

Introduction

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Even though the study of television fiction emerged as a relevant field of study in the 1970s (Stedman; Newcomb; Adler and Cater), it is especially in the last three decades that attention has increasingly focused on TV series as a sophisticated form of expression and a fertile ground for research into the cultural dynamics that govern the representation of cultural identity, class, race, ethnicity, gender, and the use of language (Jones; Miller; Creeber; Hammond and Mazdon; Mittell; Bianculli). There can be little doubt that this surge in critical interest came in response to the new generation of series, such as *The Sopranos* and *Six Feet Under*, that broke new ground from the 1990s onwards in terms of aesthetics, production values, narrative complexity, and subject matter. With the advent of cable and, more recently, streaming services and other alternatives to traditional network channels, not only have TV series been freed, at least in part, from the shackles of censorship, but they have also provided creators and show runners with a flexible vehicle which encompasses different formats and communication strategies. This has resulted in a rich, enormously varied offering of television products which often partake of, and straddle across, different genres: drama, comedy, fantasy, reality television, etc. It is

increasingly rare to find television dramas that do not incorporate elements of comedy and soap opera, or comedies that don't occasionally swerve into drama.

Like the great serial literature of the nineteenth century which they often draw upon or evoke, TV series simultaneously entertain and hold up a mirror to society, providing invaluable insight into political and social issues, re-examining history, inviting reflections on gender and generational issues, and delving deep into the human condition. Often characterized by a high degree of intertextuality, TV series mix high and low – classic literature, drama, and movies, with pop culture (songs, comics, etc.) – thus speaking a hybrid language which transcends national borders. TV series have been for some time a truly global phenomenon. While English-language (especially American) productions continue to dominate the international market, the menu of streaming services such as *Netflix* and *Amazon Prime* has become increasingly diverse, introducing large audiences all over the world to series written in languages other than English (as demonstrated by the astounding global success of the South Korean series *Squid Game*).

At the same time, however, much can be understood about specific countries and cultural contexts, by studying the evolution of their television offerings. One could mention, for example, the educational “mission” which was at the basis of several literary adaptations produced for European public broadcasting companies such as the BBC and RAI, especially in the 1950s and 1960s, or the idealized, suburban domestic comedies that dominated American small screens during the Eisenhower era.

Over the last three decades, the study of TV series has also attracted the interest of linguists from different traditions: as a consequence, aspects like “multimodal characterization” (Toolan; Bednarek 2010), “genre and performance” (Paltridge, Thomas, and Liu), “mind style” (Montoro) and “ideology” (Bednarek 2011), to quote but a few, have been widely investigated starting from the language patterns characterizing characters' dialogues.

Indeed, while TV shows are rarely *about* language (in fact, few media products ever are), language itself always plays a crucial role in sustaining the general settings, the internal consistency of the characters and the unfolding of both the broad and the narrow narrative arcs (Queen 2). This potential of language can be ascribed primarily to what linguists

call ‘variation’, i.e. alternative ways of using grammar, of pronouncing sounds, of structuring conversations, and of selecting particular words over others. In gender representation, for example, stereotypical roles are heavily dependent on the different way in which language is used by different characters: specific patterns may be used only by females, while others may be exclusively employed by male figures. This, of course, can result in an extreme polarisation of gender roles, which then may become ‘naturalised’ and ‘common sense’ for viewers. It goes without saying that the stereotypical representation of different ethnicities is construed by using language variation in analogous ways.

In the last 10-15 years, linguistic studies of TV shows have also benefited from so-called ‘corpus methods’, i.e. computer programs that make it possible to collect and analyse millions of words at the same time (e.g. all the words pronounced by a specific character over all the seasons of a show, for example), thus allowing researchers to quantitatively identify recurrent linguistic patterns that are indicative of particular aspects. The use of corpus techniques could also prove crucial for the creation of learning materials aimed at the development of ‘televisual literacy’ both for University and for Secondary school students.

The present collection originates from a research project, financed by the Department of Humanities of the University of Trieste, whose findings were first shared and debated with scholars from other Italian academic institutions, as well as students and the general public, in the course of a two-day conference held at the “Stazione Rogers” in Trieste, on 15-16 October, 2021. It presents, in amply revised and expanded form, papers which were first presented in that venue and which are representative of a variety of approaches to the study of TV series. The opening essay, by Leonardo Buonomo, places the highly acclaimed American drama series *The Americans* (2013-2018), created by Joe Wiseberg (a former CIA agent), in the context of the representation of family dynamics, a staple of American mass entertainment since the very beginnings of television programming. The essay argues that under the guise of a fact-based spy thriller, involving two Russian agents who pose as a typically American middle-class married couple with children during the Reagan era, *The Americans* offers an insightful and probing look into suburban American mores, consumerism, gender relations, parental responsibility, and generational conflict.

Questions of gender and marital conflict are also center stage in *The Affair* (2014-2019), created by Hagai Levi and Sarah Treem, which Vincenzo Maggitti in his essay sees as part of the glorious tradition of melodrama. Fully representative of the recent generation of television drama, characterized by high-quality production values, carefully honed writing, visually ambitious directing, and impeccable casting, *The Affair* exemplifies what has been appropriately called “complex TV”. Focusing on the series’ pilot, Maggitti shows how the tropes and traits that identify *The Affair* as melodrama are firmly established from the very outset of the story, thus setting the tone for what follows in the overall narrative arc of the series.

The focus on gender, family, and class representations continues in the next essay of this volume, by Antonio Di Vilio, which takes as its case study an apparently unlikely candidate, namely the police procedural *Dragnet* (1951-1959), created by Jack Webb. Tracing its origins from radio to television, and highlighting its connections with the Hollywood noir tradition in film, Di Vilio’s essay uncovers and analyses *Dragnet*’s political, social and gender ideology, with particular attention to its treatment and depiction of American masculinity.

In his paper, Piergiorgio Trevisan uses a range of linguistic and multimodal approaches to show how the *Us versus Them* polarisation between the White and the Black population is construed in the American TV show *When They See Us* (2019). Starting from the contribution of linguistic and visual choices at the level of paratext, Trevisan then moves to analysing how the representation of the black characters heavily relies on trite stereotypes about food, sport and music. A key role in this polarisation is played by language variation, which also explains why the white characters struggle to make sense of some colloquial expressions used by the black group, ultimately misunderstanding their meaning.

Vincenza Minutella’s paper starts from the assumption that American TV series dubbed into Italian can exert a great cultural and linguistic impact on young audiences, who often mimic the way their favourite TV characters behave and speak. Ultimately, this can produce changes in the way Italian is spoken by Italian themselves. In order to collect evidence of this phenomenon, Minutella analyses a corpus of television dialogue consisting of 10 episodes from the world-renowned TV series *Modern Family* (2009-2020). By comparing the original version in English and

the correspondent dubbed one in Italian, she takes into consideration a number of Anglicism that are generally associated with *dubbese*, i.e. the specific language variety of dubbing.

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