaluation, usually observe the above-given order.

Unlike Labov and Waletzky’s elicited stories, empirical evidence coming from sociolinguistic research (Ervi-Tripp and Kuntay 1997; Georgakopoulou 2006a; 2006b; Hornoiu 2008) on conversational narratives, are un-elicited and their narrators did not engage in a long performance that would hold the floor for a considerable amount of time. Consequently, one can safely argue that the extensions and application of Labov’s model of the internal structure of narratives to spontaneous stories in talk-in-interaction trigger the distinction between *compulsory* and *optional* components. Complicating action is deemed as obligatory for the formation of a narrative, containing the climax or the high point of the story. Resolution is also most likely to be present in any conversational narrative, though not all narratives have a clear resolution – some may report a problem, but fail to present a solution. Orientation, like the other two elements, complicating action and resolution, is believed to be compulsory for the internal structures of narratives embedded in dialogue. At the other end of the continuum, lie the optional elements: preface/abstract and the coda. Empirical evidence supporting this claim comes from Chafe (2001:677) and Ozyldirim (2009: 1218). The latter’s study on Turkish oral and written personal experience narratives (PEN) revealed that, while all of the written narratives exhibited a fully-fledged narrative structure, some of the oral, conversational narratives lacked the preface/abstract and the coda.

In Excerpt 1, the evaluation is contained in the third clause. The question of what counts as a story is further complicated by the issue of whether or not the evaluative component is optional or not. Since, as Labov (1972) points out, the evaluation may be embedded rather than explicit, identifying it may not be straightforward. Moreover, the evaluation may be conveyed entirely prosodically, or paralinguistically, or non-verbally (Holmes and Marra 2004; Hornoiu 2016). Taking this into account, we can safely assume that unevaluated stories are extremely scarce.

Moreover, in many conversational narratives in English, the climax of the story is displaced towards the beginning of the story, in what is known as an inverted plot, in order to effectively enhance suspense by creating immediate intrigue and a strong desire in the audience to learn how the characters reached that point. For instance, a story may start with a key utterance of the story's protagonist and only afterwards provide the necessary background details, followed by the main action, which culminates with a fully-detailed account of the climax (Fludernik, 2009:47).

Thus, it can be argued that the internal structure of a *prototypical* narrative will display all the components (preface/abstract anticipating the topic, orientation, complicating action, resolution, evaluation and coda), whereas a *marginal* case will only contain the obligatory elements, lacking therefore precisely those elements whose role is to delimit the narrative passage from the surrounding ongoing talk: the preface/abstract and the coda.

2. Narrative, self and identity

It has been shown in the literature that individuals construct their personal sense of self by weaving their life experiences into a coherent, stable, and continuous story that gives their lives meaning and purpose. Thus, Polkinghorne (1988) argues that individuals use narrative structures to construct a coherent sense of their lives and the self by ordering events into a meaningful whole. This process of weaving together past experiences into a personal story allows people to make sense of who they are and how they fit into the world, providing a unified understanding of their entire existence. Similarly, Bruner posits (1987:15) that we eventually “*become* the autobiographical narratives by which we tell about our lives” [emphasis in original].

Narrative's self-transforming role stems from subjunctivization, a process where language reveals our presuppositions (our implicit meanings), allows for diverse viewpoints, and filters reality through characters' perspectives, enabling us to reshape our understanding of the world (Bruner 1987: 25). Linde (1993) asserts that narratives are crucial for establishing a coherent life story and for presenting oneself as a “good” or moral person. Linde explains that people construct these narratives to show their lives have meaning and to negotiate their place in society, drawing on cultural assumptions about normative life paths and values to create a sense of personal coherence. According to Linde (1993), the linguistic properties of narrative genre - specifically, how language is used to convey temporal continuity, a sense of self versus other, and reflexivity of the self - are key factors in enabling narrative construction and personal identity formation. Stories serve as crucial resources for constructing and expressing our identities, functioning

both as psychological self-narratives and as a means of navigating our social and cultural environments. They are a fundamental human practice for making sense of the world, shaping individual and collective identities, and communicating values, norms, and beliefs within a community.

Thus, Bruner (1990:52) argues that the emergent narrative self is created where the social and cultural worlds intersect: narrative deals with “the stuff of human action and human intentionality ... [mediating] between the canonical world of culture and the more idiosyncratic world of beliefs, desires and hopes.” Narrative thinking helps to construct meaning by transforming experiences into coherent stories, linking objective cultural norms with subjective personal experiences of human action and intentionality.

Telling a story creates a “story world” or a narrative space where individuals can interpret and present their experiences within a framework of shared cultural and social expectations, allowing them to construct their identities by positioning themselves relative to these norms (see also Chafe 1994 on story schemas). When our socio-cultural expectations change, so too do our perceptions of identities. As a particular culture shifts, the very definition of what it means to belong and how one should act within society evolves, leading individuals to renegotiate and redefine their cultural and social identities.

The way we tell our stories also reveals a self that is embedded within a cultural matrix of meanings, beliefs, and normative practices. Narratives are not merely personal but also social and cultural constructs. Research across various disciplines reveals that both the style and substance of stories are sensitive parameters of ethnicity (Michaels 1981, Gee 1991, Minami and McCabe 1991, Blum-Kulka 1993); social class (van Dijk 1992); gender (Riessman 1990, Attanucci 1993); age (Cohler 1982, Coupland and Nussbaum 1993); and region (Bauman 1986, Johnstone 1993). Still other research links story-telling style and substance to social roles and contexts at both interactional and institutional levels. This connection allows storytelling to serve multiple purposes: constructing individual and collective identities, framing social realities, establishing shared values, and driving social change.

The way individuals construct and convey stories - their story structure, story content, and storytelling behaviour- reveals deeper aspects of who they are, reflecting their personal experiences, as well as the collective social and cultural identities of the groups they belong to (Heath 1983, Ochs and Schieffelin 1989). These elements are not just arbitrary choices but are shaped by personal perspectives and inherited cultural traditions, making stories a powerful lens through which to understand both individual and collective selfhood.

3. Description of the data

The stories analysed in this paper are taken from naturally-occurring conversation between friends or long-term acquaintances which were collected for the approximately 90,000 word Constanta Corpus of Spoken Romanian (CCSR) published in Hornoiu (2016). Each conversation was a relaxed chat between two friends of roughly the same age, level of education, gender and ethnicity, with the exception of one conversation where the two protagonists belonged into different age groups. There were 24 informants in all. This conversational data base yielded **40** narratives. In this paper, I focus on how speakers choose to construct their gender identity through story-telling.

There was no great disparity in the number of stories which occurred in the female versus the male conversations. While the women produced more stories than the men, the difference was insignificant: the women produced 21 compared with 19 from the men. And, given the problems of deciding where to draw boundaries between stories, the greatly differing lengths of stories, and the fact that the excerpts analysed in this paper were generally taken from longer conversations, no particular weight should be put on this difference.

Not all conversations are equally conducive to story-telling. Conversational topics and ‘moods’ differ greatly, though in fact all but two of the recorded conversations (one male and one female dyad) included at least one story. In both these story-less interactions the conversations developed into task-oriented discussions of the merits and demerits of a proposed course of action - one concerning plans to buy a piece of electronic equipment, the other about plans for refurbishing a room. The remaining conversations include a range from one story to six. The men’s stories tend to be shorter, while those of the women are longer, but there is a large area of overlap: both women and men produced very short and very long stories. Indeed, in relation to story length, age was a more relevant factor than gender: older contributors tended to produce longer stories than younger ones. The analysis which follows examines the kind of gender identity constructed by narrators.

4. Constructing gender identity

Stories are a versatile and fundamental human tool that can serve many concurrent functions in conversation, including entertainment, amusement, and amazement; they also function as crucial methods for socializing individuals, teaching cultural values and life lessons, establishing social norms, and even challenging societal conventions; they may function interpersonally to praise others, to establish or consolidate connection *and deepen our social bonds*, or perhaps to flatter, to build up the narrator’s ego or that of the addressees (for example, Heath, 1982; Labov, 1972; Riessman,

1993; Schiffrin, 1994). Stories may also be used to draw distinctions and emphasize the boundaries between groups such as women and men.

In this section, focusing on eleven specific examples, I look in more detail at the ways in which women and men use narratives to construct gendered identities. Telling a story is a significant way to establish and reinforce societal ideas of appropriate femininity and masculinity, for self and others, or alternatively, a story may be used to subvert or contest the mainstream gender ideology.

4.1 Female identity

The women in the Romanian sample tell stories about the small events which characterize their daily activities and which often reflect their relationships with others. The main characters are themselves, their family members and their friends. The stories relate minor mishaps and small successes; they document embarrassing experiences rather than major disasters. The events recounted are mundane everyday occurrences. The topics include children's illnesses, giving blood, a good experience at the beautician's, a bad experience at the hairdresser's, buying gifts for friends and family.

The first two narratives to be examined portray the narrator as not just accepting, but even embracing her primary gender role - that of wife and mother. The excerpts 2 and 3 are taken from the same conversation, which I split into two examples for convenience. The conversation was an encounter with the beautician and both excerpts function as **news-updates**, a type of small talk whose aim is to establish and maintain a relationship based on solidarity and co-operation. Narratives in women's lives are a crucial way of keeping in touch with friends. For women, updating friends on the ongoing story of one's life is an important way to maintain close, intimate friendships by fostering self-disclosure, mutual trust, and a sense of shared experience and support. The narratives in my corpus illustrate this very well. Most of the women's stories in each of the recorded conversations reveal a pattern, where a primary function of the narratives is to provide updates on recent personal events to the conversational partner.

When we update someone on our life story we are inevitably selective. We can choose to focus on positive outcomes like past successes and events that have gone smoothly, or we can focus on negative aspects like disasters and worries like disasters and worries. Similarly, we can present ourselves as being 'in charge', controlling events, or as the hapless victim of circumstances or luck. This selection process that I want to highlight in this section showcases the ways in which women and men use stories to 'do gender'. In other words, through their interactions and storytelling, my informants construct and express gendered identities and roles in their everyday lives. In

a variety of ways, the stories told by the Romanian women in my sample functioned to construct or reinforce a particular kind of gendered identity for the narrator. This identity was typically a rather conservative one, even when the protagonist was a professional woman working full-time.

Excerpt 2 - Felicia da pe 23 a împlinit și ea patruzeci și trei de ani

- 1 Camelia: și felicia ce face? a fost ziua ei duminică
and how's Felicia? it was her birthday on Sunday
- 2 Mariana: felicia da pe 23 a împlinit și ea patruzeci și trei de ani si restu-
felicia yes on the 23rd she was forty-three and the rest
- 3 lucrează da' ea luna și joia își ia liber că lucrează mai târziu
she goes to work but takes Monday and Thursday off cause she works
late
- 4 cum lucram io pe vremuri și se chinuie cu ceara
as I used to in the old days and she's got problems with the wax
- 5 că ba le-o dă o firma mai bună alta mai puțin bună
'cause they are either supplied with high quality wax or one of a poor
quality
- 6 clientele care mai întârzie care
the clients some come late some
- 7 (3)
- 8 vin la timp [...]
are on time
- 9 Mariana: cosmin a terminat toate zece examenele și a luat numai nouă și
zece
cosmin has passed all ten exams and got only nine and ten
- 10 ce n-a facut în anu' unu și doi
something he didn't do the first and the second year
- 11 Camelia: da
yes
- 12 Mariana: și și-a facut mărtișoare să le dea cadou colo colo și el
and he made first of march decorations to give them around like that
- 13 să nu mai dea bani pe ele
lest he should spend money on them
- 14 Camelia: și george?
and george?
- 15 Mariana: george nu se simte bine cu sănătatea a facut tratament și
fizioterapică
george's got some health problems he's been under treatment and has
received physiotherapy
- 16 a făcut și reflexo
and reflexotherapy as well

- 17 în Londra a făcut crize și a trebuit să-și facă [injecție cu voltaren
he had seizures in London and he had to get a shot with voltaren
18 Camelia: [m::::
mmmm
19 Mariana: și acum mai are niște cîteva ședințe de fizioterapie (cu) pauză de
zece zile
and now he receives physiotherapy with ten-day breaks
20 și să continue mai continuă cîteva
and he's got to go on he's going on with some more
21 (2)
22 pe douăș' patru martie tre' să plece
he's got to leave on the twenty-fourth of march
23 Camelia: e acasă el
he's at home
24 Mariana: e acasă de o lună și ceva
he's been at home for over a month
25 Camelia: nu se plictisește acasă
he doesn't get bored at home?
26 Mariana: e nu:: mai face și el
eh, no, he's been doing some things
27 Camelia: da: v-ajută
yes, he's helping you
28 Mariana: pe felicia ei acolo-n casă fac menajul' că pînă vine felicia seara
felicia they do the work there around the house 'cause felicia comes in
the evening
29 ce s-o mai aștepti pe felicia să pregătească masa să:
so why wait for felicia to cook dinner to
30 mai ușurează pe căn- cătălina că ea se pricepe la gătit
they take some burden off cătălina 'cause she's good at cooking
31 și cosmin face piața
and cosmin does the shopping
32 Camelia: cătălina gătește da?
cătălina can cook right?
33 Mariana: cătălina găte::ște
cătălina can cook
34 (2)
35 ce nu știe mai face felicia mai complicat joia și luna
when she doesn't know, felicia's cooking sometimes the more
complicated things on
Thursdays and Mondays
36 în rest cartofi la cuptor cartofi prăjiți ouă ochiuri grătar
for the rest, baked potatoes, fries and fried eggs roast

- 37 Camelia: e și astea dacă vii și le găsești gata făcute contează
eh, these if you come and find them already cooked, they count too
38 Mariana: e:: da' ea nu poate la opt și jumătate să aștepte toți nemîncații
eh but she can't at eight thirty let them be hungry and wait
39 să vină felicia să pregătească
for Felicia to come and cook

(Hornoiu 2016: 150-152)

Excerpt 3 - Era mîndră că de ziua ei i-a luat Cosmin o pereche de cercei de argint

- 1 Mariana: era mîndră că de ziua ei i-a luat cosmin o pereche de cercei de
argint mari așa
she was proud because cosmin bought her a pair of large silver
earrings for her birthday
2 Camelia: a:::h
a :::
3 Mariana: cînd i-am văzut la (.) ureche zic 'io nu port așa' și era numai cu
argint
when I saw them on her ears I said 'I don't wear this' and she was
covered in silver
4 da' verigheta lor este combinație de aur cu aur alb
but their wedding ring is a combination of gold with white gold
5 Camelia: mhm ce frumoasă
mhm, how beautiful
6 Mariana:și merge și la argint și la aur da și avea o groază de brățări pe
mînă
and it goes with both silver and gold yes, and she had a lot of
bracelets on her wrist
7 'cerceii ăia mari mi-a luat cosmin de ziua mea'
'cosmin got me those large earrings for my birthday'
8 că pe nouă februarie a fost ziua lu' cătălina pe cînșpe a lu' cosmin
'cause on the ninth of February it was Catalina's birthday, and on the
fifteenth it was cosmin's
9 și acum pe douăștrei a lu' felicia da și:::
and now on the twenty-third it's Felicia's, yeah and
10 (4)
11 îi luase a venit c-o seară înainte nașa de cununie a lor și i-a adus o bluză
she had brought her... their matron of honour came a night before and
brought her a blouse
12 foarte frumoasă cu fir prin ea așa
very beautiful, purred like that
13 (4) au făcut la clubu' unde lucrează cosmin au serbat amindoi pe:::

- sîmbătă
the party was at the club where cosmin works they celebrated both
their birthdays on
Saturday
14 pe pașpe
on the fourteenth
15 Camelia: de valentine
on valentine's day
16 Mariana: da au făcut platouri reci
yes, they served a cold buffet,
17 le-am făcut io un tort de fructe le-am dat
I baked them a fruit cake, I gave them
(Hornoiu 2016: 152)

In the excerpts 2 and 3, the beautician engages in extended stories about her husband's health, or her son and daughter-in-law's happy marriage, about her grandson's academic success or her granddaughter's cooking talent. Through these stories she constructs a particular gendered identity for both herself and the other protagonists. The gender identity constructed here is to a certain extent a *conservative* one: an identity conforming to the beliefs of a patriarchal society, beliefs about the way women and men should behave. This type of gendered identity constructed through these narratives is consistent with and reflects Andrei's (1978: 219) view that there is overwhelming societal pressure to accept particular gender roles:

Noi nu ne creștem copiii cum vrem, ci așa cum ne impune obiceiul, tradiția, opinia publică, societatea cu structura ei dintr-un moment dat¹

The question that arises is what do such stories aim to accomplish? At one level, they are intended to bring the interlocutor up-to-date on what the narrator and significant others have been doing. This function help the interlocutors establish and maintain a relationship based on solidarity, i.e. create intimacy. At another level they are components in a complex answer to the client's enquiry. At yet another level, through these stories, the beautician constructs **conservative** or **normative gender identities** not only for herself, but also for her daughter-in-law and her granddaughter.

Constructing gender identity through storytelling is best understood in the broader context of developments unfolding in contemporary Romanian society. According to the **Gender Barometer 2000**, in Romanian society, the proportion of women who have internalized and accepted patriarchy is roughly

¹ "We do not raise our children as we want, but as custom, tradition, public opinion, society with its structure at a given moment imposes on us" (Andrei 1978: 219).

similar to that of men². Some twenty years later, despite some progress being made, Romanian society still oscillates between conservative, compliant and modern attitudes in relation to gender equality issues. To give just one example relevant to the narratives analyzed in this paper, one should consider how the complementary and unbalanced distribution of household tasks is perceived in Romanian society. In 2000, for instance, at least 80% of respondents considered that cooking, cleaning the house, washing clothes and dishes, etc. are activities carried out only by women, and that home repairs are the prerogative of men. With small fluctuations, these percentages are still valid in 2018, as evidenced by **Gender Barometer Romania 2018**. One can notice comparable percentages in 2000 and 2018 regarding those who agree with the statement “it is more the duty of women than men to take care of housework” (58% in 2018 compared to 63% in 2000). Moreover, assertions such as “The man is the head of the family and the woman is the mistress of the house” and “The woman must follow her man” received a high rate of agreement in both 2000 and 2018. Despite some statistically significant decrease in the response rate (e.g. 83% believed in 2000 that the man is the head of the family, compared to only 70% in 2018; 78% believed in 2000 that the woman is the mistress of the house, compared to only 51% in 2018), present-day Romanian society still embraces patriarchal values and norms (Grünberg, Rusu and Samoilă 2019).

Considering this context, in the first narrative to be examined, the narrator portrays her daughter-in-law as embracing a woman’s primary role - that of a ‘loving’ wife and ‘good’ mother who is concerned with her family’s comfort and well-being and therefore works long hours to supplement her family income, but at the same time she manages to take two days off to look after her family’s needs. Consider the most obvious relevant sections of excerpts in (2) and (3) repeated below for convenience:

Excerpt 4

● (Felicia) lucrează da’ ea luna și joia își ia liber că lucrează mai târziu cum lucram io pe vremuri și se chinuie cu ceara că ba le-o dă o firma mai bună alta mai puțin bună

² Romanian mass-media do not portray a less patriarchal society. Television shows with and about women are confined to aspects of the private sphere whereas shows with and about people (i.e. men) focus on aspects of the public sphere and issues of general interest. Commercials endlessly perpetuate the image of the woman who brings up her children and does all the cleaning and cooking to keep her man around the house or the woman who beautifies herself to win over the man for whom she will wash, clean and cook to keep him around the house. The Romanian woman as promoted by mass-media is the victim of poverty and violence or the super-woman top model (Roventa-Frumusani 2005), the so-called ‘Barbie doll’.

(Felicia) goes to work but takes Monday and Thursday off cause she works late as I used to in the old days and she's got problems with the wax 'cause they are either supplied with high quality wax or one of a poor quality

- (O ajuta) pe Felicia acolo-n casă fac menajul' că pînă vine Felicia seara ce s-o mai aștepti pe Felicia să pregătească masa

(They help) Felicia they do the work there around the house 'cause Felicia comes in the evening so why wait for Felicia to cook dinner to

- (Ce e mai complicat) face Felicia joia și luna

Felicia cooks the more complicated things on Thursdays and Mondays

- E:: da' ea nu poate la opt și jumătate să aștepte toți nemîncații să vina Felicia să pregătească

Eh but she can't at eight thirty let them be hungry and wait for Felicia to come and cook

- Era mîndră că de ziua ei i-a luat Cosmin o pereche de cercei de argint mari așa

She (i.e. Felicia) was proud because Cosmin bought her a pair of large silver earrings for her birthday

(Hornoiu 2016: 150-152)

While the message can easily be inferred from the first four utterances, it is not quite so obvious from the last. In fact, the last utterance in (4) indicates that Cosmin's love for his mother is a reflection of the latter's good qualities. The beautician also constructs her own gender identity as a loving, understanding and compassionate mother(-in-law) and grandmother:

Excerpt 5

- Pînă vine Felicia seara ce s-o mai aștepti pe Felicia să pregătească masa

Felicia comes in the evening so why wait for Felicia to cook dinner to

- le-am făcut io un tort de fructe le-am dat

I baked them a fruit cake, I gave them

- (Felicia) se chinuie cu ceara că ba le-o dă o firma mai bună alta mai puțin bună

She's got problems with the wax 'cause they are either supplied with high quality wax or one of a poor quality

(Hornoiu 2016: 151-152)

Similarly, the gender identity the beautician constructs for her granddaughter conforms to the rather conservative norms of Romanian society. The granddaughter is portrayed as a good daughter and sibling, concerned with her parents and siblings' comfort and well-being, being perfectly able to run the household. This is best rendered by the following three utterances, repeated here for convenience:

Excerpt 6

- Cătălina se pricepe la gătit
Cătălina is good at cooking
- Cătălina gătește (...) cartofi la cuptor cartofi prăjiți ouă ochiuri grătar
Cătălina can cook baked potatoes, fries and fried eggs roast
- Ea nu poate la opt și jumătate să aștepte toți nemîncații să vină Felicia să pregătească
She can't at eight thirty let them be hungry and wait for Felicia to come and cook

(Hornoiu 2016: 152)

Such a portrayal of her granddaughter is consistent with the Romanian traditional family which is characterised by a spirit of partnership only to limited extent³. In Romanian traditional families, the housewife role in adulthood is prefaced by a long period of apprenticeship in adolescence. These excerpts describe a state of affairs frequently encountered in Romanian society: girls are socialized into appropriate 'feminine' behaviour which presupposes, among other things, taking care of the male members of their families⁴. With regard to boys' socialization, freedom of choice and independence are valued twice as much as in the case of girls, the latter being orientated towards such traditional values as obedience and hard work⁵.

At least one rather different feminine identity gets voiced throughout these news-updates: the identity of several mutual female acquaintances who identify themselves more readily with the role of a *modern independent woman with a full-time job*, a woman who takes great care of her physical appearance and who regularly undergoes beautifying treatments.

Excerpt 7 - Camelia ce bine arată nu?

- 1 Camelia: da' camelia ce bine arată nu?
but camelia, she's looking good, isn't she?
- 2 Mariana: da camelia arată foarte bine

³ Although the population's perception of gender roles and relations is in a dynamic in contemporary Romanian society, the comparative research reported in the two Gender Barometers (2000, 2018) highlights the existence of some fixed patterns and societal expectations, frozen in time in an area of conservative/patriarchal approaches. Thus, in 2000, 80% of people believed that household chores and child rearing should be left up to the wife whereas only in 5% believed that household chores should be jointly completed by both partners (Barometrul de gen, 2000). While the percentage of household chores decreased for women some twenty years later, nevertheless it remains significantly greater than that of men: 42.2% of women spend their free time carrying out such activities, as opposed to only 16.2% of men (Barometrul de gen 2018).

⁴ See also Stanciulescu (1998)

⁵ See Barometrul de gen (2000) and Barometrul de gen (2018)

- yeah, Camelia's looking very good
3 'să știți că chiar nu m-am dus decît de vreo două ori'
you know I really went there a couple of times only
4 la o colegă a ei care a făcut cosmetică
to a colleague of hers who's a beautician
5 da' nevoită că mă duceam acolo la coafor și dacă nu mai puteam să vin
but because I had to cause I was going to the hairdresser's there and if I
couldn't come anymore
6 de cînd lucrez la bancă termin tot la șapte opt seară
since I started working at the bank I get off at seven or eight in the
evening just like before
7 știam că sîmbăta dumneavoastră nu lucrați
I knew you didn't work on Saturday
8 și cînd mi-am adus aminte
and when I remembered
9 cînd a mai vrut ea să mai vină din nou auzise că sînt bolnavă și nu mai
lucrez
when she wanted to come again she heard that I was ill and I didn't work
anymore
10 Camelia: și auraș?
and auraș?
11 Mariana: auraș acuma nu mai vrea să piardă
auraș doesn't wanna miss any beautician treatment
12 că toate fetele au lăudat-o că arată foarte bine
cause all the girls praised her cause she looked so good
(Hornoiu 2016: 148)

Through her narratives, the beautician also constructs her son's and grandson's gender identities. In some contexts she portrays them as assuming a predominantly conservative and normative male identity when she presents her grandson as knowledgeable, competent and successful:

Excerpt 8

- Cosmin a terminat toate zece examenele și a luat numai nouă și zece ce n-a făcut în anu' unu și doi
Cosmin has passed all ten exams and got only nine and ten something he didn't do the first and the second year
(Hornoiu 2016: 151)

In other contexts, however, men are portrayed as behaving in ways usually framed as 'feminine' (e.g. helping with the housework or doing the shopping) deviating thus from a traditional masculine identity.

Excerpt 9

- Ei acolo-n casă fac menajul mai ușurează pe Cătălina

They do the work there around the house 'cause Felicia comes in the evening and they take some burden off Cătălina

- Cosmin face piața

Cosmin does the shopping

(Hornoiu 2016: 151)

Ordinarily, in terms of household chores, men's work is related to private property and its external tokens: the house and the car become symbols of social status. Since property ownership confers power, this close association between men and symbols of property represent the materialization of relationships based on power.

4.2 Male identity

In my sample, engaging in conversation with a friend in a relaxed social setting, men also tell stories about everyday events, but their stories tend to focus on work, leisure activities and romantic relationships. The topics include sitting exams, applying for a job, refurbishing their home, going to picnic, and playing sports. While some of these topics may potentially be pursued by women as well, the way these topics are approached differ between women and men. Through their choice of story topics and the conversational styles used, Romanian women and men construct themselves as differently gendered. These differences are not necessarily innate but are often shaped by societal expectations, gender roles, and the cumulative effect of gendered experiences.

Men's narratives highlight their successes and achievements, sporting prowess, their abilities to overcome challenges, often due to their own ingenuity, personal skills or competence. Like the women's stories, the men's stories constructed a clearly gendered identity for those featuring in their stories. On one level, the young men in my sample, reflecting on their earlier escapades, present a picture of themselves either as 'dumb', not knowing how to handle their romantic relationship (excerpt 10), or as a ladies' man particularly skiff at attracting women (excerpt 11).

Excerpt 10 - Băi sînt disperat

1 Vlad: băi sînt disperat

dude, I'm freaking out

2 Adi: m::?

m::?

3 Vlad: nu m-a sunat teoloaga

- the theology girl hasn't called me
4 Adi: a:: ce-ai făcut? de ce n-ai mai ieșit?
oh:: what did you do? why didn't you go out again?
5 Vlad: băi esti prost mă lasă-mă dracu'
dude, are you daft? leave me the hell alone
6 Adi: ați ajuns la stadiu să vă țineți de mî[nă?
have you reached the point where you're holding hands?
7 Vlad: [ce ești prost mă
what, are you stupid?
8 n-am ajuns încă acolo și-o luasem de mînă
we haven't gotten there yet — I *did* hold her hand
9 deci io n-am mai pățit așa ceva
I've never been through something like this
10 asta îi ziceam lu' asta că îmi place s-o luăm așa încet
that's what I was telling this girl, that I like taking things slow
11 lu' asta cu care sînt acum lu' Georgiana
to the one I'm with now, to Georgiana.
12 și deja cre' că foarte curînd se ajunge la altele
and I think that very soon it'll get to other things
13 da' ți-am zis că mă duce la biserică?
but did I tell you she's taking me to church?
(Hornoiu 2016: 126)

Excerpt 11 - Am agățat-o pe una u::::na din Iași

- 1 Vlad: am agățat-o pe una u::::na din iași
I picked up this gi::::rl, from Iași
2 Adi: hai termină sînt urîte alea la față
oh come on, stop it, those girls are ugly
3 Vlad: BU:nă mă
she's HO::t, man
4 blondă ochi verzi frumoasă
blonde, green eyes, beautiful
5 Adi: e::: blondă
re:::ally blonde?
6 Vlad: mișto mă tipa
the girl's cool, man.
7 m-am dus io am agățat-o da' de față cu ăștia știi nu știi ce
I went and hit on her, but in front of the guys, you know, whatever.
8 îl sun dup-aia pe marian
then I call Marian after that
9 “mariane vezi că io nu mă mai întorc mă duc puțin cu fata”

- “Marian, listen, I’m not coming back, I’m going off with the girl for a bit.”
10 asta “bine bă::”
 and he goes, “alright, ma::n”
11 i-auzeam p-ăia “ai grijă ce faci acolo”
 I could hear the guys: “be careful what you’re doing there!”
12 zbierau ăia nu știu ce
 they were yelling all sorts of stuff

(Hornoiu 2016: 124)

In other men’s stories ‘doing gender’ involves presenting themselves as in control, knowledgeable, competent, projecting thus an image of capability in a professional setting. In excerpt (12), Stefan presents himself as an understanding compassionate man, focusing on solutions, but at the same time, showing control and skill while navigating workplace issues:

Excerpt 12 - Azi m-am certat cu unu’ acolo

- 1 Ștefan: azi m-am certat cu unu’ acolo
 today I got into an argument with some guy there
2 Radu: de ce?
 why?
3 Ștefan: păi spărsese o doză d-aia de bere știi la jumate
 well, he had busted one of those beer cans, you know, split it halfway
4 Radu: așa
 okay
5 Ștefan: și no— normal trebuia să-i dau tot baxu’ lu’ ăla înapoi
 and no - normally I was supposed to give him the whole pack back
6 Radu: tu?
 you?
7 Ștefan: da și să i-l scadă aia de la recepție
 yeah, and then the receptionist would deduct it from him
8 că ăsta venise cu marfă știi s-aducă marfă
 because the guy had come with goods, you know, to deliver stuff
9 Radu: da mhm
 yeah mhm
10 Ștefan: și zic „la:::să mă o doză d-aia da-o-n— să-i dau tot baxu’ știi
 so I go, “co:::me on, man, it’s just one can, screw it— why should I
 give him the whole pack?”
11 Radu: mhm
 mhm
[...]
12 Ștefan: și i-au descarcat marfa din mașină

- and they unloaded the goods from his truck,
13 și a mai stat vreo zece minute un sfert de oră
and he waited another ten minutes, fifteen,
14 n-au putut să-i dea actele
they couldn't give him the papers
15 că tre' să se ducă să-i pună pună ștampila p-acolo
because someone had to go get a stamp put on them somewhere
16 să semneze șefii de recepție
and have the reception supervisors sign
17 Radu: așa
right
18 Ștefan: și ăla—
and the guy -
19 și el s-a supărat și a tras tiru' acolo în mijloc la recepție
he got pissed off and parked the truck right there in the middle of the
reception area
20 Radu: mhm
mhm
21 Ștefan: l-a pus de-a curmezișu' așa
he left it sideways like that.
22 Radu: mhm
mhm
23 Ștefan: că el stă s-aștepte jumate de oră până i-aduce actele
saying he'd wait half an hour until they bring the papers
24 că e plătit la kilometru și că nu știu ce
and he's paid per kilometre and whatever else
25 Radu: mhm
mhm
26 Ștefan: și zic „după ce că sînt băiat bun cu tine
so I go, “after I've been nice to you,
27 Radu: =așa
=right
28 Ștefan: faci ta— talente d-astea
“-and you pull stunts like this.”
29 m-am dus la recepție „ia mă ia gata scădeți-i lu' ăsta un bax
I went to reception: “come on, just deduct a pack for this guy,
30 dați-i: un bax înapoi’
give him a pack back.”
31 îi dau baxu-napoi ăla care l-a spart știi
they give him the pack back — the one with the busted can
32 Radu: mhm
mhm.

- 33 Ștefan: îl scade de pe:: de pe marfă și gata
they deduct it from the goods, and that's it
34 deci luați cu un bax mai puțin'
35 Radu: mhm așa a făcut?
mhm, is that what they did?
36 Ștefan: da i-am dat baxu' înapoi
yeah, I gave him the pack back

(Hornoiu 2016: 110-111)

Similarly, in excerpt 13 a mutual male friend is depicted as an able person who is not only in control of refurbishing his own home but also successful in the process. This is as much a gendered identity as the one reflected in Mariana's story which portrays her daughter-in-law and granddaughter as paradigmatically dutiful mother and daughter. By framing such scenarios through the lens of personal competence, men's stories of success in conflict and problem-solving can reinforce an individual's professional standing. Such stories emphasize a typical normative masculine identity in Romanian culture - someone who can handle a conflict situation or is in active control of refurbishing one's home.

Excerpt 13 - Mă bătea și ăla la cap să-i fac rost de un ananas d-asta să-și pună-n bar

- 1 Ștefan: mă bătea și ăla la cap să-i fac rost de un ananas d-asta să-și pună-n bar
that guy was nagging me too, wanting me to get him one of those pineapples to put in his bar
2 Radu: păi ce are bar?
wait, he has a bar?
3 Ștefan: mhm și-a pus bar și-a schimbat tot în casa mobilieru'și-n sufragerie
mhm, he set up a bar and changed all the furniture in the house and in the living room
4 Radu: da' și-a spart zidu' ăla da la:: sufragerie, nu?
but he tore down that wall in the li::ving room, didn't he?
5 Ștefan: nu, n-a spart nimic
no, he didn't tear anything down
6 da' a schimbat toată bucătăria [...]
but he refurbished the entire kitchen [...]
7 și-a schimbat tot canapeaua
and he changed everything the sofa
8 Radu: păi știu că-n sufragerie am intrat
well I know, I went into the living room

- 9 am fost acum o lună de zile, nu știi? să iau ulei
I was there a month ago, remember? to get some oil
- 10 Ștefan: să vezi acum și-a luat și măsuțe-
wait till you see - he also bought small tables-
- 11 nu știu dacă-și luase măsuțe
I don't know if he had bought small tables
- 12 î și luase măsuțe?
did he buy the small tables?
- 13 Radu: nu
no
- 14 Ștefan: și-a luat și doua măsuțe-n sufragerie
well, he bought two small tables for the living room
- 15 d-alea c-ale tale așa bin:e numa' că alt model
like the ones you have, ni:ce ones, just a different model,
- 16 da' tot așa cu multă sticlă
but still with lots of glass
- (Hornoiu 2016: 114-115)

It is possible, though not common, to find stories where men present themselves in ways traditionally framed as “feminine”, although societal and media norms often reinforce the opposite stereotypes. These portrayals can challenge conventional gender norms by depicting men as communal, emotional, or nurturing, themes that are sometimes more associated with women in traditional narratives. In my corpus, one man recounts a story about his work being rejected by his manager, clearly seeking his friend's sympathy; another's story describes a problem at work. But such stories are exceptional. Thus, it may be hypothesized that stories constructing less-stereotypical masculine identities are more likely to be shared in private or intimate settings. This is an area which requires further research.

5. Constructing a story

Spontaneous conversational stories are seen as collaborative achievements, where the narrator and addressee work together to shape the narrative through a series of turns. This “joint production” means both participants are actively involved in the creation of a story. Research shows that the addressee's contributions are not passive but are integral to how the story unfolds (Corston 1993; Wolfson 1976, Riessman 1993). Focusing on spontaneous narrative, Corston argues that it is “interactive in nature, rather than monologic” (1993: 70). Duranti views the audience “co-author” and provides extensive evidence of “the symphonic quality of verbal performance” (1986: 245). Similarly,

Goodwin (1986: 283) demonstrates that the meaning of a story “emerges not from the actions of the speaker alone, but rather as the product of a collaborative process of interaction in which the audience plays a very active role”.

Coates’ (1996) analysis of women’s conversations describes a phenomenon where personal stories act as “solo performances,” contrasting with collaborative parts of conversations where women actively build on each other’s contributions. In other words, the narrator takes centre stage to tell a story, rather than the group collectively developing the narrative. This is a key distinction from other parts of their conversations, which exhibit a more “genuinely collaborative floor” described as *polyphonic talk* (1996: 117, 133). While this observation accurately describes many of the conversational stories in my Romanian data, where the role of the audience is largely confined to indications of interest and attention there are also some stories which are jointly co-created by both conversationalists, being thus collaborative or ‘dialogic’ in structure (Cheepen, 1988). Such collaborative stories emerge when two participants have jointly experienced an event and one participant helps another tell a story they both experienced. The role of the co-teller involves assisting the main storyteller and can involve taking over the storytelling at various points, either by filling in details or by completely taking over the role of teller. This creates a “dual tellership-constellation” where storytelling becomes a collaborative effort between two people (Lerner, 1992).

It is therefore useful to conceptualise the *role of the narrator* as a continuum which may be represented as follows:

Solo construction ----- Joint construction

At one end of the continuum, a narrative may be produced as a complete solo, following one-party-at-a-time’ talk (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson, 1974), as if the story were being read aloud. At the other end of the continuum, a story may be co-constructed from contributions by two or more participants through a collaborative process of shared ideas/experiences, leading to a richer narrative that incorporates diverse perspectives.

Similarly, *the role of the listener(s)* or audience can also be conceived as continuum in terms of the degree of support the addressee gives to the narrator in the process of storytelling. This listener-related continuum may be represented as follows:

Supportive ----- Unsupportive

This support can be measured by how attentive and engaged the audience is, which in turn affects the narrator's performance. At one end of the continuum, a completely passive listener offers little or no feedback, while at the other end, a highly engaged listener provides immediate and such specific responses as minimal responses, anticipatory completions, or phatic questions that demonstrate their understanding and support. Thus, it becomes apparent that the two continua are *intricately intertwined* in that one extreme type of supportive behaviour might be to share the narrator's role⁶.

6. Gender differences in assuming the narrator's and listener's role

6.1 The narrator's role

The Romanian corpus illustrated a range of features on both the narrator and the listener continua. In each of the conversations involving two contributors, the most common pattern was for stories to clearly belong to one speaker or another. On the other hand, there were three examples of jointly constructed stories which involved three participants. These excerpts were typically reminiscences of shared experiences or relivings of past shared events. Earlier research suggests that collaboratively built stories were by far more frequent in women's talk, being thus a specifically female way of interacting. As Coates has pointed out:

women friends prefer a way of talking which emphasizes the collaborative and which is antipathetic to monologue. So although storytellers are granted a more privileged floor, this often lasts only for a brief period at the beginning of a story (1996: 111)

However, we may safely assume that jointly constructed stories are not confined to women talk (cf. Holmes 1998).

While gender does have an impact on the use of linguistic variables and patterns of language use, the felicitous use of shared creative endeavours like jointly constructing stories is more dependent on the length and closeness of a friendship than on the gender of the contributors. Typically, jointly constructed stories consisted of collaboratively constructed reminiscences. The following excerpt is part of a long sequence in which two women are reliving a past shared event.

⁶ Holmes (1998) documents that in Maori culture, the most supportive audience behaviour involves allowing the narrator uncontested access to the floor. In such cultures where silence is interpreted positively, speakers are allowed to continue uninterrupted until they have finished, and there is no expectation of verbal feedback.

Excerpt 14 - Să vezi o sună tipa asta

- 1 Iulia: să vezi o sună tipa asta
well, this lady calls her
- 2 <e tot medic
she's a physician as well
- 3 și o sună pe alina
and she calls alina
- 4 cât era? unșpe noaptea cât era?
what time was it? eleven at night what was it?
- 5 Alina: °unșpe jumate doișpe (nici nu știu)°
half past eleven twelve (I don't know)
- 6 Iulia: da (.)
yes
- 7 Iulia: [înnebunită ia] povestește-i tu=
mad, come on, you tell her,
- 8 Alina: [speria:tă că-]
scared that
- 9 Alina: = în loc să-i pună picături de nas cu Olinth
instead of giving him Olinth nose drops
- 10 Alina: pentru băițelu' ei i-a pus ALte tipuri de picături tot pentru nas
for her little boy, she gave him ANOTHER kind of nose drops
- 11 da' hhh cu hhh un hhh antihistaminic care era pentru adulți
but hhh with hhh another hhh type of antihistamine which was for adults
- 12 Maria: [AOleu
AY
- 13 Alina: [VA:i despera:tă săra:ca despera:tă
AY, poor thing, she was desperate
- 14 °la unșpe jumate° 'ce se poate întâmpla?
at eleven thirty 'what could happen?
- 15 ↑Ali:na de trei zile îi pun din astea' [((laughs))
Alina: I've been giving him these for three days'
- 16 Maria: [((laughs))
- 17 Maria: a::: și nu și-a dat seama
a::, and she didn't realize
- 18 Alina: nu și-a ↓dat seama
she didn't realize
- 19 și-n seara a:ia ce-o::: fi făcut-o să se uite [pe asta]
and that night what made her look at this
- 20 Maria: [>da' bine că-<]
well it's good that

21 Alina: pe etichetă pentru că ea până atunci îi puneă și știa că avea flaconu’
la fel

da’ eticheta– pe etichetă scria ↓altceva=
at the label. because she had been giving him before and she knew
that the bottle
was the same but the label - the label read something else

22 Maria: =va::I

ay

23 Alina: și era disperată, disperată=
and she was desperate, really desperate

24 Maria: =oribil
horrible

25 Alina: bi:ne că [n-a: fost nimic]
thank God nothing happened

26 Iulia: [n-a avut nimica]
he was fine

27 Alina: se absoarbe de obicei
it usually gets absorbed

28 Iulia: și săracu și așa povesteai tu că-i slab
and the poor thing, you were saying he’s so thin

29 Alina: dac-ai știi cum e do:amne bietu’ copil
if you only knew what he’s like, oh Lord, the poor child...

30 Iulia: ca un păianjen

1 ike a spider

31 Alina: da
yeah

32 Iulia: și culmea că e superîngrijit
and the funny thing is he’s super well taken care of

33 și stau o grămadă [de capu’ lui
and they fuss over him [so much

34 Maria: [da sînt mă unii copii așa sînt nu?
yeah, there *are* kids like that, right?

35 Alina: da și spunea că ieri noapte– nu aseară
yeah, and she was saying that last night- no, last evening-

36 Iulia: mhm
mhm

37 Alina: m-a sunat să-mi spună că nu s-a-ntîmplat nimic într-adevăr pînă la
urmă

she called me to tell me that in the end nothing had actually happened
(Hornoiu 2016: 67-68)

The joint construction of stories is one way of expressing intimacy and affect in relationships. Notice that Excerpt 14 starts as a jointly constructing story (lines 1-8), then turns into solo construction as Iulia gives the floor entirely to Alina (line 7) who assumes the role of an expert while telling the story, and then, towards the end, the story is again jointly constructed (lines 28-36). This rapport-building function is emphasized in Excerpt 14 by the shared overlapping laughter, supportive overlapping talk throughout, as well as by the use of a collaboratively built sentence which invokes shared experience and appeals to emotional closeness, and by various repeated lexical units. In this corpus, however, such examples were not common. There were relatively few instances where the stories were jointly owned in the sense that the experience they were based on was shared by both participants, which would have made a joint construction of the story possible.

6.2 The addressee's response

Much more common was a pattern where the narrator told her or his story and the addressee assumed the listener role, reflecting the fact that the narrator was describing an experience which the other person had not shared. It was in this area that gender differences were most apparent. Women and men differed not only in the amount of verbal feedback, but also in the kind of feedback they provided.

Empirical evidence has shown that in talk-in-interaction women tend to use more minimal responses (e.g. *yeah*, *mm*), often to show support and encourage the speaker to continue talking (for example, Strodbeck and Mann, 1956; Zimmerman and West, 1975; Fishman, 1983; Leet-Pellegrini, 1980). Recent trends in conversation analysis have expanded the study of verbal feedback beyond simple acknowledgments to include a wider array of **short utterances and non-lexical vocalizations like laughter**. This reflects a more nuanced understanding of how participants manage interaction and convey meaning, distinguishing supportive positive feedback from neutral or non-committal responses (for example, Pilkington, 1994). Elsewhere I analysed conversations in Romanian conversational discourse and distinguished supportive from neutral minimal responses, as well as more extended overtly supportive feedback, such as cooperative overlaps, from neutral verbal feedback (Hornoiu 2016). This distinction highlights how subtle conversational cues can convey different levels of support. My Romanian data show that there is a tendency for men to use more neutral and minimal responses, while women's feedback tends to be more supportive, collaborative, and detailed. The women in my sample use a greater proportion of responses which are both overtly supportive and more extended and contrapuntal in nature. Doing gender (i.e. femininity) for a woman within a

particular conversational context clearly involves providing ongoing explicit verbal support for the interlocutor.

Detailed qualitative analysis reveals that feedback is not a one-size-fits-all phenomenon and is influenced by contextual factors, specifically the relationship between the conversationalists and the nature of the conversation itself. In other words, how, when, and what type of feedback is provided is sensitive to the existing relationship dynamics and the purpose of the interaction. It appears that discussing personal topics often elicits more supportive and reassuring responses. One factor accounting for the greater incidence of feedback in the women's interactions, then, is the **personal nature of topics in women's stories** which contributes to a higher rate of feedback in their interactions compared to men's, whose stories tend to be more focused on less personal or more factual topics.

Doing gender is also reflected in the more extended responses provided to story-tellers in my sample: the questions and comments offered by listeners. Some questions and comments are clearly experienced by the narrator as supportive and structurally cohesive: they assisted the story's development. Others were disruptive, or, in some cases, challenging.

The women in my sample tend to ask more questions and offer a wider range of comments (including elaborations and repetitions) to facilitate the smooth progress of the interaction and show active involvement. In the following excerpt, Iulia is recounting the story of her practicum experience and is expressing her dissatisfaction with the idea that, for her final lesson during practicum, she should teach a class she has never thought before, and repeatedly stating her refusal to do so (lines 1-2 and 5-6 and 16-17).

Excerpt 15 - Și o să-i zic îmi pare rău

- 1 Iulia: și o să-i zic îmi pare rău da' io nu pot să țin la a unsprezecea
and I'm gonna tell her I'm sorry but I can't teach the 11th grade
2 nu e vorba că mi-e frică mie că io fac față dacă mă pregătesc
it's not that I'm afraid 'cause I can handle it if I prepare myself
3 normal că fac față
of course I can manage
Maria: ((laughing))
4 Iulia: ce râzi măi de mine ce râzi?
why are you laughing at me, why are you laughing?
5 dar ideea este că nu este corect
the thing is, it's not fair
6 cum să mă duc io să să fără ni- nici un
how am I going to go, to... to... with no... no
7 Maria: și literatură
and moreover it's literature

8 Iulia: da (3) mă rog asta nu-i o problemă că pînă la urmă dacă ăia nu știu vorbești tu

yeah, well, that's no problem, 'cause, after all, if they don't know anything you do the talking

9 Iulia: deci ea care vorbește de metodică cum poa' să zică–

she, who's talking about methodology, how can she say?

10 să-mi dea o clasă pe care eu nu o cunosc nu?

to give me a class that I don't know, right?

13 Maria: [ca lecție finală

as a final lesson

14 Iulia: [ca lecție finală

as a final lesson

15 nu e posibil așa ceva

that's just not possible

16 și mâine o să-i zic “îmi pare rău doamnă da' nu există așa ceva

and tomorrow I'm gonna tell her “I'm sorry madam but that's impossible

17 cum să-mi dați mie- ” nu? spune și tu

how can you give me-” right? don't you think so?

(Hornoiu 2016: 60-61)

Maria's feedback and her comments are facilitative and encouraging. Maria intervenes in line 7 adding *și literatură* ('and moreover it's literature') implying that the subject of study, German literature as opposed to German language, makes Iulia's task even more difficult. After agreeing with Maria in line 8 (*da* 'yes'), Iulia uses (in the same line) the item *mă rog*, ('well') which, in this case, is an appositional term signalling disagreement and then she moves on to saying something that may be seen as standing in complete disagreement with Maria's turn: *asta nu-i o problemă că pînă la urmă dacă ăia nu știu vorbești tu* ('that's no problem 'cause if they don't know anything you do the talking). In addition to the item *mă rog* 'well', the dispreferred nature of her turn is also signalled by the three-second pause. Thus Iulia uses a token agreement to avoid disagreement and to convey that she and Maria share common opinions. Moreover, Maria's elaboration in line 13 is phrased as a prepositional phrase which becomes, together with Iulia's contribution (lines 9-10), a collaboratively built sentence (Sacks, 1992) which is the type of jointly constructed turn which conveys the highest degree of intimacy and support showing that the interlocutors are on the same page.

Similarly, Excerpt 16 illustrates the use of minimal responses functioning as *continuers*. This excerpt shows Maria to be attending to the ongoing talk at lines 2, 8, 13, and 18. This involves, on the one hand, Maria's

refraining from initiating a turn in order to show that she does not object to her partner's having the floor and producing an extended unit of talk.

Excerpt 16 - Și acum io știam c-aveam niște oase în frigider de vită

- 1 Alina: și acum io știam c-aveam niște oase în frigider de vită
and now I knew I had some beef bones in the fridge
- 2 Maria: **mhm**
mhm
- 3 Maria: și zic lasă din oasele alea fac ciorbă și din carne fac spaghetti
and I thought I'd make some soup with those bones and spaghetti
with the meat
- 4 și când dimineața am constatat că de fapt aveam aveam numai
carne
but in the morning I noticed that in fact I had only meat
- 5 și zic a:: și ciorbă din carne de vită și spaghetti tot–
and I thought, well, beef soup and spaghetti as well
- 6 toate sînt prea cu carne de vită
too much beef in everything
- 7 lasă o să fac p[ui
well, I'll cook some [poultry
- 8 Maria: **[mhm=**
mhm
- 9 Alina: =cu spaghetti=
with spaghetti
- 10 Alina: =și le-am făcut
so I cooked them
- 11 le-am fiert pe ele
I've boiled them
- 12 apoi am făcut un sos cu ceapă, usturoi, bulion și un cub de Knorr de
pui
then I made a sauce with onion, garlic, tomato paste and a Knorr
poultry cube
- 13 Maria: **mhm**
mhm
- 14 Alina: ca să aibă cît de cît gust de pui
to taste a little bit like poultry
- 15 Maria: (((laughing))
- 16 Alina: (((laughing))
- 17 Alina: așa și apoi am pus carne de pui tăiată așa fișii lun[gi
so, and next I put some beef carved in long strips
- 18 Maria: **[mhm**

mhm
(Hornoiu 2016: 61-62)

Not objecting to her partner's contribution and encouraging her to carry on with her stories enables the conversation to flow smoothly, when willingness to take part in a conversation is equivalent to willingness to be part of a relationship. On the other hand, fitting to the details of the locally preceding talk is achieved through the use of minimal responses functioning as continuers. In this example, Maria satisfies her partner's desire to be liked, admired and listened to.

The women in my sample are particularly skilled at inserting *mm*, *aha*, *oh*, *așa* ('right') and other such comments throughout streams of talk rather than placing them at the end. The inserter signals that she is constantly attending to what is being said, demonstrating her participation, her interest in the interaction and in the speaker since none of these minimal responses is delayed. These minimal responses are skilfully inserted between the breaths of a speaker, causing sometimes slight overlaps and there is nothing in tone or structure to suggest that the person who produces them is attempting to take over the talk. Thus they are signals of solidarity and support.

By contrast, the men's questions and comments sometimes seemed to distract the narrator from his story and could be regarded as disruptive and challenging.

Excerpt 17 - Mi-am depus cv-ul

1 Adi: mi-am depus cv-ul la ()

I submitted my CV at (...)

2 Vlad: du-te mă dracu'

fuck off

3 Adi: nu ceream post de bodyguard timpitule

I wasn't asking for a bodyguard position dumbass

4 n-am nici armata făcută

I wasn't even in the army

5 ceream d-ăsta de- ceream d-ăstea cum-ii-zice

I was askin' for this...I was askin' for this wha'cha call it

6 post de dispecer mă

7 Vlad: ((laughing)) calling all cars calling all cars

8 Adi: am băgat foarte bun cunoscător al limbii engleze

I said I have a very good command of English

bun cunoscător al limbii fran[ce:ze

good knowledge of French

9 Vlad: [tu BĂ:?? du-te dracului de nesimțit

YOU DID?? get the hell outta here, you shameless bastard

10 Adi: ((laughing)) ăla– trebe să [impresionezi scuză-mă
((laughing)) well— you have to impress them, excuse me

11 Vlad: [bă mai minte omu’ da’ nici în halu’ ăsta
man, people lie, but not *that* bad

12 Adi: am băgat acolo posturi de conducere când am fost coordonator de
proiecte cu nato

I also put in there “management positions,” from when I was project
coordinator with NATO

13 cu ăștia să impresionez acolo să vadă lumea că nu-s un oarecare
and all that, to impress them, you know, so they can see I’m not just some
nobody

14 Vlad: nu, da’ dup-aia o să se convingă ((laughing))
no, but then they’ll find out the truth ((laughing)).

(Hornoiu 2016: 123)

In **Excerpt 17**, Adi is telling a story about his experiences while looking for a job and submitting his CV. Vlad’s comments and swearing (lines 2, 7, 9, 11 and 14) are sarcastic put-downs uttered in a jeering tone meant not only to challenge and undermine his interlocutor but also to highlight his active role as an addressee.

Conclusions

This paper analysed stories told by women and men in the Romanian sample with a view to showcasing how conversationalists construct their gendered identities in everyday interactions with friends. Mundane family events and routine experiences are transformed by “narratives” into a new meaning, allowing thus storytellers to give salience to particular facets of their identities. My analysis demonstrates that gender identity is not categorical or fixed, but is locally situated. Thus, gender identity is constantly being constructed through stories as speakers may choose to conform to and reinforce the dominant societal ideology concerning gender roles imposed by a patriarchal society, whereas at other times they may choose to display more liberal identities that deviate from these societal norms.

In excerpts 2 to 6, for instance, the narrator constructs a predominantly conservative identity not only for herself but also for her daughter-in-law and granddaughter. Although we may safely assume that in other contexts their gendered identities may not conform to the rather conservative norms of Romanian society, on this occasion she takes the traditional roles of ‘good mother’, ‘good daughter’ and ‘good wife’ very seriously, and expects her interlocutor to recognise and appreciate the extent to which she and the other female members of her family meet society’s prescriptions. Excerpt 7, on the other hand, showcases a feminine identity which is different from other,

perhaps more traditional, portrayals of womanhood. This type of identity is shaped by a blend of career-focused ambition and the aesthetic pressures of maintaining a specific appearance.

Through our storytelling we create and re-create our identities by experimenting with possible selves in a context of mutuality and trust (Coates 1996:115), as narratives are used for self-reflection, connection, and shaping our understanding of the past, present, and future. Sharing stories allows individuals to form a more cohesive sense of self by understanding their experiences, experimenting with different perspectives on those experiences, and developing empathy and trust with others who listen and respond.

Storytellers, irrespective of their gender, expect their conversationalist partners to express empathy and understanding in their responses to such stories. When experiences are shared, stories can be co-constructed, or the listener can offer different types of support, with empathy being a key expectation for both genders.

Although both female and male addressees respond to stories with supportive questions and minimal responses, women tend to use significantly more minimal responses to show support, while men may use more challenging or sceptical questions to engage with a story. This suggests different conversational strategies, with women using feedback to build rapport and men using it to probe or test the information presented.

The topics women and men use in their stories not only reflect the fundamental importance of everyday experience and activities but also the different preoccupations of the daily lives of women and men. The women's stories often focus on caregiving, domestic life, and relationships, reflecting their traditional roles as homemakers and mothers, while men's stories frequently centre on themes of strength, protection, and being the primary breadwinner, aligning with traditional male roles as providers and protectors. In these Romanian stories, both women and men use language to construct their gender identities, but they are also aware of the boundaries of their gender roles as defined by society. Through a variety of discourse strategies, the protagonists performed expected gender behaviours while simultaneously showing recognition of these confines.

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