**Book Review**

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***Watching TV With a Linguist***

Edited by Kristy Beers Fägersten

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This is an interesting and very readable book that aims to provide an introduction to the study of English language and linguistics through the medium of popular television programmes. The premise of this edited volume is simple enough: in each chapter, an author takes a topic and examines it using data from one television programme to examine and exemplify a range of linguistic concepts and phenomena. *Watching TV With a Linguist* is written in a user-friendly manner with helpful ideas for further reading - and viewing - following each chapter, together with a full list of references and a comprehensive and very useful-looking glossary.

The book begins with an introduction in which the editor, Kristy Beers Fägersten, outlines her rationale and the volume’s scope of study. She reminds us that, although fictional representations of speech on television are constructs and therefore differ from naturally occurring talk, the differences are not as marked as might be thought and consequently can be explored using similar analytical methods. Indeed recent work in corpus linguistics has demonstrated that apart from aspects such as non-fluency features, fictional manifestations contain many of the features of real talk (see for example Mahlberg, 2013 for discussion). This means that there is a readily made bank of material ready for the linguist to analyse. Recognising, however, that talk in fictional contexts is constructed also offers the analyst/linguist the opportunity to explore how the medium both mediates and repackages spoken language for a viewing audience. Here, as Beers Fägersten reminds us, television provides an opportunity to examine speech as a process, written by scriptwriters, performed by actors and overseen and managed by directors. And of course, language is the means by which television shows present characters, events and world-views; it is here that we can examine how talk helps construct various representations of groups, individuals and belief systems. Moreover, television programmes present and reflect various discourses about language and attitudes to speech: how characters talk about, and invite us to reflect on, their talk can be as interesting and valuable an activity as looking at the talk itself.

The chapters in this book offer a variety of both topics in linguistics and television shows although most of the programmes discussed are from the United States and were designed with an adult audience in mind. This is not necessarily a problem but the reader does need at least some familiarity with the programme examined in order to successfully follow each of the chapters and it would have been interesting to have some rationale for how decisions were made to choose these shows. In order, the chapters cover: *Sherlock* (conversational analysis); *The Wire* (sociolinguistic variation); *The Golden Girls* (regional variation); *Sex and The City* (language and gender); *The Big Bang Theory* (speech act theory, the co-operative principle, politeness theory); *South Park* (ambiguity and language change); *How I Met Your Mother* (word formation); *Seinfeld* (morphology); *Frasier* (syntax); *The Simpsons* (language development); *Lost* (second language learning); and *Friends* (corpus linguistics). In addition, a chapter on phonology uses examples from a number of different programmes.

There is a wide range of approaches in evidence here although inevitably some of the chapters work better than others. The more successful ones are those that not only explain principles of a theory or model but also offer a critical interpretation of the television show itself. That is, the chapter becomes an exercise in showing how an understanding of linguistics can illuminate the study of the programme rather than simply using the programme as a vehicle for linguistic exemplification and description. Ultimately, these more successful chapters also examine television as a medium per se; again, the discussion demonstrates that knowledge of the linguistic system can lead to a more critical awareness of the constraints of the medium. An example of this type of insight is evident in the first analysis by Kay Richardson, which explores the BBC series *Sherlock* and examines the interplay of different contexts in television drama. Drawing on ethnographic approaches to spoken discourse analysis, Richardson uses Dell Hymes’ SPEAKING mnemonic to examine the ways that television operates within complex and interrelated outer (the relationship between the characters and an audience of a programme) and inner (the relationship between characters themselves within the programme) contexts. Richardson also utilises aspects of Erving Goffman’s notions of *alignment* and *footing* to examine the complexity of understanding just who speaks the words we hear a character use on-screen and Alexandra Jaffe’s work on *stance* to examine the shifting sense of characterisation and the subsequent development of reader’s responses when on-screen characters deviate from expected behavioural and conversational norms. This latter phenomenon is expertly articulated and demonstrated through an analysis of Sherlock’s interaction with Molly in a scene from ‘A Scandal in Belgravia’. In each instance, the reader is left with a richer understanding of the programme itself; the linguistic enquiry and analysis augments, rather than simply decorates, the discussion of the text.

Other notable examples where this approach is successful include the chapter on language and gender through the lens of *Sex and The City*. Here, Kristy Beers Fägersten and Hanna Sveen provide a historical survey of the narrative concerning the study of natural and representations of gendered talk whilst also articulating how the programme’s characters reflect more contemporary ideas about gender as performance. Through a systematic analysis of the speech of one of the main characters, Sam, they demonstrate how the programme explicitly foregrounds the ideas that identities are fluid and open to conscious construction and reconstruction as participants engage in social interaction. And Michael Percillier’s chapter on ambiguous and shifting meanings in *South Park* not only explores the nature of semantic ambiguity and shifts in lexical meaning over time but also lends itself well to a discussion of just how humour is designed to work on the television and how the medium positions viewers to respond to specific instances where the meaning of a word or phrase may be unclear.

The book is an interesting one in a number of ways. As a linguist, I appreciated the focus on highlighting the value of represented television talk as a genuine and useful area of study and foregrounding the complex nature of television as viewing medium and genre. I could see how easily it would be to slot some of these chapters into seminar material and reading lists on an undergraduate module on spoken language. Equally, some of the more accessible parts of this book could be used by post-16 teachers to support lesson planning and given as extended reading to students wanting to develop their understanding of how language works in television and in support of independent projects.

From an educator’s perspective, the book also raises some questions around how we frame activities and how we might usefully draw on resources that form part of ‘everyday’ viewing in our teaching materials. One objection to the texts used in this book might be simply ‘why television?’ Could a teacher not teach and exemplify the content here without needing to resort to television programmes? Do the programmes add anything? The chapters that provide a critical analysis of the medium itself directly address these objections, but more generally, I think that the book does highlight the value in using mass audience materials in the classroom. Without resurrecting old – and rather pointless – arguments about cultural value and high and low-status texts, the extracts in this book do provide fresh analytical angles on linguistic phenomena as well as proving that they are worthy of, and interesting to, study in their own right. Indeed since the study of speech and dialogue in theatrical drama has long been accepted and written about (see for example Short, 1996), it is a little surprising that Beers Fägersten feels the need to spend time in her introduction defending the inclusion of television as a legitimate area of study.

There is also a strong argument for building activities around and developing critical literacy of *popular* texts in general, and I can see how some of the programmes’ intrinsic relevance might support interrogation in this way (see also Gerrig and Rapp, 2004 for relevance and criticality). It seems to me that a critical linguistic awareness of contemporary media (including television) is in itself a very useful activity by which to query the ways that scriptwriters think about and present language as a social phenomenon that both reflects and influences world-views. This volume undoubtedly demonstrates that examining these representations of talk has the potential to push us to reflect on our own and others’ language use and, of course, encourage our students to do the same.

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**References**

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