Watching in Tongues

Multilingualism on American Television in the 21st Century

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Salve Regina University, USA

Series in Language and Linguistics



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For my mother, MaryAnn.

Since I first started watching TV, you have always been with me offering love, support and encouragement, challenging me to do my best.

For my father, Malcolm.

Although you left us before this work was finished, your love and support were keenly felt throughout this process.

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Preface

The last decade or so has witnessed an enormous increase in linguistic studies of film and television. A recent bibliography compiled by the author with Raffaele Zago (University of Catania) is now 23 pages long! Yet, few of these studies focus on multilingualism as depicted in contemporary US television series. Having just this specific focus makes this book a unique contribution to this emerging sub-field of linguistics. James Mitchell focuses on the representation of second language speakers and second language use as well as language learning in US network TV series, drawing from his vast collection of examples from the first two decades of the 21st century (2003 to 2019). In most cases, the second language spoken is English, although cases where L1 English characters speak or learn a second language such as Spanish or French are also covered. A variety of languages are discussed in the book, including Spanish, Italian, Chinese, German, and French.

When examining fictional television series, two main approaches to coverage are possible: you can focus on one TV series in depth, or you can discuss a particular theme in a variety of programs; this book usefully does both. On the one hand, there are individual chapters that focus mainly on indepth analyses of one or more scenes from a particular program – such as the crime series Psych in Chapter 2, the children's animated series Xiaolin Showdown in Chapter 4, the (telenovela-based) comedy-drama Ugly Betty in Chapter 5, and the sitcom *How I met Your Mother* in Chapter 8. On the other hand, these chapters are complemented by chapters that take a broader view. For instance, Chapter 3 discusses eight examples from Monk, Bones, The Closer, Castle, White Collar, and the Law & Order franchise, while Chapter 6 covers episodes from American Housewife, Brooklyn Nine-Nine, The Middle, Modern Family, Schooled, Speechless, One Tree Hill, Pretty Little Liars, The Simpsons, 10 Things I Hate About You and Ben 10: Ultimate Alien. All in all, the book references over 50 different TV series. The author's focus on network television will enable future comparison with depictions in programming from premium cable (HBO, etc.) and streaming outlets (Netflix, Hulu, Amazon, etc.), which have different business models.

The author uses a broadly defined, applied linguistics framework to categorize and discuss the various ways in which L2 speakers, L2 use, and L2

¹ http://unico.academia.edu/RaffaeleZago/Bibliography

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acquisition are represented on television. The book's 12 chapters focus on a wide variety of issues, ranging from humor, stereotyping, and crime solving to depictions of language learning and language attitudes. The diversity of issues covered in the book means that there will be much to interest different readers. Mitchell also draws on the use of subtitling, where relevant, and considers the many functions of TV dialogue and its aim to create believable stories and characters, as well as entertain viewers. To give just two of many examples, Chapter 7 shows how language plays a role in amplifying stereotypes for comedic effects, while Chapter 3 discusses how second language use can function to drive crime-solving plots. In that respect, Mitchell hypothesizes that "the next big TV show could popularize linguistics in the American imagination" (p. 81). Indeed, an announcement was made in November 2019 that CBS is developing a forensic linguistic procedural crime drama called *Fighting Words*, which will feature a forensic linguistics professor as the main character!²

The book's many examples show that there is not only one way in which second language acquisition and use are depicted in contemporary network television, and it uncovers both negative and positive trends. While some televisual representations of L2 speakers can be negative, stereotypical, and even racist, others are more sympathetic in their depiction of linguistic diversity in the US. They illustrate the characters' *language resistance* to the subordination of their language or dialect, challenging other characters' prejudices and assumptions. The representation of L1 English speakers with poor command of other languages can embody a critique of US American monolingualism, and knowledge of a second language can even be depicted as key to solving a crime! In some instances, the way in which televisual representations are interpreted and evaluated also depends on viewers, showcasing the ambiguity of contemporary television.

The US is arguably a perfect context for this exploration. While there are other 'Anglo'-countries that feature multilingualism in relation to immigration, the global impact of US-American pop culture in the realm of fictional TV series is unparalleled. Many successful programs are exported overseas, including to countries where English is spoken as a second or foreign language. Even though Mitchell's book mainly addresses a US audience, it would seem there is potential for a much wider reach. Many of the TV series discussed would also be familiar to non-US audiences, and many of those viewers would be speakers of English as a second or foreign language with a clear interest in this topic.

https://deadline.com/2019/11/cbs-fighting-words-crime-drama-jeffrey-kramers-juniper-place-prods-1202787251/

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Furthermore, the author hopes his book will inspire others to investigate similar issues on US television, but, in connection with language-specific and locally-relevant research, it could similarly be used as a springboard for investigations of such issues in other countries.

Mitchell's qualitative approach means that many scenes are individually described and discussed concerning what is taking place in them. This approach lends itself well to a linguistic classroom setting, where many of the scenes could easily be turned into activities (e.g., in terms of language learning theories, and to contrast televisual depictions of outdated grammartranslation or audiolingual methods with more recent language pedagogies). The conversational style, accessible use of theory, and personal reflections that occur throughout also make this book ideal for use in teaching. As depictions on television also reflect contemporary issues in US-American society (such as political polarization and anti-immigrant sentiment) and because Mitchell makes concrete connections to real-world issues such as language and immigration policy (e.g., the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals/DACA program; official English state legislation), the book can also be used in the teaching of US culture. For example, Chapter 11 introduces readers to depictions of child language brokers, the bilingual children of immigrant parents who mediate between their parents and monolingual speakers and institutions in the US. Interesting facts about historical developments in television are also presented. For example, the Puerto Rican grandmother in the sitcom Freddie (discussed in Chapter 8) was the first character to speak only in Spanish on a US-American TV series. This invites comparison with Abuela (the character of Alba Gloriana Villanueva) in the more recent comedy-drama Jane the Virgin, which furthermore invites comparisons to *Ugly Betty*, discussed by Mitchell in Chapter 5.

Analyzing and critiquing televisual representations of multilingualism is important, not least because of the potential impact of such representations. As Mitchell puts it, "The globalization of our world finds a mimetic outlet on the small screen, reinforcing the need to look beyond our own borders, beyond our own language" (p. 109). As Mitchell also notes, the increasing diversity in writers' rooms has already given us new depictions of multilingualism in the 2019-2020 TV season. There is no doubt, then, that the theme of multilingualism will remain significant and that representations will continue to evolve, with much scope for future analysis of the television-society debate through the prism of linguistics.

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Introduction

I. Context

Popular media have long shaped societal views in America on a variety of issues. They have been responsible for both perpetuating stereotypes on the one hand, and presenting evidence to contradict, and sometimes even tear them down, on the other. Television has, perhaps, the most pervasive power in this domain, given its ubiquity in American society. A negative portrayal of a given minority group, be they a linguistic, racial, or ethnic minority, can do great damage to that group's image in the collective American psyche. Whereas a positive storyline revolving around a minority character can help mainstream that minority group by erasing or softening linguistic, racial, ethnic, and cultural differences, essentially presenting the message that they are just like us. In the end, we are all the same—we all express the same concerns and face the same challenges in the complex world that we live in today. Of course, the questions surrounding who the they and the us might be are ever evolving depending upon the expected target audience of a given program. Nevertheless, the power of television to impact American attitudes toward a given language, group, or culture is undeniable.

As a television junkie from a young age and a second language learner from almost as early, I have always been interested in when and why languages other than English were being used in real life and, of course, on the television that I'd watch growing up in a suburb of New York City. As a grown-up who became an applied linguist and second language acquisition researcher, I finally had the tools to understand and analyze these portrayals from a linguistic perspective. My hope for this book is to explore a number of issues and ideas raised by these depictions of second language speakers and second language use on television.

Of course, my work is not exhaustive in any way, nor is it meant to be. It would be nearly impossible to find and cite every example of second language $(L2)^1$ use on television today, especially with the proliferation of channels, streaming services, and original network and non-network programming. I do, however, try to investigate issues that have not received much attention to date in an

 $^{^1}$ In this book, I deliberately use the term second language or L2 and not terms like LX, where X is 2, 3, 4, etc., to represent multilinguals, because the U.S. is primarily a monolingual context.

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effort to provide answers that shed light not only on issues of the representation of language learning and language use, but also provide an optic through which American society as a whole might be understood. As Queen (2015) tells us, "we can consider the scripted media to be fundamentally interesting precisely because of the ways in which they are of the culture of which they are a part, even as they play a role in shaping that culture" (p. 20).

The bulk of my data comes from shows on the five major U.S. broadcast networks (ABC, CBS, Fox, NBC, and the CW) that most American viewers would be able to access quite easily. I also include some data from shows on basic cable networks (ABC Family [now Freeform], Cartoon Network, TNT, USA), as well as a single show from a premium cable channel (Cinemax). My research spans the first two decades of the 21st century. I principally analyze episodes from 2003-2019, with the exception of a single, very relevant episode of The Simpsons from 1990. I recognize that, since I began looking at how second language speakers and second language use are portrayed on television, the very nature television itself has changed. With options like Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon, as well as streaming platforms from networks themselves (e.g., CBS All Access), how people watch television and what they watch is undergoing significant disruption. As much as the landscape of content delivery for television has changed from the turn of the 21st century until today, I imagine that in another five or ten years, things will be even dramatically different. These changes notwithstanding, fundamental questions that I explore in the chapters ahead remain relevant, especially in light of the current political climate and partisan divisions in the U.S. Our divisions are often keenly felt by immigrants who speak other languages and often have a second-language (L2) accent in English.

II. Theoretical & Methodological Approach

I am certainly not the first person to apply linguistic analysis to television. Queen (2015) provides an excellent guidebook for exploring linguistic variation, including dialect and language differences, in narrative media such as films and television. Through the lens of corpus linguistics, Bednarek (2018) analyzes TV dialogue and its many functions, from moving the narrative forward and aiding character development to capturing audience emotions and fostering linguistic innovations. I am also not the first to look at multilingualism in media. Bleichenbacher (2008, 2012) considers the role of multilingualism in film, providing important insights that can translate to the context of television as well. Although Pandey (2016) looks at the use of multilingualism and monolingualism in prize-winning literary fiction, her work is relevant to my own exploration of these issues on television.

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Broadly speaking, I employ an applied linguistics framework to the analyses that I present in the chapters below. I borrow theories and ideas from the texts that I've just mentioned, as well as others from the fields of second language acquisition (SLA), sociolinguistics, and bilingualism to explore various topics in the text. I also employ close reading techniques used by my colleagues in literary studies. My approach is necessarily interdisciplinary because of the breadth and variety of phenomena related to L2 use. In some sense, my goal in this book is to catalogue the diversity of ways in which L2 speakers and L2 use are depicted on TV, meeting those phenomena where they are instead of trying to impose a one-size-fits-all approach. Rather than being limited by a specific methodological approach, I see the variety of perspectives that I make use of as offering those in fields beyond linguistics, such as television studies, sociology, or intercultural communication, a way to approach this text to suit their needs and the needs of their students. It must also be said that there has not been much research done that links television and L2 use. It may seem to the reader that my approach is somewhat disjointed—in some ways it is—but this choice results from a desire to look at the phenomena themselves, to try to make connections among different shows and from those shows to the real world.

The analytic approach I take in this book is decidedly qualitative. I do very little counting of tokens; I don't compare the numbers of episodes in which I find certain languages or incidences in which a given language is used to accomplish a specific task. Rather, I am interested in trying to understand the contexts in which languages other than English are used or in which L2 English speakers are found. I am not a media critic nor am I a television expert. Without doubt, scholars from those fields would be able to add a great deal to my analysis. That being said, I do try to reach out beyond television to other happenings in our popular culture (e.g., plays, news, etc.) that support the points I seek to make in an effort to demonstrate the interconnectedness of our TV lives with our real ones.

III. Structure

Over the last decade and a half, I have collected many examples of television depictions of L2 speakers and L2 use that I include in the chapters to come, and many others that I have had to leave out for the sake of brevity. I have noticed some trends in terms of the ways in which these examples are employed to achieve specific ends. These trends have shaped the structure of my book in the form of four sections, each containing three chapters: Humor and Homicide; Language Learning; Subtitles and Stereotypes; and Language Attitudes and Mediation.

In the first section, Humor and Homicide, I look at two disparate aspects of the inclusion of L2 speakers and L2 use on television. On the one hand, L2 use xviii Introduction

or L2 speakers are often depicted to create humor in various ways, especially through miscommunication or misunderstanding. I evaluate the reasons behind such portrayals, both positive and negative. On the other hand, I analyze the use of L2 knowledge or the ability to speak a second language to solve crimes in the detective/police procedural genre. I describe how this phenomenon works and also what messages it might convey to viewers.

In Language Learning, I include three chapters on how language acquisition is represented, or misrepresented, on American television. These chapters cover aspects of adult acquisition of a second language as well as child acquisition of vocabulary and metaphor in a new language. Additionally, a more general chapter on realistic and non-realistic language-learning depictions rounds out this section.

Subtitles and Stereotypes explores the ways in which L2 speakers are often negatively depicted on television based on stereotypes. Two chapters in this section specifically investigate the role that subtitles play in leading viewers to such conclusions, employing the idea of language subordination, a process that devalues non-standard language while validating the norms and beliefs of the dominant group (Lippi-Green, 2012). A third chapter in this section analyzes other ways in which stereotypes are used, sometimes to undermine negative perspectives on L2 speakers. In this section, we will see how various groups are targeted by stereotyping, including Italian-Americans, Asian-Americans, and newcomers to the U.S. who speak English as a second language. Sometimes the stereotypes utilized in the television shows I cite are related to language use, sometimes not. In some cases, the stereotypes depicted have much in common with prejudical attitudes toward minority groups. In these chapters, such negative attitudes are directed at Asian and Latinx characters. Certainly, these groups are not the only ones subject to stereotyping and negative portrayals on television. Other racial, ethnic, religious, and minority groups, such as Arabs, Muslims, African-Americans, and LGBTQ Americans, for example, are far from immune to such treatments on television. The chapters in this section focus on what I found in the data I collected and analyzed. In no way is it my intent that my analysis should discount discrimination faced by other minority groups in the U.S., on television or in real life.

Finally, in the fourth section of the book, Language Attitudes and Mediation, I present and evaluate depictions of second languages used as tools of mediation. I look at this process in both historical and satirical terms. I conclude with a chapter focused on attitudes toward those who speak English with non-standard accents, including not only varieties of L2 English but regional varieties of American English. I consider how those with non-

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standard accents engage in language resistance (based on Worth's (2006, 2008) idea of foreign language resistance) to combat linguistic prejudice.

Overall, there are both positive and negative depictions of L2 speakers and L2 use. However, this patchwork of portrayals is complex, with multiple valences and interpretations possible from the same scene. For instance, comedic depictions of L2 speakers/use can lead us to conclude that L2 speakers are just like us and can lessen the sense of otherness. But, such depictions can also undercut the agency or intelligence of L2 speakers, leaving viewers to think of them in a negative light (cf. Queen, 2015, pp. 31-33 for a discussion of how variational use of languages can be used to show similarity/solidarity or difference/otherness). It is precisely the ambiguity of these portrayals that I hope to highlight. Subtitles can also play a role in this process as Queen (2015) demonstrates in her analysis of a scene from the movie *Crash* (2009). By drawing attention to the perhaps unintended negative aspects of these portrayals, we can hopefully develop more sophisticated ways of representing L2 speakers as more like us than not.

I view this book as a first step. Certainly, there may be perspectives to add and other analyses possible, but I hope to inspire others to investigate issues of L2 language use or L2 language speakers on American television. If any of the episodes I cite intrigues you, I invite you to find them and watch!—most are readily available on Amazon, Netflix, Hulu, or via some other service, if not available on DVD. Now, sit back, and enjoy the show!

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