THE HIGH PRICE OF PRICE WATERHOUSE: DEALING WITH DIRECT EVIDENCE OF DISCRIMINATION

Robert A. Kearney†

An employer swings by his sales agent's office to deliver his recent subpar sales figures. After dropping the agent's sales figures on the agent's desk, the boss shakes his head and utters, "Just like a Dago." Later that day he fires the agent. The agent decides to sue. But what kind of a case will he have? It is undeniable that his sales were low, and there might even be evidence that others in the same boat had suffered a similar fate. But the employer did call him a "Dago," and appeared to equate his performance with his ethnicity. That sounds like the basis of a national origin discrimination claim2 if the boss's animus toward Italians, rather than the agent's slumped productivity, prompted the decision.3

After depositing the case on the steps of a federal courthouse, the fun really begins.4 The court will have the unenviable task of interpreting the

† Assistant Professor, Illinois Wesleyan University; B.A., 1988, University of Notre Dame; M.B.A., 1990, University of Illinois at Chicago; J.D., 1994, Notre Dame Law School. I am grateful to the University of Michigan Business School, where I taught as a Visiting Assistant Professor when I wrote this article. I am especially grateful to Professor Cindy A. Schipani, Chair of Law, History and Communication at UMBS, for generously providing me with the resources I needed.

1. An ethnic slur typically used to describe individuals of Italian origin.
2. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 makes it an unlawful employment practice to discriminate against an individual because of "such individual's race, color, religion, sex, or national origin." 42 U.S.C. § 2000e-2(a)(1) (1994 & Supp. 1999). Depending upon the interpretation, "Dago" is a derogatory remark tied to both one's ethnicity and national origin. Discrimination on the basis of an individual's ethnicity is unlawful under 42 U.S.C. § 1981(a) (1994). *See, e.g.*, Saint Francis Coll. v. Al-Khazraji, 481 U.S. 604, 613 (1987) (interpreting § 1981 and stating that "we have little trouble in concluding that Congress intended to protect from discrimination identifiable classes of persons who are subjected to intentional discrimination solely because of their ancestry or ethnic characteristics").
3. Causation is often the primary issue during the litigation of employment discrimination suits. If the employee was not fired (or demoted, etc.) "because of" his protected characteristic (here, national origin), then the plaintiff's claim fails. 42 U.S.C. § 2000e-2(a)(1) (1994 & Supp. 1999).
4. Actually, the plaintiff must exhaust his administrative remedies before filing suit in federal court. In an employment discrimination context, that means filing a charge of
remark. Its initial dilemma will be whether to treat the remark as "direct evidence" of discrimination or something less than that. The decision carries great consequences for litigants. But there is no consensus among the federal courts as to what evidence is "direct." If the judge treats the comment as direct evidence of discrimination, then the case will in all likelihood speed past the employer's motion for summary judgment and end up in the hands of the jury. At trial, the agent may even be entitled to discrimination with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission or the appropriate state human rights agency, which would share jurisdiction over the case. See 42 U.S.C. §§ 2000e-5(a)-(k) (1994 & Supp. 1999) (describing the process by which a charge is filed and investigated).

5. "Direct evidence" is a term which became commonly used in employment discrimination cases after Price Waterhouse v. Hopkins, 490 U.S. 228, 275-79 (1989) (O'Connor, J., concurring). The Supreme Court held that once a plaintiff proves that a protected characteristic played a motivating part in an employment decision, the defendant may avoid a finding of liability by proving by a preponderance of the evidence that it would have made the same decision even without consideration of the characteristic. Id. at 258. In her concurrence, which has subsequently been interpreted as the decisive vote in a plurality opinion, Justice O'Connor held that plaintiffs could shift the burden on the issue of causation to the defendant, thus requiring the defendant to meet the "same decision" test, if the plaintiff could "show by direct evidence that an illegitimate criterion was a substantial factor in the [challenged] decision." Id. at 276. Justice O'Connor did not define direct evidence in this context, but did allow that "stray remarks in the workplace, while perhaps probative of sexual harassment, cannot justify requiring the employer to prove that its hiring or promotion decisions were based on legitimate criteria. Nor can statements by nondecision-makers, or statements by decision-makers unrelated to the decisional process itself, suffice to satisfy the plaintiff's burden in this regard." Id. at 276 (internal citation omitted).

6. The Court of Appeals for the First Circuit summarized the advantage to the plaintiff in this case as follows: "First, the sheer strength of the evidence may carry the day. Second, it increases the chance of some form of relief, including attorneys' fees. Third, it imposes on the employer the burdens of production and persuasion, unlike the McDonnell Douglas model, which merely shifts to the employer the burden of producing admissible evidence to support a non-discriminatory reason for its actions. Fourth, it is more difficult, although not impossible, for the employer to get summary judgment in light of the strength of direct evidence and the potential shifting of burdens." Weston-Smith v. Cooley Dickinson Hosp., Inc., 282 F.3d 60, 64-65 (1st Cir. 2002) (internal citations omitted).

7. "Courts have noted the difficulty of defining direct evidence for discrimination claims. Our own statements on what constitutes direct evidence are not in complete harmony." Sanghvi v. St. Catherine's Hosp., Inc., 258 F.3d 570, 574 (7th Cir. 2001) (internal citations omitted) (noting the lack of consensus within the Seventh Circuit and then "assum[ing] without deciding that the broader definition of direct evidence applies").

8. Summary judgment for the employer in a direct evidence case is unusual, but not unheard of. See Sanghvi, 258 F.3d at 573-74 (treating the question "Being an older, foreign-born physician, how comfortable do you feel dealing with young, white American women?" as direct evidence of discrimination, but affirming summary judgment against the plaintiff because all other evidence pointed to the nondiscriminatory nature of the hospital's decision not to sell a medical practice to plaintiff).

9. This assumes that one of the parties has opted for a jury trial, as is common. See 42 U.S.C. § 1981(a)(c) (2000).
an instruction from the judge to the jury that he wins his case (and damages) unless the agency presents sufficient evidence that it would have taken the same action even if it had no discriminatory motive.

In determining whether the remark is "direct evidence," the court will likely turn to the case law. However, it is unlikely the case law will help resolve this issue. Rather, the court will be exposed to a flurry of rules intended to describe what "direct evidence" is not. For example, it is not an "isolated" or "stray" remark, nor one that requires too much interpretation, nor one uttered by someone who is not a decision-maker. In this case, the sales agent's theory would be that his boss attributed his sales figures to his being Italian, and, because the termination was based on low sales, it follows that the firing was tied to his national origin and ethnicity. However, this interpretation would probably not convince the

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10. This instruction to the jury is called a "Price Waterhouse" instruction. See Price Waterhouse, 490 U.S. at 292 (Kennedy, J., dissenting).

11. "Sufficient" means that a preponderance of the evidence supports the defendant's "same decision" argument. Id. at 258.

12. See id. at 258.

13. Many of these bright line rules can be traced to Justice O'Connor's concurrence in Price Waterhouse.

14. The terms "isolated" and "stray" remarks are often used in tandem in judicial opinions. A "stray remark" is a term that formed the basis for an unofficial bright line test after Price Waterhouse, in which Justice O'Connor ruled out "stray remarks in the workplace" as direct evidence of discrimination. Id. at 277. Remarks are "isolated" and "stray" when they are not tied to the specific employment decision challenged by the plaintiff and instead are merely uttered during the course of the plaintiff's employment. See, e.g., Denesha v. Farmers Ins. Exch., 161 F.3d 491, 500 (8th Cir. 1998) (noting that supervisors' comments that the "younger employees were running circles around the older employees" and that the office needed to rid itself of "old heads" were not "stray remarks" but rather were direct evidence, because they were uttered "contemporaneously with events that form the basis of this litigation"); Fuka v. Thomson Consumer Elecs., 82 F.3d 1397, 1403 (7th Cir. 1996) ("Following the Supreme Court's decision in [Price Waterhouse], this circuit has held that before seemingly stray workplace remarks will qualify as direct evidence of discrimination, the plaintiff must show that the remarks 'were related to the employment decision in question.' ") (citation omitted); Beshears v. Asbill, 930 F.2d 1348, 1354 (8th Cir. 1991) (finding remarks that older people have problems adapting to changes and new policies constituted direct evidence because they were "not stray or random comments: they were made during the decisional process by individuals responsible for the very employment decisions in controversy").

15. "[O]nly the most blatant remarks, whose intent could be nothing other than to discriminate on the basis of [race] ... constitute direct evidence of discrimination." Bass v. Bd. of County Comm'rs, 256 F.3d 1095, 1105 (11th Cir. 2001) (quoting Damon v. Fleming Supermks. of Fla., Inc., 196 F.3d 1354, 1359 (11th Cir. 1999)); see also Chiaramonte v. Fashion Bed Group, Inc., 129 F.3d 391, 401 (7th Cir. 1997) ("[A] plaintiff's subjective interpretation of her employer's statements is not controlling. (citing Mills v. First Fed. Sav. & Loan Assoc., 83 F.3d 833, 841-42 (7th Cir. 1996)). ". "[I]f the subjective beliefs of plaintiffs in employment discrimination cases could, by themselves, create genuine issues of material fact, then virtually all defense motions for summary judgment in such cases would be doomed."
court that the comment was direct evidence. In the alternative, the district court might find the remark to raise an inference of discrimination (a prima facie case), which could be answered by evidence of the sales figures. Some courts will even allow a plaintiff to use such a remark to establish both an inference of discrimination and to rebut the employer’s answer, meaning the plaintiff will get a trial on his claim. Still others, after concluding that the remark is not direct evidence of discrimination, will exclude the statement because the evidence of poor sales figures will preclude the sales agent from creating even an inference of discrimination.

As this article reveals, the federal courts are in complete disagreement as to the proper treatment of oral evidence in employment discrimination cases. The Supreme Court has not provided helpful guidance in the area and may even be accused of adding to the complexity. Furthermore, the federal appeals courts and district courts have nearly as many approaches to the issue as they have cases on their docket.

This article has four purposes. The first is to determine why courts evaluate oral statements by using a rigorous, “direct evidence” standard. In order to do so, this article will trace the history of causation in discrimination cases, showing that strong evidence was originally intended to offset weak proof of causation. The article’s second purpose is to demonstrate that the term “direct evidence” causes only inconsistency and confusion among the federal courts both in defining the term and in using it as a standard by which to assess the probity of oral statements. Third, this article considers whether the indirect method of proving discrimination, articulated in McDonnell Douglas Corporation v. Green, offers a solution to the problem of how oral evidence should be evaluated. This article concludes that it does not. Finally, the article suggests a simplified

16. The Seventh Circuit allows for this approach. See, e.g., Huff v. Uarco, Inc., 122 F.3d 374, 383 (7th Cir. 1997) (citing cases in support of the proposition that statements can be used to satisfy the plaintiff’s prima facie case). See also Cordova v. State Farm Ins. Co., 124 F.3d 1145, 1149 (9th Cir. 1997) (finding that discriminatory statements satisfy plaintiff’s prima facie case).

17. See Cordova, 124 F.3d at 1150 (stating that a plaintiff who uses oral evidence to satisfy a prima facie case “necessarily [has] raised a genuine issue of material fact with respect to the legitimacy or bona fides of the employer’s articulated reason for its employment decision”) (quoting Sischo-Nownejad v. Merced Cmty. Coll. Dist., 934 F.2d 1104, 1111 (9th Cir. 1991) (emphasis in original)).

18. See Robin v. Espo Eng’g Corp., 200 F.3d 1081, 1092 (7th Cir. 2000) (holding for defendant due to uncontested accuracy of sales figures which precluded Robin’s establishment of a prima facie case of discrimination).


standard for evaluating oral evidence that focuses courts on the sufficiency of the plaintiff's evidence rather than on confusing methods of proof and burden-shifting schemes.

I. WHY COURTS USE A "DIRECT EVIDENCE" STANDARD TO EVALUATE ORAL STATEMENTS

The question of whether to require that oral evidence be "direct" and "strong" cannot be answered without understanding why courts have historically required it. From the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964\(^21\) until the Supreme Court's holding in *Price Waterhouse v. Hopkins*,\(^22\) the causation standard in employment discrimination cases was ungenerous to plaintiffs: employees had to prove that discrimination was the "but for" reason for their injury. In other words, a plaintiff was required to prove that the employer's decision would have been different had the plaintiff been a member of another race, sex, etc.\(^23\) That changed when the Supreme Court opinion in *Price Waterhouse* rejected the "but-for" causation standard in favor of a lower, "motivating factor" standard.\(^24\) Almost overnight, the plaintiff's job became easier. It was enough to prove that a protected classification was a "motivating factor" in the employer's decision.\(^25\) In order to avoid paying money damages the employer had to prove that it would have taken the same action if the plaintiff had been a member of another race, color, religion, sex or national origin.\(^26\) Because this burden was the opposite of what the plaintiff's burden used to be, courts and commentators concluded that the law had changed considerably and that the plaintiff's traditional burden of proof had shifted to the employer to prove that it did not discriminate.

For both Justice O'Connor, who wrote an important concurrence in *Price Waterhouse*,\(^27\) and the overwhelming majority of federal courts, the solution to this lower standard of causation and shifted burden was to limit its application to those cases in which the plaintiff's evidence was so strong that it justified requiring the defendant to prove a negative (that it did not discriminate because its decision would have been the same if the plaintiff had been a member of another race, color, religion or national origin).\(^28\)

\(^{22}\) 490 U.S. 228 (1989).
\(^{24}\) Id. at 276.
\(^{27}\) *Price Waterhouse*, 490 U.S. at 261.
\(^{28}\) "McDonnell Douglas and Burdine assumed that the plaintiff would bear the burden of persuasion . . . and we clearly depart from that framework today. Such a departure
For Justice O'Connor and the lower federal courts that followed her approach only "direct evidence" of discrimination could shift the burden. All other evidence would be considered circumstantial evidence of discrimination and would be decided under McDonnell Douglas, where the "but-for" burden rested with the plaintiff at all times to prove that she was an actual victim of discrimination. Courts set a particularly high threshold before evidence could be termed "direct." Some required the plaintiff to produce what amounted to a smoking gun. In other words, it had to be a near admission of liability by the defendant. After all, if the defendant had practically admitted it had violated the law, then what harm at that point could come from placing a burden on the defendant to show that its discriminatory intent actually caused no injury?

Since Price Waterhouse, federal courts have overwhelmingly maintained the distinction between direct evidence and circumstantial evidence presented under McDonnell Douglas. A plaintiff is generally entitled to a Price Waterhouse jury instruction (meaning the burden has shifted to the employer) only if his or her evidence is strong enough on its own to prove the ultimate fact; that discrimination occurred. But there have been some cracks in the bifurcated approach and calls for reform. The most important development is that a few courts and commentators requires justification..."

29. For example, the First Circuit follows Justice O'Connor's approach in Weston-Smith v. Cooley Dickinson Hospital, Inc., 282 F.3d 60, 64-65 (1st Cir. 2002) and the Seventh Circuit follows her approach in Robin v. Esco Engineering, Corp., 200 F.3d 1081, 1088 (7th Cir. 2000); "Justice O'Connor's... Price Waterhouse concurrence is controlling in this Circuit." Hill v. Lockheed Martin Logistics Mgmt., Inc., 314 F.3d 657, 665 (4th Cir. 2003).


31. See Robin, 200 F.3d at 1088 (2000) (giving "I fired you because of your age or disability" as an example of direct evidence).

32. See id.

33. The problem with these approaches is that each emphasizes the quality of the plaintiff’s evidence instead of its simple sufficiency. See infra Part IV.

34. Compare Fields v. N.Y. State Office of Mental Retardation & Dev. Disabilities, 115 F.3d 116, 121 (2d Cir. 1997) (applying the “motivating factor” standard), Harris v. Shelby County Bd. of Educ., 99 F.3d 1078, 1084-85 (11th Cir. 1996)(utilizing the “motivating factor” standard), and Quantum Chem. Corp. v. Toennies, 47 S.W.3d 473, 477-80 (Tex. 2001) (discussing conflicting views among federal courts before deciding to apply motivating factor standard to all discrimination cases), with Watson v. Southeaster Penn. Transp. Auth., 207 F.3d 207, 219 (3d. Cir. 2000) (limiting “motivating factor” standard to so-called mixed-motive cases), and Fuller v. Phipps, 67 F.3d 1137, 1143 (4th Cir. 1995)(applying the “motivating factor” standard only in mixed motive cases). See also Carey v. Mt. Desert Island Hosp., 156 F.3d 31, 39 (1st Cir. 1998) (stating it was “aware of
have suggested that the Civil Rights Act of 1991, which adopts *Price Waterhouse*’s “motivating factor” standard of causation,\(^\text{36}\) applies to all discrimination cases, whether the plaintiff’s evidence is direct or circumstantial. In fact, the statute does not use the term “direct evidence” nor explicitly confine the “motivating factor” standard to a subset of discrimination cases. The commentators argue that such uniformity would simplify employment discrimination cases. It would also mean that in all discrimination cases the ultimate burden of disproving causation would rest with the employer once the plaintiff had established one of the employer’s motives had been illegal.\(^\text{37}\) That interpretation may be a departure from traditional tort law, where the burden of causation remains with the plaintiff, and a departure from the Supreme Court’s pronouncements, notably in *Texas Department of Community Affairs v. Burdine*, that the burden of proof always remains with the plaintiff.\(^\text{38}\) However, it may be unavoidable if the Civil Rights Act of 1991 is to be given its plain meaning.

Two years after *Price Waterhouse*, Congress enacted into law a standard similar to the plurality’s opinion, with one exception concerning liability, but left out of the statute Justice O’Connor’s addition concerning strong evidence. Congress mandated that the motivating factor test should be used in Title VII cases “even if other factors also motivated” the decision."\(^\text{39}\) The “even if” language does not seem to require that other legitimate factors be present before the motivating factor standard is used.

the controversy that exists over whether the ‘a motivating factor’ language in 42 U.S.C. § 2000e-2(m) applies to all discrimination cases,” or only to cases under *Price Waterhouse*, and then declining to decide the issue).


37. The employer could disprove causation by proving that it would have taken the same action against the plaintiff even if it had not been motivated by illegal discrimination. Properly understood, it may not be correct to call this a “shifted burden,” though courts routinely do. A burden shifts before liability is established, and typically means that one party, if it carries the burden, can avoid a finding that it violated the law. This, after all, is the essence of the *McDonnell Douglas* burden-shifting scheme. But under the 1991 Act, which overruled *Price Waterhouse* on this point, liability is established at the moment the employer factored an impermissible characteristic into its decision. Since the only remaining issue in that case is what relief the plaintiff receives, the Civil Rights Act of 1991 actually describes an affirmative defense rather than a shifted burden.

38. See Tex. Dep’t of Cmty. Affairs v. Burdine, 450 U.S. 248, 253 (1981); see also *Price Waterhouse v. Hopkins*, 490 U.S. 228, 270 (1989) (O’Connor, J., concurring) (“We have indeed emphasized in the past that in an individual disparate treatment action the plaintiff bears the burden of persuasion throughout the litigation. . . . *McDonnell Douglas* and *Burdine* assumed that the plaintiff would bear the burden of persuasion [as to pretext], and we clearly depart from that framework today.”).

Rather, it appears to say that in some cases the defendant’s motive will be, at best, “mixed.”

Thus two plaintiffs, both claiming race discrimination, could confront two different causation standards. A plaintiff who proceeded along the Price Waterhouse direct evidence path would have to prove that her race was a “motivating factor” in the employer’s decision, while a plaintiff relying on McDonnell Douglas would need evidence that her race was a “determining,” or “but-for” factor in the decision. It makes little sense to say that a decision prompted by more than one reason, at least one of them illegitimate, is unlawful, but a decision prompted by only one entirely illegitimate reason may not be.

Whatever the correct answer concerning the reach of the “motivating factor” standard, the practical effect of the debate may be limited. If the motivating factor standard were to apply to all discrimination cases, rather than just cases involving direct evidence, it is unclear how that would change the way cases are tried and even decided. A case brought under McDonnell Douglas differs from a direct evidence case, where the defendant’s motives are at best “mixed.” Under McDonnell Douglas, the defendant denies any discriminatory motive whatsoever, and the jury is faced with two very different versions, only one of which can be true. The “premise of [McDonnell Douglas and Burdine] is that either a legitimate or an illegitimate set of considerations led to the challenged decision.” It is hard to imagine that a jury’s decision on liability in that case will turn on the difference between a “motivating factor” instruction and a “determinative” or “but-for” instruction. After all, there is no tricky issue of causation to sort out. After catching the employer in a lie, the jury

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40. The term “mixed motives” has come to identify a case under Price Waterhouse, where the plaintiff’s “direct evidence” of discriminatory intent means the defendant’s only strategy is to prove that he had other, more legitimate motives, one of which was the “but-for” cause of his decision.
43. The motivating factor standard cannot be construed as a “but-for” standard for this reason: if it were, a black plaintiff charging race discrimination would have to demonstrate that the employer would have made a different decision had he not been black. The employer would be entitled to his affirmative defense, which would involve proof that he would have made the same decision had the plaintiff not been black. Both of these burdens cannot not be satisfied simultaneously. Accordingly, if these respective proofs are to have any meaning, the motivating factor test must be described as something other than a “but-for” test.
44. McDonnell Douglas, 411 U.S. at 804-05.
46. See id. at 247.
47. Id. (emphasis in original).
will likely find that the intent the employer was hiding was actually what "motivated" the decision. As the employer has offered no other explanation, the jury will also likely conclude that this "motivation" caused the decision. In this case, "motivation" and causation go hand-in-hand.\(^4\)

There is a difference between the "motivating factor" and "but-for" standards only when the employer offers more than one explanation for his decision, and the jury must sort out which factor actually caused the plaintiff’s injury. The argument over causation in that case ended once Congress passed the 1991 Act, which squarely places the burden of sorting all of this out on the employer.\(^5\) The employer’s worry in cases under *McDonnell Douglas* may be that a jury might tolerate thin evidence of discrimination after interpreting the “motivating factor” standard to be a low threshold. The jury’s interpretation in that case would be incorrect of course, as the evidence must make the ultimate fact of discrimination more likely true than not, which thin evidence presumably could not do.\(^6\) A jury instruction might do the trick if it added “substantial” to “motivating factor,” or by defining “motivating factor” as a consideration that had a “substantial effect” on the employer’s decision.\(^7\) It is unlikely Congress intended all motivations to be subject to scrutiny,\(^8\) rather than only those that played a significant role, and the change would further erase any real distance between a factor that motivates and another that proves decisive.\(^9\)

49. There is even a chance, however small, that a uniform "motivating factor" standard ends up assisting defendants in these cases. Instead of just one chance at winning, they now have two chances and two bases for appeal.\(^10\)


51. Thin evidence of pretext would especially fail if the evidence was one-sided and favored the employer’s nondiscriminatory explanation for its decision. See *Reeves v. Sanderson Plumbing Prods., Inc.*, 550 U.S. 133, 148 (2000) (stating that an employer would be entitled to judgment as a matter of law “if the plaintiff created only a weak issue of fact as to whether the employer’s reason was untrue and there was abundant and uncontroverted independent evidence that no discrimination had occurred”).

52. See, e.g., *Parker v. Sony Pictures Entm’t, Inc.*, 260 F.3d 100, 108-09 (2d Cir. 2001) (upholding a jury verdict that used the term “motivating factor” but noting that the ultimate issue in disability discrimination case was “whether plaintiff’s disability made a difference” in his employer’s decision).

53. Raising the issue of Congress’s intent is done with great reluctance, not only because intentions are poor substitutes for text, but also because, even if they were useful, the 1991 statute conveys no singular intent. “Congress and the White House could not agree on a statutory meaning but could not resist passing the act anyway, while accompanying it with contradictory official explanations of what the new law meant. The federal courts would decide, by default.” Hugh Davis Graham, *The Civil Rights Act and the American Regulatory State, in Legacies of the 1964 Civil Rights Act* 43, 59 (Bernard Grofman ed., 2000).

54. There is little evidence that judges evaluate oral evidence differently based on the causation standard. Age-related comments should be subject to the “but-for” standard because the 1991 Act’s “motivating factor” standard only applies to Title VII. It would mean that comments about age would have to meet a higher threshold before becoming
If the "motivating factor" standard were applicable to all discrimination cases under Title VII, the future of the direct evidence standard would head in one of two directions. The search for such evidence might simply end, it being no longer necessary to maintain a distinction between a "mixed motive" case brought under Price Waterhouse and a single-motive case brought under McDonnell Douglas. Or it could become a quest in every case, which is more likely. After all, courts require strong evidence to compensate for the seemingly lower burden plaintiffs enjoy under the 1991 Act, which would mean the direct evidence threshold travels with the lower burden. Direct evidence under Price Waterhouse might equate to strong evidence that the employer's explanation for its decision is pretextual, or a lie, under McDonnell Douglas. So whether the 1991 Act redefines causation for all discrimination cases, or applies only to cases brought under Price Waterhouse, the standard is not going away and there is no avoiding the issue: what is direct evidence and does the standard work? It turns out that because the first question is unanswerable, the answer to the second question is no. Thirteen years after Price Waterhouse, the term "direct evidence" has become its own irony, providing no direct answer as to what direct evidence is.

II. HOW THE "DIRECT EVIDENCE" STANDARD FAILS IN PRACTICE BY CAUSING INCONSISTENCY AMONG THE FEDERAL COURTS

At the heart of the problem of interpretation is the term itself: "direct evidence." It has become a term almost too complex to define. Two
distinct approaches have emerged. The first is to define it in its strictest sense and require that it describe evidence that, standing alone, leads a trier of fact to a single conclusion—namely, that the challenged employment decision was motivated by an impermissible characteristic exhibited by the plaintiff. No inferences are allowed. In our case, the manager’s statement “Just like a Dago.” falls short of this standard because a jury would have to conclude that the firing (accomplished later that day) was related to the remark more than it was prompted by the salesperson’s slumping sales. Because more than one conclusion could be reached from this scant record, the utterance is not “direct evidence” under this standard.

A second approach is more generous for the plaintiff. It defines the term by including any evidence making it more likely than not that discriminatory animus prompted the challenged employment decision.

Consider a statement that an employee is an “old S.O.B.” and is “getting too old” for the job. The comment was uttered by Eugene Esposito, Sr., Martin Robin’s boss and owner of Espos Engineering. Two years later Robin was fired. Esposito claimed that the firing had everything to do with Robin’s diminished sales performance. Robin has divided the courts of appeals but also has created a patchwork of intra-circuit conflicts); Wright v. Southland Corp., 187 F.3d 1287, 1293-1306 (11th Cir. 1999) (engaging in a lengthy recitation of the “substantial confusion” concerning direct evidence in an opinion joined by no other panel members); Tyler v. Bethlehem Steel Corp., 958 F.2d 1176, 1183 (2d Cir. 1992) (“[T]he various circuits have about as many definitions for ‘direct evidence’ as they do employment discrimination cases.”).

60. See, e.g., Bass v. Bd. of County Comm’rs, 256 F.3d 1095, 1105 (11th Cir. 2001) (“[O]nly the most blatant remarks, whose intent could be nothing other than to discriminate ... constitute direct evidence of discrimination.” (quoting Damon v. Fleming Supermkt of Fla., Inc., 196 F.3d 1354, 1359 (11th Cir. 1999))). In Damon, the court provides an example of direct evidence by citing a management memorandum stating, “Fire Earley — he is too old.” 196 F.3d at 1359. See also Hasham v. Cal. State Bd. of Equalization, 200 F.3d 1035, 1044 (7th Cir. 2000) (giving as an example of direct evidence a supervisor’s statement, “I did not promote you because of your national origin.”).

61. See Fernandes, 199 F.3d at 582 (describing this approach as the “classic” position among the courts and listing illustrative cases).

62. This is the preponderance of the evidence standard.

63. See Gagnon v. Sprint Corp., 284 F.3d 839, 848 (8th Cir. 2002) (explaining that direct evidence is conduct or statements by an employer from which a fact finder could “infer” discriminatory intent and which was more likely than not a motivating factor in the employer’s decision); Sheehan v. Donlen Corp., 173 F.3d 1039, 1044 (7th Cir. 1999) (stating that “a remark need not explicitly refer to the plaintiff’s protected status” in order to be considered direct evidence of discrimination); Wichmann v. Bd. of Trs. of S. Ill. Univ., 180 F.3d 791, 801 (7th Cir. 1999) (illustrating that direct evidence need not be explicit, but rather can be evidence, including a metaphor, capable of being “interpreted” as an acknowledgment of discriminatory intent).

64. See Robin v. Espo Eng’g Corp., 200 F.3d 1081, 1087 (7th Cir. 2000).

65. Id. at 1087, 1089.

66. Id. at 1087.
claimed that his poor sales performance could be attributed to his illness, prompting him to sue for disability discrimination in addition to his obvious claim under the Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA).\(^{67}\) What to do with Esposito’s comments? Comments that reveal discriminatory intent usually must pass through a filter, which more often than not diminishes, if not eliminates, their probative value. Was the age-based comment uttered by a decision-maker?\(^{69}\) Was the comment made around the time of the employment decision adverse to the plaintiff?\(^{70}\) Was the comment about the plaintiff?\(^{71}\) Was the comment isolated or were there others?\(^{72}\) And, finally, does the comment establish (or at least question) the decision-maker’s intent, which, after all, is the ultimate issue in employment discrimination cases.\(^{73}\)

In Robin’s case, the remarks passed only a few of these tests. Yes, they were uttered by someone important, the owner and CEO of the

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67. Id. at 1091.
70. “To rise to the level of direct evidence discrimination . . . isolated comments must be contemporaneous with the [adverse action] or causally related to the [applicable] decision-making process.” Markel v. Bd. of Regents of the Univ. of Wis. System, 276 F.3d 906, 910 (7th Cir. 2000) (quoting Conley v. Village of Bedford Park, 215 F.3d 703, 711 (7th Cir. 2000)). See also Dennesha v. Farmers Ins. Exch., 161 F.3d 491, 500 (8th Cir. 1998) (interpreting supervisors’ comments that the “younger employees were running circles around the older employees” and that the office needed to rid itself of “old heads” as direct evidence, because the remarks were uttered “contemporaneously with” the events that formed the basis of that litigation).
71. See Stone v. Autoliv ASP, Inc. 210 F.3d 1132, 1140 (10th Cir. 2000) (“Age related comments referring directly to the plaintiff can support an inference of age discrimination.”); see also Rivers-Frison v. Southeast Missouri Com. Treatment Ctr., 133 F.3d 616, 619 (8th Cir. 1998) (“Direct evidence of employment discrimination must have some connection to the [plaintiff’s] employment relationship.”).
72. Price Waterhouse, 490 U.S. at 277 (O’Connor, J., concurring) (stating that “stray remarks” don’t constitute “direct evidence”); see also Stone v. Autoliv ASP, Inc., 210 F.3d at 1141 (“The Tenth Circuit has established that a single age-related comment, even if made by a decision-maker, may not be sufficient to infer discriminatory intent.”).
73. See supra, note 3; see also Sheehan v. Donlen Corp., 173 F.3d 1039, 1044 (7th Cir. 1999)(determining that decision-maker’s comments “related to his motivation for the decision” to fire plaintiff). Motive matters in all intentional discrimination cases, including harassment cases. See, e.g., Ocheltree v. Scollon Productions, Inc., 308 F.3d 351, 358-63 (4th Cir. 2002)(concluding that harassment was not prompted by plaintiff’s sex); Johnson v. Hondo, Inc., 125 F.3d 408, 411-13 (7th Cir. 1997)(determining that plaintiff in same-sex harassment case failed to prove abuse was gender-based).
company, and certainly someone responsible for Robin's discharge.\textsuperscript{74} Yes, the comment was about Robin. But according to the company, the comments were uttered two years before Robin's declining sales performance forced him out.\textsuperscript{75} The remarks were not combined with other comments and instead popped out as "random office banter,"\textsuperscript{76} and, in the abstract, were "hardly offensive" to the court.\textsuperscript{77}

Though the court did not elaborate, it is likely the comments were "hardly offensive" because Robin was getting older, which is perhaps why we tolerate the remark more than a statement about a black employee described as "too black." Though, here, the treading is dangerous. The ADEA proscribes employment decisions tainted by age animus just as clearly as Title VII does with respect to race, and it was unnecessary for Esposito to mention Robin's age if all he needed to accomplish was a criticism of Robin's production or even Robin's personality (the "S.O.B." part of the equation). In what could be considered a double standard, courts are reluctant to turn what amounts to socially acceptable banter about the aged into direct evidence of discrimination.\textsuperscript{78}

Substituting "black" for "old" may illustrate the point. Say Esposito referred to Robin as a "black S.O.B." or "too black." Then what result? It is hard to imagine that the court would be as dismissive of his case. Something very close to that occurred in \textit{Hunt v. City of Markham}\textsuperscript{79} where the district court relied on the "stray remarks" doctrine to dismiss a case brought by four white police officers who were denied raises and who later quit under intolerable conditions.\textsuperscript{80} For years prior to the lawsuit, the mayor of the city made several racist and ageist comments, such as that the city "needed to get rid of all the old white police officers" and, directly to one of the plaintiffs, "When are you going to quit so we can bring these

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{74} \textit{Robin}, 200 F.3d at 1086.
\item \textsuperscript{75} Id. at 1089.
\item \textsuperscript{76} Id. (citing Hoffman v. MCA, Inc., 144 F.3d 1117, 1122 (7th Cir. 1998) (stating that "conversational jabs in a social setting" do not constitute evidence of intent to fire for an impermissible reason)).
\item \textsuperscript{77} \textit{Robin}, 200 F.3d at 1089. It seems reasonable to conclude, as the court did, that these failings meant Robin had no "direct" evidence of discrimination. But what plaintiff could have direct evidence under the court's "I fired you because of your age or disability" understanding of the term? \textit{Id.} at 1088.
\item \textsuperscript{78} At least one court concluded that the double standard was justified. "[S]tatements about age, unlike statements about race or gender, do not rest on a we/they dichotomy and therefore do not create the same inference of animus. Barring unfortunate events, everyone will enter the protected age group at some point in their lives." \textit{Dockins v. Benchmark Communications}, 176 F.3d 745, 749 (4th Cir. 1999) (dismissing the comment, "[w]ith your health and your age, you need to pick up the slack..." as stating a "fact of life"). The dissent in \textit{Dockins} argued that the comments in the case were not simply truisms about age, but explicitly concerned the plaintiff's age. \textit{Dockins}, 176 F.3d at 752 n.7.
\item \textsuperscript{79} 219 F.3d 649 (7th Cir. 2000).
\item \textsuperscript{80} Id. at 652.
\end{itemize}
young black men up?" The district court found the comments rather muted on two grounds: they were uttered by the mayor, not the city council, the true decision-maker in the case, and the city’s finances were in dire shape. The appellate court reversed after finding the district court “overread” the stray remarks doctrine. True, said the court, not all remarks of a derogatory nature are “evidence of actionable discrimination,” but some are even when they are not uttered by decision-makers themselves. The mayor was not far removed from the council’s decisions with respect to the officers, and certainly close enough to influence it by his own bigotry. “Emanating from a source that influenced the personnel action (or nonaction) of which the plaintiffs complain, the derogatory comments became evidence of discrimination.” But if the mayor only wanted to bring young men up, rather than “young black men,” would the result have been the same or would the court have chalked the comments up to a truism about how resignations at the top of an organization create room for promotions at the bottom?

Despite the rigorous “but-for” causation standard, courts do find that some age-based comments provide sufficient evidence. In Wichmann v. Board of Trustees, the court of appeals reviewed a jury verdict in favor of a former employee in an age discrimination case and concluded that the plaintiff’s most “striking piece of evidence” was his supervisor’s comment, addressed to others, about why the plaintiff had been fired. “Think of it like this. In a forest you have to cut down the old, big trees so the little trees underneath can grow.” The employer argued that the remark was simply meant to reassure troubled employees about the changes at the school while Wichmann contended it was a thinly veiled metaphor that meant he was fired because of his age. The court of appeals conceded that either interpretation would have been reasonable.

81. Id.
82. Id.
83. Id.
84. Id.
85. Id. at 653.
86. Id.
87. See, e.g., Dockins v. Benchmark Communications, 176 F.3d 745, 749 (4th Cir. 1999) (rejecting comment about health and age as evidence of discrimination because “[s]tating a fact of life does not make one an age bigot”); see also, Hoffman v. MCA, Inc., 144 F.3d 1117, 1122 (7th Cir. 1998) (dismissing comment “you’re getting old,” uttered to plaintiff, as a “truism” because the plaintiff “was indeed aging”).
88. 180 F.3d 791 (7th Cir. 1999), vacated on other grounds, 528 U.S. 1111 (2000).
89. See Wichmann, 180 F.3d at 800.
90. See id. at 801.
91. Id.
92. Id.
93. See id. (noting that Wichmann’s supervisor “did not expressly say, ‘Wichmann was
meaning the jury was free to choose between them, which it did in Wichmann's favor. But if Wichmann got to present his case to a jury and won largely on the basis of a metaphor, then why did Robin's case fail soon after it started? Because the courts did not define "direct" evidence in the same way. For the Robin court, direct evidence was as close to an admission of guilt as possible, while in Wichmann, direct evidence was evidence that could be "interpreted" as an acknowledgement of discriminatory intent. According to the court of appeals in Wichmann, even isolated remarks which others would see as falling squarely within the "stray remarks" doctrine could constitute direct evidence so long as they were connected to the challenged employment decision and close in time to it.

Another factor may explain the difference between Wichmann and Robin. Review in Wichmann came after the jury had returned a verdict in the plaintiff's favor. Once a trial is complete and the plaintiff has prevailed, federal courts undergo a transformation and begin crediting the very utterances they so often discount at the summary judgment stage. Either they are result-oriented before the trial begins or they are simply applying the wrong standard. Whether the plaintiff is at trial or defending against a dispositive motion beforehand, the same sufficiency of the evidence standard should be used. The transformation is nicely illustrated in Sheehan v. Dolan Corporation, in which the plaintiff became pregnant three times while working for a family-owned business. According to the company, it fired her because she was an impossibly rude employee. This version was contradicted by the comment Sheehan's boss told her at

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4. Id. at 796.
5. See Robin, 200 F.3d at 1088 (stating that direct evidence "tak[es] the form of, "I fired you because of your age or disability").
6. See Wichmann, 180 F.3d 791, 801 (7th Cir. 1999) ("Language may be all the more unmistakable and vivid for being metaphorical, figurative, or nonliteral.").
7. See id. at 802.
8. Id. at 796.
9. See Anderson v. Liberty Lobby, Inc., 477 U.S. 242, 251-52 (1986) (noting that the "genuine issue" summary judgment standard is "very close" to the "reasonable jury" directed verdict standard and presents the same issue; "whether the evidence presents a sufficient disagreement to require submission to a jury or whether it is so one-sided that one party must prevail as a matter of law"); see also Reeves v. Sanderson Plumbing Prods., Inc., 530 U.S. 133 (2000)(finding that the record contained sufficient evidence to sustain the jury's verdict); and Mayer v. Gary Partners & Co., 29 F.3d 330, 334 (7th Cir. 1994) ("[U]nder Anderson and Celotex [Corp. v. Catrett, 477 U.S. 242, 249-51 (1986)] the pre-trial, mid-trial, and post-trial standards are supposed to be identical!").
10. 173 F.3d 1039 (7th Cir. 1999).
11. See id. at 1042.
12. Id. at 1044.
the time of her firing: "Hopefully this will give you some time to spend at home with your children." The jury found that remark combined with other evidence indicative of pregnancy discrimination, and the appeals court was not inclined to disagree. It noted that the jury was faced with two "radically different stories" concerning Sheehan’s employment and what led to her discharge. In the end, the jury was free to credit Sheehan’s version and conclude that her boss’s comment “reflected unlawful motivations because it invoked widely understood stereotypes the meaning of which is hard to mistake.”

If the implication in the Sheehan comment is that a woman’s place is at home because of her sex, is it so unlike a statement that implies an older worker belongs in the same place because of her age? Consider what was said to Roberta Baker, age 60, after she was informed that she was not selected as the new store manager of a Speedway Superamerica gas station and food pantry. Speedway razed the store Baker formerly managed. The company then built a new, much larger store in its place. Instead of giving the new managerial job to Baker, the company chose a woman 21 years younger than Baker for the position. Speedway claimed the decision was based on the employee’s merits. Baker’s bosses, Neil Blanos and Dave Wallace, communicated the company’s decision to Baker at the same time it asked her about her age and her plans to retire. The district court summarized the conversation:

[A]fter Blanos told [Baker] that he did not think she was capable of managing the new store, she began to cry. In response, Blanos said, “Well, I thought you were going to retire. You had asked about retiring.” In addition, Wallace said, “Aren’t you about 58?” Baker replied that she was 60. Blanos then said, “But you talked about retiring. Are you sure you don’t want to retire?”

The conversation would be far easier to interpret if Blanos and Wallace had included a normative statement about Baker’s age along the lines of her being “too” old for the new position; as such, the job of interpretation here is more difficult. Either Blanos and Wallace were

103. Id. at 1043.
104. See id. at 1046-47.
105. See Sheehan v. Donlen Corp., 173 F.3d 1039, 1044 (7th Cir. 1999).
106. Id. at 1045.
109. See id.
111. See Baker, 2000 WL 33280123, at *3 (district court decision).
112. See id. at *8.
genuinely trying to soften the blow levied by their decision by discussing Baker’s retirement, or they revealed what prompted their decision by confirming her age. Having two decision-makers in the conversation does not clarify matters. Wallace, as Baker’s direct supervisor, was the chief decision-maker in this case. Thus, the fact that Wallace asked the question regarding Baker’s age is arguably significant. But perhaps Wallace’s comment was taken out of context and he was simply responding to Blanos’ comment about retirement, making his question less awkward and even directly relevant to Speedway’s retirement policies. Is there sufficient evidence to send the case to the jury? Not under Robin’s smoking gun approach to direct evidence. But the case appears to be much closer under Sheehan, where implications can support jury verdicts, or under Wichmann, where a metaphor uttered to someone other than the plaintiff gets the job done.

At the very least, Baker may have what Sheehan had: evidence that a stereotype tainted an employment decision. Evidence of stereotypes lowers the bar considerably in these cases, but it is consistent with the message laid out in Price Waterhouse that discrimination in sex-based cases is often rooted in assumptions about sex roles, whereas in other cases, such as race-based ones, it is more likely rooted in animus. In cases that deal with older workers discrimination is often rooted in a combination of assumptions about age as well as in animus. Calling Robin an “old

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113. Id. at *2.
114. See Robin v. Espo Eng’g Corp., 200 F.3d 1081, 1088 (7th Cir. 2000).
116. See id. at 1044 (conceding that decision-maker “did not actually state in so many words” that plaintiff’s pregnancy prompted her firing).
118. See id. at 801. Baker’s attorneys did not play up Baker’s conversation with Blanos and Wallace. In fact, they abandoned the “direct evidence” argument on appeal. See Brief and Required Short Appendix of Plaintiff-Appellant Roberta M. Baker at 22 n.10, Baker (No. 00-4134). The attorneys may have over extended cases holding that retirement-related questions generally do not imply age discrimination unless they rise to the level of coercion. See, e.g., Pitasi v. Gartner Group, Inc., 184 F.3d 709, 715 (7th Cir. 1999) (“Mr. Pitasi does not claim that the company made repeated references to urge him into retirement; we have noted that such reiterated comments may be considered by a jury to infer discrimination because they ‘may reflect the employer’s intention to rid itself of older workers by subtly pressuring them into retiring.’” (quoting Kaniff v. Allstate Ins. Co., 121 F.3d 258, 263 (7th Cir. 1997))). In Baker’s case, the retirement question is combined with an adverse job action (not hiring Baker as the new store manager) and a direct inquiry concerning the employee’s age. See Baker v. Speedway Superamerica LLC, No. IP 99-0282-C-M/S, 2000 WL 33280123, at *8 (S.D. Ind. Oct. 24, 2000).
119. See Price Waterhouse v. Hopkins, 490 U.S. 228, 250-51 (1989) (objecting to the placement by Price Waterhouse of “sex stereotyping” in quotation marks throughout its brief and rejecting “an insinuation either that such stereotyping was not present in this case or that it lacks legal relevance”).
S.O.B. displays animus (it was likely not an attempt at humor); calling
an employee "senile" displays a similarly unsophisticated bias. More
ambiguous are those comments which are simply descriptive (such as
"You're getting old." uttered in social banter) and courts are generally
correct to dismiss these as, at worst, truisms about many employees.
Perhaps that is what makes age-related comments so difficult to interpret;
the remark "You're getting black." preceding a firing would be nonsensical
and therefore would probably never be uttered. If the comment was uttered
meaning "You're acting black." and it was intended in a derogatory sense,
it might be strong evidence of animus, though perhaps not "direct
evidence." If coupled with the right kinds of other evidence, it could well
lead a jury to conclude that race motivated the firing in question. A similar
comment about age, such as "You're getting old." is true of all of us,
especially judges, a fact which cleanses the comment of illicitness or at the
very least successfully camouflages any animus.

It is always a bad sign when the law in a case is more complicated
than the facts. The "direct evidence" category fails for the same reason that
a statute might be pronounced unconstitutional; it is vague. When a vague
standard is passed out to hundreds of federal court judges, the results are
exactly what one might expect: inconsistency and confusion. Age-based
workplace comments should be evaluated under a single criterion: could a
fact-finder reasonably conclude from the comments that the challenged
employment decision turned on the plaintiff's age? Or, put another way,
do the comments raise enough doubt about why the plaintiff was fired, or
demoted, or not hired? The problem may well come from the fact that

120. See Robin v. Espo Eng'g Corp, 200 F.3d 1081, 1089 (7th Cir. 2000).
121. See Samarzia v. Clark County, 859 F.2d 88, 91 (9th Cir. 1988).
122. See Hoffman v. MCA, Inc., 144 F.3d 1117, 1122 (7th Cir. 1998).
123. Comments that are relative in nature ("You're too black," or "You're too old")
should come much closer to putting the ultimate question of discrimination into play. The
first comment considers whether the employee is the right race for the job. No job would
satisfy that test, for race can never be used as a bona fide occupational qualification. See 42
necessary to the normal operations of [a] particular business or enterprise"). The second
comment contemplates whether the employee is the right age for the job. Here, the context
would matter greatly. Too old for what? For travel? For lifting heavy weights? For flying
a plane? Or for simply performing a task that under similar conditions could be performed
equally well at different ages? See, e.g., Robin v. Espo Eng'g Corp., 200 F.3d 1081, 1091
(7th Cir. 2000) (noting the possibility that the plaintiff's sales, which prompted his
discharge, could have been affected by his chemotherapy).

124. These results should come as no surprise, as they were forecasted by the dissent in
Price Waterhouse. Price Waterhouse, 490 U.S. at 291 (Kennedy, J., dissenting) ("Lower
courts long have had difficulty applying McDonnell Douglas and Burdine. Addition of a
second burden-shifting mechanism, the application of which itself depends on assessment of
credibility and a determination whether evidence is sufficiently direct and substantial, is not
likely to lend clarity to the process.").
Price Waterhouse never defined "direct evidence,"125 and the appellate courts can hardly agree on a standard definition for the term.126 This is what it is not: evidence that amounts to an admission of guilt. In other words, it is not evidence that would render a trial on the matter utterly silly. In the extreme, it is a supervisor referring to a plaintiff as "senile" and encircling "retire now" in a smoking-gun memorandum describing retirement benefits.127 Or it is a corporate officer who explains why a woman was not promoted to route manager by telling her that management "wanted men in these positions."128 But it can be less than that and still lead the jury (or judge) to conclude that sex motivated the decision at issue. Comments that an employee is "getting too old,"129 when uttered in connection with a decision adverse to the plaintiff, may be sufficient evidence of a discriminatory motive not because they rule out the need for interpretation (too old for what?) but because they may, without the need for additional evidence, directly lead the fact-finder to a single conclusion.

Under this approach, courts would not ask whether the evidence was so strong and damaging to the defendant that it should be called "direct." Evidence that merely convinces, rather than commands, a particular result is sufficient to support a verdict and to survive summary judgment. Of course, oral evidence might fall short of this standard yet still constitute the bulk of the plaintiff's case.130 What to do in that instance is a further source of disagreement among the courts.

III. EXAMINING ORAL EVIDENCE UNDER THE *MCDONNELL DOUGLAS* SCHEME

What happens to evidence that cannot be labeled "direct" because of its context? For example, some oral statements reflect a discriminatory animus but are not uttered by the decision maker, or are uttered by the decision-maker but are not contemporaneous with the challenged decision. Other statements are uttered in regard to the plaintiff but also are clouded

125. Justice O'Connor comes closest in her concurrence, but defines the term by illustrating what direct evidence is not. Price Waterhouse, 490 U.S. at 277 (O'Connor, J., concurring) (ruling out "stray remarks in the workplace," "statements by nondecisionmakers," and "statements by decisionmakers unrelated to the decisional process itself").
126. See infra Part III.
127. See Samarzia v. Clark County, 859 F.2d 88, 91 (9th Cir. 1989).
128. See Emmel v. Coca-Cola Bottling Co. of Chi., 95 F.3d 627, 632 (7th Cir. 1996).
129. See Robin v. Espo Eng'g Corp., 200 F.3d 1081, 1089 (7th Cir. 2000).
130. Actually, this observation is hardly self-evident, as courts routinely categorize evidence as either direct or indirect, with the former falling under Price Waterhouse and the latter governed by McDonnell Douglas.
by just enough ambiguity to fall out of the "direct evidence" category.\footnote{131} Courts will likely subject these remarks to what has become known as the \textit{McDonnell Douglas} method,\footnote{132} whereby a plaintiff with little to no evidence proves discrimination by catching her employer in a lie.\footnote{133} Under \textit{McDonnell Douglas}, a plaintiff must prove his case is triable in three stages.\footnote{134} The first stage, the prima facie case, is flexible and adjusts to the plaintiff's particular claim.\footnote{135} \textit{McDonnell Douglas} involved a claim of race discrimination.\footnote{136} In a case where the plaintiff alleges age discrimination, as in \textit{Robin},\footnote{137} he must establish that he: (1) is at least 40 years old; (2) was meeting his employer's legitimate job expectations; (3) suffered an adverse employment action, such as being fired, not promoted, or not hired; and (4) was treated differently than significantly younger employees or can point to other evidence that the employer found his age to be significant.\footnote{138} If he can pass these four tests, then the burden shifts to the employer to justify his or her decision on any nondiscriminatory ground.\footnote{139} If done, the ball shifts a final time back to the plaintiff, who must demonstrate to the satisfaction of the court that the employer's explanation is a pretext or a lie.\footnote{140}

Consider a woman who is not promoted to the ranks of manager in a male-dominated profession. Some time before the decision is made to deny her the promotion, a manager with partial influence over the decision says casually to one of the employees, "The problem with this job is that it's simply not cut out for both sexes—it may not be politically correct to say it, but it's the truth." As courts typically define the term, the statement is not "direct evidence" because it is unclear how much influence this manager had over the challenged decision, whether the comment relates to the job denied the plaintiff, and even what the manager had in mind when he made the comment. We can guess which sex the manager is talking about when he rules out one for a job, but it is an inference, and one that a jury would have to make. Perhaps the woman in question had a terrible

\begin{itemize}
  \item \footnote{132} See \textit{McDonnell Douglas Corp. v. Green}, 411 U.S. 792, 802-05 (1973).
  \item \footnote{133} Proof that the employer's reasons were in fact a "cover-up" for discrimination will suffice. See \textit{id.} at 805.
  \item \footnote{134} See \textit{id.} at 802-05.
  \item \footnote{135} See \textit{id.} at 802 n.13; see also \textit{Int'l Bros. Teamsters v. U.S.}, 431 U.S. 324, 358 (1977) (rejecting the idea that the prima facie case was "an inflexible formulation").
  \item \footnote{136} See \textit{McDonnell Douglas}, 411 U.S. at 801.
  \item \footnote{137} See \textit{Robin v. Espo Eng'g Corp.}, 200 F. 3d 1081, 1087 (7th Cir. 2000).
  \item \footnote{138} This recitation of the prima facie case varies almost on a case-by-case basis, but reflects the most common elements. For a discussion of the elements, in particular the fourth, see \textit{Hartley v. Wis. Bell, Inc.}, 124 F.3d 887, 890-93 (7th Cir. 1997).
  \item \footnote{139} See \textit{McDonnell Douglas}, 411 U.S. at 802.
  \item \footnote{140} \textit{id.} at 804-05.
\end{itemize}
tardiness problem that is well documented in the company’s record.

One approach is to consider the manager’s comment at the pretext stage, meaning that the remark is evaluated only if the employee establishes a prima facie case of discrimination. Because her tardiness is well documented, the employer will undoubtedly argue she was not meeting her employer’s legitimate job expectations. She therefore cannot establish a prima facie case. Robin lost his case on exactly those grounds, thus his oral evidence of discrimination was never revisited by the court. 141

The employer’s argument might work depending on where this case is tried. The Seventh Circuit may well demand that the employee first establish a prima facie case. 142 The Sixth 143 and Eleventh 144 Circuits would not accept the employer’s explanation concerning tardiness. These circuits have adopted a rule that the employer’s explanation, offered in step two of the McDonnell Douglas paradigm, 145 cannot be advanced by using it to rebut the plaintiff’s initial showing in step one. 146

The approach favored by the Sixth and Eleventh Circuits solves one problem at the same time that it creates another. The problem solved: the two circuits avoid an all-or-nothing approach with respect to oral evidence. Evidence is revisited at the pretext stage even if the court concludes that it falls short of direct evidence. It hardly follows that age-based comments are irrelevant simply because they do not directly prove a case. Image that the evidence of a poor work record is there, but barely so; after all, “thin evidence” cases can appear on both sides. The employee has not established pretext, but on balance, perhaps comments such as “too old” and “near dead” are stronger evidence of discrimination than anything the employer can put forward to show the employee was legitimately fired. A jury might reasonably question not the accuracy of the employer’s records

141. Robin v. Espo Eng. Corp., 200 F.3d 1081, 1092 (7th Cir. 2000) (“Robin was not meeting his employer’s bona fide expectations at the time of his discharge. For us to consider Robin’s evidence of pretext, he has to establish a prima facie case of discrimination, which he has failed to do.”).


143. See Cline v. Catholic Diocese of Toledo, 206 F.3d 651, 660-61 (6th Cir. 2000) (“[W]hen assessing whether a plaintiff has met her employer’s legitimate expectations at the prima facie stage of a termination case, a court must examine plaintiff’s evidence independent of the nondiscriminatory reason ‘produced’ by the defense as its reason for terminating plaintiff.”).

144. See Damon v. Fleming Supermrkts of Fla., Inc., 196 F.3d 1354, 1360 (11th Cir. 1999) (noting that the circuit’s caselaw “clearly instructs that plaintiffs, who have been discharged from a previously held position, do need to satisfy the McDonnell Douglas prong ‘requiring proof of qualification.’”) (citation omitted).

145. See McDonnell Douglas Corp. v. Green, 411 U.S. 792, 802 (1973). (noting that a prima facie case of discrimination can be established by showing that the plaintiff “applied and was qualified for the job which the employer was seeking applicants”).

146. Step one refers to the plaintiff’s prima facie case. See id. at 802.
about the plaintiff's work record but whether that record actually prompted the decision. Therefore, revisiting the remarks makes sense even if there is other evidence that the employee's job performance was unsatisfactory.

The problem created: skipping the step in the prima facie case concerning job performance amounts to a judicial presumption that the plaintiff's work history qualifies him for the job. The record evidence may not support that presumption. *McDonnell Douglas* is tailored for a plaintiff to prove his case with little to no affirmative evidence. But that should not mean ignoring other evidence that would convincingly negate his case.

Perhaps in response to this problem, the answer for some courts is a third approach: to effectively merge the "direct evidence" and the *McDonnell Douglas* constructs. Under this alternative, an utterance by a manager that falls short of direct evidence would satisfy the plaintiff's prima facie case. The employer would then have to answer with a nondiscriminatory reason for its decision. It is understandable, though ultimately not helpful, that courts would attempt this compromise. Despite the lower courts' recitation of the *McDonnell Douglas* scheme as almost always beginning with a multi-faceted prima facie case, the Supreme Court has consistently held that it is not to be applied in such a rote fashion in all cases, and that any evidence sufficient to create an inference of discrimination can satisfy the prima facie aspect of the indirect evidence case.

But the solution merely delays the awkwardness just around the corner. Are the comments to be used a second time to establish pretext,

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147. Price Waterhouse v. Hopkins, 490 U.S. 228, 271 (1989) (O'Connor, J., concurring) ("As should be apparent, the entire purpose of the *McDonnell Douglas* prima facie case is to compensate for the fact that direct evidence of intentional discrimination is hard to come by.").

148. If a plaintiff offers no affirmative evidence of discrimination and relies solely on proving his case under *McDonnell Douglas*, then insisting that he satisfy the prima facie case is an important exercise. *See infra* Part IV. It weeds out frivolous cases from the meritorious ones. The problem occurs when a court implies that a plaintiff without a case under *McDonnell Douglas* must have an admission of guilt from his employer in order to state a case. This is wrong. Circumstantial evidence may convince a jury that, an employee's work record notwithstanding, discrimination better explains the employer's decision towards him. *See Troupe v. May Dept. Stores Co.*, 20 F.3d 734, 737 (7th Cir. 1994) (holding that an employee without evidence of pretext and without direct evidence could still avoid summary judgment with "evidence from which a rational trier of fact could reasonably infer" discrimination); *see also* Coco v. Elmwood Care, Inc., 128 F.3d 1177, 1180 (7th Cir. 1997) (noting that an employee not meeting his employer's legitimate expectations but with affirmative evidence of discrimination would have a triable case, "[f]or it is not a defense . . . that the plaintiff should have been fired") (emphasis in original).

149. *See, e.g.*, Teamsters v. U.S., 431 U.S. 324, 358 (1977) (rejecting the idea that the prima facie case was "an inflexible formulation").
and, if so, what is gained by all of this burden shifting?\textsuperscript{150} Moreover, oral utterances often constitute a weak attempt at proving pretext, which can only be established when the employer's explanation for its decision is sufficiently called into doubt. While age-related utterances provide a context to the incredulity, more often than not they would constitute shooting at the wrong target. An utterance about being "too old," for example, is not very responsive to the employer's citation of an employee's work record, or the need for it to reduce its workforce, and so on. Once the plaintiff has opted for the \textit{McDonnell Douglas} method, his or her proper focus is to contradict the defendant's stated reason for the decision.\textsuperscript{151} At that point, an assortment of oral statements on the employer's part may seem like a non sequitur.

The \textit{McDonnell Douglas} scheme is not the solution to the problem of dealing with utterances that fall short of the "direct evidence" threshold. Perhaps there is a way to jerry-rig or contort the scheme so that such oral evidence finds its proper place, but if feasible, the approach has yet to be suggested. That should not be a surprise. \textit{McDonnell Douglas} is a scheme for cases where the plaintiff does not have significant affirmative evidence, direct or otherwise, of discrimination.\textsuperscript{152} In a sense, it is a last resort format for a plaintiff.\textsuperscript{153} Though she lacks evidence, she can raise sufficient suspicion concerning her employer's motives to warrant a trial on her claim. For example, she falls under a protected class, was performing her job well enough, was treated differently than others by virtue of her termination, and the employer's explanation for its decision is not supported by the record.\textsuperscript{154} In other words, her most important "evidence"

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{150} See Cordova v. State Farm Ins. Co., 124 F.3d 1145, 1150 (9th Cir. 1997) (holding that if derogatory statements constitute a prima facie case, they "necessarily" provide sufficient evidence of pretext to warrant a trial). Cardova's case was actually built on after-acquired evidence. One of the most derogatory comments cited by her was uttered \textit{after} the company turned her down for a job. In addition, the comment was not uttered about her. \textit{Id.} at 1149.
  \item \textsuperscript{151} See Reeves v. Sanderson Plumbing Prods., Inc., 530 U.S. 133, 148 (2000) (discussing the possibility that "weak" evidence of pretext may not suffice to carry the plaintiff's burden).
  \item \textsuperscript{152} \textit{Id.} at 147 (noting that under these circumstances the plaintiff's job is to eliminate the possible lawful reasons for the employer's decision so that "discrimination may well be the most likely alternative explanation"); see also Furnco Constr. Corp. v. Waters, 438 U.S. 567, 577 (1978) ("[W]hen all legitimate reasons for rejecting an applicant have been eliminated as possible reasons for the employer's actions, it is more likely than not the employer, who we generally assume acts with some reason, based his decision on an impermissible consideration . . . .").
  \item \textsuperscript{154} Proof of different treatment is especially probative. See McDonnell Douglas Corp. v. Green, 411 U.S. 792, 804 (1973) (explaining that in a race discrimination case brought by a fired black employee who engaged in an unlawful "stall-in," it is "[e]specially relevant to
is a record that casts doubt on her employer’s version of events.

Why not position these cases so that the evidence rather than the method of proof determines the outcome? This is not the result in many cases. When a court reviews a jury verdict, the plaintiff’s method of proof becomes irrelevant and the evidence is all that matters. Not surprisingly, it is in these cases that evidence often found incomplete at the summary judgment stage is usually found to support the jury’s verdict after-the-fact. There is no getting around the inconsistency. A plaintiff who wins at trial is not entitled to a more generous reading of the evidence than another plaintiff at the pre-trial stage. The standard for reviewing jury verdicts is the same as the standard applied in deciding a dispositive motion: whether a reasonable trier of fact could find sufficient evidence of discrimination based on the record to support a verdict for the plaintiff. If the standards are the same, the results should not be so divergent.

IV. HOW THE SUFFICIENCY-OF-THE-EVIDENCE STANDARD UNIFIES DISCRIMINATION CASES

The problem posed by oral utterances is that they regularly fall short of what courts consider to be “direct evidence,” and, at the same time, they provide an awkward fit within the McDonnell Douglas scheme. Consider again the remarks uttered about Robin, that he was an “old S.O.B.” and was “getting too old.” On the basis of these remarks, the court rejected the oral evidence because it was not “direct” enough. But requiring evidence to be “direct,” which many courts define as evidence that needs no inferences, obligates the plaintiff to produce more evidence than is necessary to meet her burden. Juries exist in order to reach conclusions about the data presented to them, and to do so without the ability to draw inferences would mean they could find discrimination occurred only if the evidence was so one-sided that any other result would amount to jury negation. Of course, data which requires too many inferences does not [show pretext that] would be evidence that white employees involved in acts against petitioner of comparable seriousness to the ‘stall-in’ were nevertheless retained or rehired”.

155. Reeves v. Sanderson Plumbing Prods., Inc., 530 U.S. 133, 153 (2000) (“The ultimate question in every employment discrimination case involving a claim of disparate treatment is whether the plaintiff was the victim of intentional discrimination.”).

156. See Anderson v. Liberty Lobby, Inc., 477 U.S. 242, 250 (1986) (agreeing that the summary judgment standard “mirrors the standard for a directed verdict under Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 50(a)’’); see also Mayer v. Gary Partners & Co., 29 F.3d 330, 335 (7th Cir. 1994) (adopting in diversity cases, the “federal reasonable-person standard across the board: pre-trial, mid-trial, post-trial, and on appeal, for evaluating both the merits and the quantum of relief”).

157. Robin v. Espo Eng’g Corp., 200 F.3d 1081, 1089 (7th Cir. 2000).

158. See id. at 1089 (characterizing the remarks as “random office banter” and “hardly offensive”).
belong in front of a jury in the first place. However, that is an accurate statement about evidence in all cases, not an indication that discrimination cases are special and the jury’s task particularly complex.

The “stray remarks” doctrine does highlight a source of concern about oral evidence. Insensitive workplace utterances are probably common, which means either workplace discrimination is rampant or the remarks are capable of being over read. However, the solution is not an accumulation of bright-line rules, which often prevent the remarks from being adequately assessed. (For example, were the remarks uttered by the decision-maker? Was the comment about the plaintiff? Was the remark isolated or were there others?) These questions may provide helpful background information, but they often miss the broader point: that evidence can fail a narrow test and still be sufficiently convincing. The only question in a discrimination case is whether sufficient evidence exists to support a jury verdict. That standard translates into two simple inquiries: (1) Does the evidence reflect a discriminatory intent? and (2) Can it reasonably be related to the challenged employment decision? Robin’s oral evidence, an utterance that he was “getting too old,” would fail under this standard because even if it displayed a discriminatory intent, there was little evidence that it, rather than his low sales, prompted his firing. What if Esposito, Robin’s employer, attributed Robin’s lower sales to his age? Same answer, so long as that merely describes Esposito’s theory of Robin’s declining sales and not the motivation behind Esposito’s decision. What a plaintiff in Robin’s case needs is evidence that a younger salesperson with similar sales figures would have been treated better.

A sufficiency standard would eliminate what can only be described as an inconsistency in the methods courts use to evaluate evidence. Consider the statement by a contractor, “I don’t need minorities, and I don’t need no [sic] residents on this job,” uttered in Fernandes v. Costa Bros. Masonry, 159. See supra Part II.

160. Id. at 1089.

161. In Robin’s case, the lower sales may just as easily have been attributed to his cancer. See Robin, 200 F.3d at 1091.

162. Robin may have overlooked that evidence. Shortly before he was fired, Robin ranked fifth out of seven salespersons in sales volume. The only salespersons he outperformed were two junior account executives with only one year of experience. See Robin, 200 F.3d at 1087. Though the court does not list their ages, it is safe to conclude they were younger than Robin, who was over 60 when fired. Id. at 1086. But their lack of experience makes them an imperfect comparison group for Robin on his age claim. Robin’s disability claim was probably his better case. He could have argued that the company accommodated low sales under other circumstances (breaking in new junior agents), making the reason for his low sales (recovery from colon cancer) no less deserving of accommodation. But the court determined that Robin abandoned his disability claim by failing to request any accommodation from Espo. Id. at 1092.
A federal court of appeals rejected this comment and other similar remarks as direct evidence of discrimination on the grounds that it was open to more than one interpretation, one benign and one discriminatory.\(^{164}\) Under the benign interpretation, the comment was simply a profession that the employer had already met all of its equal employment opportunity requirements in the public works job.\(^{165}\) The discriminatory interpretation is obvious. But because a jury could have gone either way on the issue, the court resolved the dispute in favor of the defendant and concluded that the statement was not direct evidence because it was not one-sided enough.\(^{166}\)

The court revisited the same remarks at the pretext stage under *McDonnell Douglas* and concluded that under that approach it was free to give the plaintiff’s interpretation the benefit of the doubt, which in this case meant he could get a trial on his claim.\(^{167}\) In fact, the court went so far as to say that ambiguity actually “helps” a plaintiff if his claim is brought under *McDonnell Douglas* and is attacked at the summary judgment stage.\(^{168}\) At summary judgment, the court noted that it was compelled to interpret the evidence in a light most flattering to the nonmovant, here the plaintiff.\(^{169}\) So *Fernandes* holds that a plaintiff gets the benefit of the doubt if his claim is brought as a pretext case under *McDonnell Douglas*,\(^ {170}\) but doubts are resolved against him under the direct evidence method retained from *Price Waterhouse*.\(^ {171}\) The problem with this approach is that nothing in the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure, especially Rule 56 detailing the summary judgment standard,\(^ {172}\) permits a court to weigh the same evidence differently depending upon the plaintiff’s method of proof.

If an oral statement is capable of proving an employer’s stated reasons to be pretextual, then it must also be “sufficient” apart from the *McDonnell Douglas* scheme to create a triable issue. Otherwise, the case gets to trial only by virtue of the method of proof the plaintiff has chosen. There may be good reason to require plaintiffs to be very specific about the type of

\(^{163}\) 199 F.3d 572, 578 (1st Cir. 1999).

\(^{164}\) See *Fernandes*, 199 F.3d at 583, 588.

\(^{165}\) See id. at 583.

\(^{166}\) See id. (“We conclude, therefore, that a statement that plausibly can be interpreted two different ways - one discriminatory and the other benign - does not directly reflect illegal animus and, thus, does not constitute direct evidence.”).

\(^{167}\) See id. at 588 (noting that while “ambiguity” defeated the plaintiff's direct evidence claim, “the question differs under pretext analysis”).

\(^{168}\) See *Fernandes v. Costa Bros. Masonry, Inc.*, 199 F.3d 572, 589 (1st Cir. 1999).

\(^{169}\) Id.


\(^{172}\) See *Fed. R. Civ. P. 56(c)* (providing that the judgment sought shall be rendered if the pleadings, depositions, answers to interrogatories, admissions, and affidavits show that there is no genuine issue as to any material fact and that the moving party is entitled to a judgment as a matter of law).
discrimination they are claiming so that the defendant’s answer and defense may be responsive, as in sexual harassment cases. But there is less reason for inferences to tilt in favor of some Title VII plaintiffs and against others. Indeed, under Rule 56, the inferences tilt only one way in a summary judgment case, and that is in favor of the non-moving party.

The other problem with the Fernandes approach is that it is possible that the supervisor’s statements will not be revisited at the pretext stage. This result occurred in Robin, where the plaintiff failed to mount even a prima facie case because the court concluded he was not meeting his employer’s legitimate job expectations. So not only is the result in a case dependent upon the method of proof used, direct evidence or pretext, but success under a particular method of proof depends upon how seriously the court takes the prima facie case. There is good reason to take it seriously, and Robin was correct to dismiss the claim under McDonnell Douglas, but this further underscores why the plaintiff’s best oral evidence is a misfit under that scheme.

How should the handling of evidence be reformed? First, the term “direct evidence,” both as a category of evidence and a method of evaluating evidence, should be discarded. When it is defined as smoking-gun evidence, or a near admission of liability on the employer’s part, it is the equivalent of asking a hurdler to clear a ten-foot bar when only a five-foot jump is necessary to advance in the contest. It also fails because of its narrow evidentiary focus. Imagine an employer who requires a sales agent undergoing chemotherapy to sell as much as other, healthy salespersons. Add to these facts comments from the company president that the agent, in addition to being ill, was “getting too old” and that he was “not the same man” he was six months earlier. This was the background of Robin, but the employer’s unconscionability did not persuade the court that a jury could find in Robin’s favor on either his age discrimination or disability claims. The result, even if ultimately correct, demonstrates the failure of a method that ignores the sum of a plaintiff’s case. The court even mentioned the employer’s shameful conduct but simultaneously concluded

173. See Robin v. Espo Eng’g Corp., 200 F.3d 1081, 1091-92 (7th Cir. 2000).
175. See Robin, 200 F.3d at 1088.
176. See id. at 1091-92.
177. Id. at 1086, 1087.
178. Id. at 1091-92 (acknowledging the ethical issues but declining to take them into consideration). Robin leaves open the intriguing question of whether an employer’s conduct could ever be so unethical that it would necessarily call its lawfulness into question.
it was only “empowered to decide legal issues.”179 This may be true enough, but it is unclear why juries need to be shielded from the bad acts of employers, especially as they relate to the plaintiff in a case. Even when the jury is not shielded, Robin’s case may not be triable, but at least the analysis would accurately reflect the plaintiff’s burden. Only a line-item approach to Robin’s evidence results in a decision that fails to at least consider his alternative route to the jury: a combination of bad acts and age-oriented remarks which makes up for the deficiencies of each alone.180

In place of “direct evidence,” courts should approach discrimination cases by asking whether plaintiffs have any affirmative evidence of discrimination. Affirmative evidence of discrimination would be any evidence, whether oral, written, statistical, anecdotal, or comparative, that is capable, either on its own or in combination, of proving to a jury that the plaintiff is a victim of intentional discrimination. Affirmative evidence, therefore, is a broader category than direct evidence.181 The evidence need not be one-sided, though it must be sufficient under the preponderance standard. Furthermore, it must do more than raise suspicion concerning the employer’s motives for his or her decision; it must sufficiently prove discrimination so that a reasonable jury could find for the plaintiff. Affirmative evidence, especially when it is oral, does this when a reasonable jury could conclude that it establishes discriminatory intent with respect to a challenged employment decision. Evidence of animus or even intent apart from the challenged decision would fall short under this standard unless the plaintiff could establish that bias so contaminated the

179. See id. at 1092 (quoting Fuja v. Benefit Trust Life Ins. Co., 18 F.3d 1405, 1412 (7th Cir. 1994)).

180. Evidence of other crimes, wrongs, or acts is not admissible to prove the character of a person in order to show action in conformity therewith. See FED. R. EVID. 404(b). This seems to include discriminatory remarks unrelated to the plaintiff. But the Rule allows such evidence to be admitted to show motive, intent, knowledge, preparation, and plan, all of which would apply if the plaintiff could show that the employer knew of the hostility and did nothing to stop it. The employer’s inaction in one case would then be linked to his or her action (firing the plaintiff) in another and the plaintiff’s theory would be that the same motive and intent could explain both.

181. See Ross v. Rhodes Furniture, Inc., 146 F.3d 1286, 1291 (11th Cir. 1998) (“Although we have repeatedly held that [some] comments are not direct evidence of discrimination because they are either too remote in time or too attenuated because they were not directed at the plaintiff, we have not held that such comments can never constitute circumstantial evidence of discrimination.”) (internal citation omitted); Ercegovich v. Goodyear Tire & Rubber Co., 154 F.3d 344, 357 (6th Cir. 1998) (considering several ageist remarks by corporate executives as relevant evidence of pretext even though they fell short of direct evidence standard); and Emmel v. Coca-Cola Bottling Co. of Chi., 95 F.3d 627, 632 (7th Cir. 1996) (rejecting company’s argument that if stray remarks are not direct evidence they are not probative because “[t]he remarks are evidence, which together with the other evidence in this case could lead a jury to conclude, by a preponderance of the evidence, that the company engaged in unlawful discrimination”).
workplace that it likely affected the decision, too.182

Finally, the McDonnell Douglas burden-shifting scheme183 would be used in those instances where the plaintiff’s evidence was negative in nature and framed in the form of rebuttal. So long as she could establish a prima facie case, which would include evidence that she was performing her job up to the employer’s expectations,184 she would be entitled to rebut the defendant’s version as to why she was fired, demoted, or treated differently in some materially adverse way. But in establishing that the employer’s version was a lie, her efforts would be better spent directly rebutting the defendant’s version, rather than re-introducing oral or other affirmative evidence that is not sufficient on its own. Statements uttered to the plaintiff, unless they directly bear on the employer’s reason for its decision, are not relevant because they shoot at the wrong target. A black employee’s evidence that the decision-maker uttered a racist remark, even about the plaintiff, is not responsive to the employer’s assertion that the employee’s tardiness prompted his or her decision. After all, an employer’s racial animus and attitudes are not, by themselves, unlawful. Proof that the plaintiff was not tardy, or evidence that the employer did not apply the same rule to non-black employees, is the kind of specific rebuttal evidence the plaintiff would be expected to provide. McDonnell Douglas creates a method of proof for an employee without affirmative evidence of discrimination but capable of proving his employer to be lying.185 Limiting the plaintiff’s case to specific evidence that addresses the employer’s explanation would focus the efforts of both litigants and courts and provide the kind of structure that lawyers tend to favor.

In all cases, the evidence must be sufficient both to survive summary judgment and support a jury verdict in the plaintiff’s favor. The plaintiff’s

182. Compare Mitchell v. USBI Co., 186 F.3d 1352, 1355 (11th Cir. 1999) (rejecting plaintiff’s argument that a series of age-related comments by various employees “demonstrate[d] a corporate culture conducive to age discrimination”), and Fuka v. Thomson Consumer Electronics, 82 F.3d 1397, 1403-04 (7th Cir. 1996) (determining that age-related comments by decision-makers made in hiring contexts were not probative in termination context even though the same decision-maker made both hiring and firing decisions), with Glass v. Phila. Elec. Co., 34 F.3d 188, 195 (3rd Cir. 1994) (concluding that district court abused its discretion in excluding plaintiff’s evidence of racially hostile work environment to support race discrimination claim), and Hunter v. Allis-Chalmers Corp., 797 F.2d 1417, 1423-24 (7th Cir. 1986) (allowing evidence that plaintiff endured racial harassment from coworkers before he was fired because the evidence made it more likely that his firing was related to his complaints about his treatment).


184. In McDonnell Douglas, a failure-to-hire case, this applied to evidence that the complainant “applied and was qualified for a job for which the employer was seeking applicants.” 411 U.S. at 802.

oral evidence, allowing for reasonable inferences, may do the trick, so long as the animus it reveals may be translated into intent and connected to an employment decision. Whatever the plaintiff's evidence, whether affirmative or negative (under McDonnell Douglas), the plaintiff must prove that unlawful discrimination motivated the employer’s decision. If it did, by playing a substantial role in the decision, liability would result. The issue of damages is a separate question and depends upon the employer’s proof that it would have made the same decision without, for example, considering the plaintiff’s race. Shifting the burden to the employer in these cases may be inconsistent with standard notions of causation (especially in other tort cases, as discrimination is an intentional tort), but it may also be unavoidable under the terms of the statute. The 1991 Act was in part prompted by Price Waterhouse,186 and Congress’s intent may well have been to confine it to “direct evidence” cases, but intent is a poor substitute for a statute’s terms. Likewise, a return to “but-for” causation under Title VII has appeal, but it is a choice for Congress to make rather than judges.

V. CONCLUSION

For more than a decade, courts have applied a random assortment of rules to evaluate oral evidence and no unified approach has emerged. The result is that litigants can form little expectation about how the next case will be handled. Consider again the manager’s “Just like a Dago.” remark at the time he dropped off a performance evaluation evidencing slumping sales. Before that case is litigated, the parties will not be able to answer any of the following questions: whether a court will construe the remark as “direct evidence”;187 if not, then whether it will reconsider the remark as circumstantial evidence;188 and if not, then how it will use the remark in the McDonnell Douglas scheme.189 Of course, answers to these questions depend upon countless other variables, such as what definition of “direct evidence” a court will employ,190 what bright-line rules with respect to circumstantial evidence (for instance, the “stray remarks” doctrine) the court will apply,191 whether the remark would be evaluated differently if it were ageist or racist rather than related to national origin192 and whether the court would give the plaintiff a more generous read of the evidence after a

187. See supra Parts I, II.
188. See supra Part II.
189. See supra Part III.
190. See supra Parts I, II.
191. See supra Part II.
192. See id.
Federal employment discrimination cases should operate in a more predictable playing field. A good place to start is to eliminate the direct evidence category and to evaluate oral evidence of discrimination no differently than other evidence by asking whether it is sufficient to prove the plaintiff's case.

193. See supra Parts II, III.