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Saying Good and Bad Things Behind Someone's Back or to Their Face: Perceived Source Selflessness and Trust in Information Matter When the Information Is Positive

Katarzyna Cantarero^{ab}, Katarzyna Byrka^{ab}, Wijnand A. P. Tilburg^c,

Agnieszka Komorowska^b

[a] *Social Behavior Research Center, SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Wrocław, Poland.* [b] *Wrocław Faculty of Psychology, SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Wrocław, Poland.* [c] *Psychology Department, King's College London, London, United Kingdom.*

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Corresponding Author: Katarzyna Cantarero, Wrocław Faculty of Psychology, SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ostrowskiego 30b, 53-238 Wrocław. E-mail: kcantarero@swps.edu.pl

Supplementary Materials: Data [see [Index of Supplementary Materials](#)]



Abstract

This study explores the consequences of gossiping on impression formation as compared to the consequences of direct communication in the presence of the target individual. Specifically, we focus on perceived source selflessness and trust in the information conveyed about the target individual as important factors for impression formation. In an internet-based study, participants (N = 155) evaluated descriptions of target individuals presented as gossip (spoken outside the target individual's presence), as direct communication (spoken in the presence of the target individual) or without any information about the source. Analyses yielded no significant differences between experimental conditions on the impression of the target individual. However, we found that trust in information mediated the relation between perceived source selflessness and the general impression of the target individual, yet only when the information about the target individual is positive.

Keywords

impression formation, gossip, source, information trustworthiness



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“If you haven't got anything nice to say about anybody, come sit next to me.”
— Alice Roosevelt Longworth

People enjoy talking about others: the majority of conversation time is dedicated to discussing social topics (Dunbar, Marriott, & Duncan, 1997). Part of this time involves gossiping, that is, the “exchange of information about absent third parties” (Foster, 2004, p. 81). Importantly, a piece of information does not have to be negative or false to be considered gossip. A variety of questions accompany the phenomenon of exchanging information about absent parties. For example, do people perceive the gossip as a credible source of information? Do they trust information conveyed as gossip? More generally, does gossiping affect people's impression of the target individual who is the subject of the gossip?

In this paper we focus on the consequences of gossiping compared to direct communication on impression formation of the target individual. More precisely, we address both the issue of perceived source selflessness and trust in the actual information conveyed about the absent (vs. present) target individual. Additionally, we will explore the effect of the valence of information on the mentioned relationship between source selflessness, trust in information and impression formation.

Functions and Impact of Gossiping

Gossiping serves numerous social functions. According to Ben-Ze'ev (1994), gossiping satisfies tribal needs as it helps to create intimacy between interlocutors. Baumeister, Zhang, and Vohs (2004) add that gossiping serves as a medium of conveying crucial information about cultural norms and rules in a given society. Wilson, Wilczynski, Wells, and Weiser (2000) argue that gossip is a tool of social control as it benefits group interests by pointing out wrongdoings. Gossiping is also related to better clarification and transparency of norms (Peters, Jetten, Radova, & Austin, 2017). Additionally, Feinberg, Willer, Stellar, and Keltner (2012) found that gossiping may be driven by a prosocial motivation to protect others. Their study revealed that people who observed an antisocial act were more prone to share this information with a potentially vulnerable person. Gossip thus helps to regulate both group-level goals (collective pro-sociality) and interpersonal ones (e.g., belongingness).

The Impact of Gossiping

Gossiping affects the impression that receivers of gossip form about both the gossipers and the party being gossiped about (the target individual). Gawronski and Walther (2008) showed that people who like others are evaluated positively, whereas those who dislike others tend to be disliked, which was described as the TAR effect (transfer of affect recursively). As far as gossiping is concerned, frequent gossipers are liked less and are seen as less powerful than those who gossip less (Farley, 2011). Peters and Kashima (2015) focused on conditions in which gossipers are perceived more favorably. They are described

as more moral when the content of the gossip they convey could help identify the target individual as trustworthy and consequently help regulate relationships. Additionally, [Gawronski, Walther, and Blank \(2005\)](#) found that when the source of the information was presented positively and approved of the target individual, then that individual was liked more than when he/she was disliked by that source. Importantly, the order in which information is presented to participants affects impressions. When information about the source (e.g., often helps vs. often insults someone) was presented after information about whether the source liked or disliked the target individual, information about the source was no longer crucial for impression formation about the target individual.

[Brandt, Vonk, and Knippenberg \(2011\)](#) focused on congruent or incongruent motives of people passing information about others. An example of a congruent motive was giving positive information about the target individual to help this individual get a new job in order to overtake the target individual's current job. An example of an incongruent motive was a source giving positive information about the target individual despite the source also being interested in the job offer. [Brandt, Vonk, and Knippenberg \(2011\)](#) found that incongruent motives had a stronger impact on impression formation than congruent ones. Inconsistent motives led receivers to form impressions of the target that were more in line with the information passed by the source person. The authors, however, did not measure the source credibility and selflessness, but rather trustworthiness¹. Additionally, they did not focus on trust in the information conveyed, which should depend, we propose, on the source's perceived selflessness. The results of their Study 1 showed that the source was perceived as less trustworthy when sharing negative (versus positive) information. Furthermore, the source was perceived as comparatively less trustworthy when passing information for the benefit of the target individual. Importantly, however, the target-benefitting motive in this particular case also proved beneficial for the source. Plausibly, the source's motivation might have been perceived as morally dubious, which could have clouded the general evaluation of the source's trustworthiness.

In this study we focus on one aspect of source credibility, namely perceived source selflessness. We treat source selflessness as grounds for considering the source to be unbiased. Evaluations of the extent to which a source is unbiased, sincere and trustworthy have been traditionally measured where perception of the source of the information is concerned (e.g., [Chaiken, 1980](#)).

Relevant Theoretical Framework

According to cognitive balance theory ([Cartwright & Harary, 1956](#); [Heider, 1946](#)), people seek congruence between various elements when forming impressions concerning interpersonal relations. For example, we speak of a balanced relationship when we like a per-

1) Note that a person can be perceived as both untrustworthy and a credible source of information regarding a target individual at the same time. For example, an imprisoned criminal might be perceived as untrustworthy but at the same time be considered a credible source of information about someone (e.g., his/her disliked prison cell inmate).

son who is liked by a friend of ours or when we dislike our friend's enemy. An example of a balanced triad occurs in a situation when we like someone who is disliked by a person we hate. Gawronski et al. (2005) demonstrated that the impression formation of others relies on cognitive balance theory. However, when the information that a source has negative features is conveyed after the information on whether the source likes the target person or not, it did not affect evaluation of the target person. Their research thus indicates that cognitive balance theory is insufficient to explain certain effects that the source qualities may have on the impression formation of a target individual.

Theory and research in persuasion give a solid background to separate the effect of the qualities of the source from the proper information that is being conveyed (e.g., Chaiken, 1980). One example might be the rise in persuasiveness over time of information coming from an untrustworthy source, which is known as the sleeper effect (Hovland, Lumsdaine, & Sheffield, 1949; Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Pratkanis, Greenwald, Leippe, & Baumgardner, 1988). A meta-analysis on the sleeper effect has shown that this effect is stronger when the arguments used at the initial stage were more impactful (Kumkale & Albarracín, 2004). The results showed that when information about the non-credible source was passed after the argument, the latter was more persuasive; this is in line with the Elaborated Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) and the empirical findings discussed by Kumkale, Albarracín, and Seignourel (2010). Additionally, Peters and Gawronski (2011) focused on *information* validity for impression formation. They found that knowledge of the validity of the information (whether it is true or false) influenced explicit and implicit target individual evaluations. When discounting information was passed with a time delay, it was not very influential for implicit judgments.

Research Goals

The purpose of our research was to explore gossiping and direct communication in the presence of the target individual as the contexts in which an impression about the target individual is formed. Specifically, we focused on the relationship between the perceived selflessness of the source and trust in information and their effect on impression. Moreover, we aimed to examine whether the valence of information, that is, whether it is positive or negative, affects this relationship.

The type of information and reasons for which a person conveys given information play a significant role in the possible impact of that information on impression formation (Wyer et al., 1994). We expect that the valence of information and the context affect the impressions of the target of the information. Specifically, we predict that when the source conveys positive information to a third party in the presence of the target individual, then that source of the information will not be as credible as a source that passes this information as gossip. It is likely that observing a person who speaks positively of another person in their presence might be interpreted as an attempt to use an ingratiation technique (Jones & Pittman, 1982). The source thus might be perceived as more selfless

when passing positive information about the target individual by means of gossip than when this information is passed in the presence of the target person. Conversely, when the information coming from the source about the target individual is negative, then this information should be perceived as more selfless when it is passed in direct communication than as gossip. This is because the decision to convey negative information about a target individual in their presence may have costly interpersonal consequences.

People are, in general, reluctant to break bad news (Rosen & Tesser, 1970). It takes more time to pass information on inferior results of a fake social perception test than on more positive results (Dibble & Levine, 2010). People report experiencing more discomfort after delivering failure feedback, especially when they are visible to the target individual (Bond & Anderson, 1987). If a person decides to share such information with the target individual, thus accepting the psychological cost of such acts, this person is likely perceived as a more self-less source of information (than when the information is conveyed as gossip). Additionally, higher trustworthiness of negative information conveyed in direct communication might result from the fact that if the information is incorrect, the target individual could rectify it.

Taken together, we expected that perceived selflessness of the source of information should predict the trust in information conveyed, which in turn should affect impression formation. In other words, we predicted that perceived selflessness of the source was positively related to impression formation of the target individual through perceived trust in the *information*. To our knowledge, such a model has not been tested before. Neither has it been tested in respect to positive and negative valence of information. Additionally, perceived selflessness of the source of information should be higher in the case of negative information in the direct communication situation. We also predicted that trust in the negative information would be higher in the direct communication situation than in the gossip situation.

Method

Participants and Study Design

One-hundred and fifty-five students of a university in Poland took part in the study. Participants were 121 (78%) women and 34 (22%) men, with ages ranging from 18 to 57 ($M = 29.61$, $SD = 9.19$).

We performed an internet-based experiment with mode of communication (direct vs gossip vs control) as a between-subject factor. Positivity vs negativity was a within-subject independent variable. Evaluations of general impression of the target individual were our main dependent variables².

2) Because agency and communion are basic dimensions of social perception (e.g., Wojciszke 2005, 2010; Abele & Wojciszke, 2014) and have been analyzed in the context of impression formation (e.g., Byrka, 2007), we decided to

Procedure and Materials

After giving informed consent, participants were randomly assigned to one of three between-subjects conditions. All participants read four stories derived from the pilot study ([Supplementary Materials](#)); two depicting positive behavior and two depicting targets behaving negatively. The order of the four stories that each participant received was randomized. The stories are presented in [Appendix](#). Depending on the assigned communication mode, these stories were modified such that the target individual was present during the conversation (direct communication mode), the target individual was absent during the conversation (gossip communication mode), or the events were presented without indication of any mode of communication (the control condition). Participants evaluated their general impression of the target individual (“What is your general impression of the protagonist of the story?”, 1 = *definitely negative* to 7 = *definitely positive*). In the direct and gossip communication mode conditions we also asked about perceived credibility of the source (as a proxy of source credibility “Is the person telling the story doing so selflessly?”) and the level of trust in the information given by the source (“Do you trust the information passed by the author of the story?” 1 = *definitely not* to 7 = *definitely yes*).

Results

We conducted a 3 between (gossip, control vs. direct communication) x 2 within (positive vs. negative valence) repeated measures mixed ANOVA. We used general impression as our dependent variable. Results showed that target individuals were evaluated more favorably when they were described positively ($M = 5.37$, $SD = 0.84$) rather than negatively ($M = 3.52$, $SD = 0.62$), $F(1, 152) = 445.32$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .75$. The mode of communication was not pivotal ($p = .226$). Critically, the interaction term of the experimental group and the valence of communication was not statistically significant ($p = .155$).

We compared possible differences in the evaluation of selflessness of the person that passed the information. Results of a mixed-ANOVA, with positive and negative valence as a within subject factor and mode of communication (gossip, control vs. direct communication) as a between subject factor on perceived source selflessness, showed that it was unaffected by valence ($p = .275$), the mode of communication ($p = .176$), and its interaction ($p = .181$). Using the same analysis, we also tested how the evaluation of trust in the information was affected by the valence and mode of communication. The results showed that when the information was more positive, there was more trust in the infor-

focus on information describing the target individuals that focuses on either agentic or communal behavior of the individual. We also measured agentic and communal characteristics of the target individual (Wojciszke & Szlendak, 2010). However, for the sake of brevity and clarity, we do not focus on these findings in this paper. Additionally, we also asked about desire to meet the target person. The results regarding this variable were almost identical to our main DV, and we thus decided not to focus on them.

mation ($M = 5.00$, $SD = 0.76$), rather than when the information was negative ($M = 4.69$, $SD = 0.68$), $F(1, 103) = 27.01$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .21$. There was no main effect regarding the mode of communication ($p = .259$) or its interaction with the valence ($p = .444$)³.

Due to the lack of significant statistical differences between the conditions, we conducted further analysis on the gossip and direct communication conditions jointly (as the control condition did not include the source of the communication regarding the target individual). We used the general mean indices of trust in the relayed information, perceived selflessness of the information provider and general impression of the target individual.

We wanted to test whether perceived source selflessness was positively related to the general impression of the target individual. We expected these relationships to be mediated by trust in the information. Due to the fact that we had a within subject design regarding the valence of the communication, we conducted these analyses separately for positive and negative valence. We conducted two mediation analyses to test these models.

We tested for a possible mediation effect using a bias-corrected and accelerated bootstrapping procedure (10,000 samples). We used standardized variables into the analysis. The total effect of source selflessness on the general impression of the target individual when the information was positive was significant ($c = 0.25$, $SE = 0.10$, $t = 2.57$, $p = .012$, 95% CI [0.06, 0.45]). The direct effect of source credibility (controlling for trust in the information) was weaker, and not significant ($c' = 0.08$, $SE = 0.09$, $t = 0.84$, $p = .402$). Approximately 25% of the variance in general impression was accounted for by the predictors ($R^2 = .248$). The 95% bootstrapped confidence intervals for the indirect effect through trust in the information did not contain zero, 95% boot CI [0.07, 0.30], $a_1b_1 = 0.17$, boot $SE = 0.06$, indicating a significant mediation effect⁴. These results are displayed graphically in Figure 1.

A similar analysis was conducted for the general impression when the information was negative. We tested for a possible mediation effect again using a bias-corrected and accelerated bootstrapping procedure (10,000 samples). The total effect of source selflessness on general impression of the target individual was not statistically significant ($p = .319$). The direct effect of source selflessness was statistically insignificant when controlling for trust in the information ($p = .253$). There was no effect of trust in the negative information on impression formation ($p = .536$). The 95% bootstrapped confidence intervals for the indirect effect through trust in the information did not contain zero, 95% boot CI [-0.13, 0.05], $a_1b_1 = -0.02$, boot $SE = 0.04$, indicating that the mediation effect was not statistically significant.

3) These two analyses were conducted only in respect to the direct communication and gossip conditions, as the control condition only presented raw material without the source of the information.

4) Importantly, when we tested the mediation model with the source selflessness as the mediator, trust in the information as a predictor and general impression as an outcome variable (when the three variables relate to positive valence), we found no significant indirect effect 95% boot CI [-0.07, 0.13], $a_1b_1 = 0.03$, boot $SE = 0.05$.

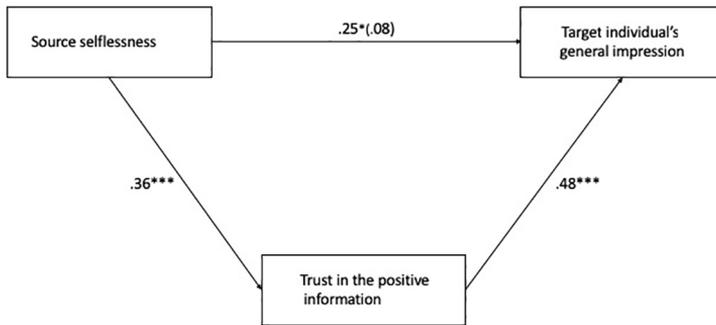


Figure 1. Standardized regression coefficients for the relationship between perceived source selflessness and the target individual’s general impression, mediated by trust in the information. The model is restricted to positive communication only. The standardized regression coefficient for source selflessness, controlled by trust in the information, is given in brackets.

* $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

These results partially support the hypothesis of the mediating role of trust in the information in the relationship between source selflessness and general impression of the target individual. The results show that only when the information about the target is positive do perceived source selflessness and trust in the information play a significant role.

Discussion

Research on person perception has adopted diverse methodologies. Some studies have focused on the perception of a target individual more generally, without stating the source of the information (e.g., Higgins, Rholes, & Jones, 1977). In other studies, the source passed on information about the target individual in their presence (e.g., Wyer, Budesheim, Lambert, & Swan, 1994). A few studies have focused on impression formation of target individuals that are not present when the information is given by the source (e.g., Brandt, Vonk, & Knippenberg, 2011). In our study we compared the three types of contexts in which impressions of a target person are formulated. Specifically, we presented participants with situations where information about the target individual was presented as gossip, where it was communicated in the presence of the target individual, or where no details about the source of the information were given. We did not find that negative information conveyed in direct communication influenced more negative perceptions of the target individuals than when it was communicated as gossip. We also did not find a more favorable evaluation of the target individual when the source communicated positive information about them in the form of gossip. Additionally, evaluations of

source selflessness did not differ between the context of gossip and direct information. Mode of communication was also not important for trust in the information.

However, the results of our study showed that impression formation depends on the perceived selflessness of the source of the information when the information is positive. Brandt et al. (2011) found no mediation effect of source trustworthiness between the source motives and target individual evaluation. Our study showed that this relationship might be complemented by trust in the information. The extent to which the source is perceived as selfless predicts trust in the information conveyed, which in turn predicts impression formation of the target individual when the information is positive. This relationship was not significant when the information about the target individual was negative. It might be that the negativity of the information is far more important than nuanced contextual information about the source of the information. This explanation is in line with the well documented notion that “bad is stronger than good” (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001). Not surprisingly, target individuals were evaluated more positively when the information about them was positive than when it was negative.

An additional theoretical account, relevant for impression formation of target individuals, comes from the literature on evaluative conditioning. Specifically, impression formation may change due to co-occurrence of a primarily neutral target individual with stimuli (e.g., a person, a piece of information or something else) that are affectively significant (e.g., Walther, Nagengast, & Trasselli, 2005; Walther, Weil, & Düsing, 2011). Evaluative conditioning can explain, for example, Gawronski and Walther’s (2008) results: those who like others are themselves liked more, and those who dislike others are themselves disliked more. Interestingly, though, results of the first study by Gawronski et al. (2005) and of research by Brandt et al. (2011) are difficult to explain by relying on evaluative conditioning, at least as far as mere associative processes are concerned. More precisely, when one target individual co-occurs with two negative stimuli, that is, coincides with a disliked person and is disliked by that person, then that target individual should also be disliked (see Walther et al., 2011). Research findings by Gawronski et al. (2005), however, show that we tend to like such people (at least when we first dislike the source). These findings are more in line with cognitive balance theory. The existing pattern of results regarding impression formation indicates that there is mixed evidence as to which theoretical background has the most predictive power regarding how we form impressions about others. This potentially gives grounds for fruitful future studies.

Although the type of information we used resulted in more positive evaluations of positively-described target individuals than negatively-described ones, perhaps we should have used stronger, more emotionally loaded descriptions to increase the potential different effects of direct communication and gossip on impression formation. Additionally, it might be that the stories were not evaluative enough to be perceived as typical gossip. That is, had the stories included more judgmental or praising evaluations, it could

have affected the perception of both the source and the target. What is more, it is possible that the issues described in the stories (e.g., breaking a camera lens) were overly mundane and not private enough. Perhaps then the two modes of communication would have differentiated perceived source selflessness. It would also be beneficial to focus on real-life behaviors rather than on evaluations of scenarios. Future research should complement the findings presented in this paper by including other types of source selflessness manipulations. A combination of expertise and credibility could lead to the most effective source for predicting trust in the information, and, as a consequence, would predict impression formation. Future studies may focus on including more information about the sources (e.g., status) and different relationships that the source and the target individual might have (e.g., length of relationship, closeness).

This study explored one aspect of source credibility, namely perceived source selflessness, and the impact that trust in the information itself has on impression formation of target individuals in the context of gossiping versus direct communication. There were no differences in the perception of target individuals when the information about the target was passed by means of gossip or direct communication. We found that trust in the information mediates this relationship when the information is positive. Our study encourages future research on impression formation focusing on source credibility and trust in the information.

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Data Availability: For this study a dataset is freely available (see the [Supplementary Materials](#) section).

Supplementary Materials

The following Supplementary Materials are available via the PsychArchives repository (for access see [Index of Supplementary Materials](#) below):

1. Results of the pilot study
2. Dataset of the pilot study
3. Dataset of the main study

Index of Supplementary Materials

Cantarero, K., Byrka, K., Tilburg, W. A. P., & Komorowska, A. (2019). *Supplementary materials to "Saying good and bad things behind someone's back or to their face: Perceived source selflessness and trust in information matter when the information is positive"*. PsychOpen.
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Appendix

Stories Presented to Participants in the Control Condition

1. Adam is really smart. He got perfect marks and received a diploma with honors. He solves tasks very quickly. Though he didn't spend much time studying, he got the best marks in his class. As a result, he will receive a scholarship starting in September.
2. Magda borrowed a book from the library more than one month ago. There are several people waiting for this book. This is the only copy that can be borrowed and taken home. The library has already reclaimed the book, sending a notice to Magda that there are people waiting for it. However, Magda doesn't really feel bothered. She doesn't really care that someone may need the book.
3. Wojtek borrowed a camera lens from a friend. He took it to a rock concert because it had a good zoom, allowing you to take a quite close picture. Unfortunately, when he tried to attach the lens to the camera, he failed. Not only did he break off a part of it, but he also dropped it, causing further damage. Now he has to buy a replacement for his friend.
4. Marta has a friend who recently had a baby girl. The baby was diagnosed with cerebral palsy. She needs expensive rehabilitation. Marta organized a collection of bottle caps that can later be exchanged for longer stays at rehabilitation facilities.

Stories Presented to Participants in the Direct Communication Mode

1. Imagine that you are going to the swimming pool with your friend Piotr, and Adam - a friend of Piotr, whom you don't know. On the way there, Piotr says about Adam: Adam is really smart. He got perfect marks and received a diploma with honors. He solves tasks very quickly. Though he didn't spend much time studying, he got the best marks in his class. As a result, he will receive a scholarship starting in September.
2. Imagine that you are going to a family meeting by train. In one of the compartments you meet your friend - Ewa, and her friend Magda, whom you don't know. You start a conversation, and at one point Ewa says about Magda: Magda borrowed a book from the library more than one month ago. There are several people waiting for this book. This is the only copy that can be borrowed and taken home. The library has already reclaimed the book, sending a notice to Magda that there are people waiting for it. However, Magda doesn't really feel bothered. She doesn't really care that someone may need the book.
3. Imagine that you are being visited by your friend Marcin and Wojtek - a friend of Marcin, whom you don't know. At one point Martin says about Wojtek: Wojtek borrowed a camera lens from a friend. He took it to a rock concert because it had a good zoom, allowing you to take a quite close picture. Unfortunately, when he tried to attach the lens to the camera, he failed. Not only did he break off a part of it, but he also dropped it, causing further damage. Now he has to buy a replacement for his friend.

4. Imagine that at the bus stop you meet your friend Ania, and Marta - a friend of Ania, whom you don't know. While waiting for the bus you have a conversation. At one point Ania says about Marta: Marta has a friend who recently had a baby girl. The baby was diagnosed with cerebral palsy. She needs expensive rehabilitation. Marta organized a collection of bottle caps that can later be exchanged for longer stays at rehabilitation facilities.

Stories Presented to Participants in the Gossip Communication Mode

1. Imagine that you meet your friend Piotr and you go to the swimming pool together. On the way there, Piotr tells you about his friend Adam, whom you don't know: Adam is really smart. He got perfect marks and received a diploma with honors. He solves tasks very quickly. Though he didn't spend much time studying, he got the best marks in his class. As a result, he will receive a scholarship starting in September.
2. Imagine that you are going to a family meeting by train. In one of the compartments you meet your friend – Ewa, who is also traveling to the same city. You start a conversation, and at one point Ewa tells you about her friend Magda, whom you don't know: Magda borrowed a book from the library more than one month ago. There are several people waiting for this book. This is the only copy that can be borrowed and taken home. The library has already reclaimed the book, sending a notice to Magda that there are people waiting for it. However, Magda doesn't really feel bothered. She doesn't really care that someone may need the book.
3. Imagine that you are being visited by your friend Marcin, whom you have not seen in a long time. At one point Martin tells you about his friend Wojtek, whom you don't know: Wojtek borrowed a camera lens from a friend. He took it to a rock concert because it had a good zoom, allowing you to take a quite close picture. Unfortunately, when he tried to attach the lens to the camera, he failed. Not only did he break off a part of it, but he also dropped it, causing further damage. Now he has to buy a replacement for his friend.
4. Imagine that you meet your friend Ania at the bus stop. While waiting for the bus you have a conversation. At one point Ania tells you about her friend Marta, whom you don't know: Marta has a friend who recently had a baby girl. The baby was diagnosed with cerebral palsy. She needs expensive rehabilitation. Marta organized a collection of bottle caps that can later be exchanged for longer stays at rehabilitation facilities.



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