

TV Discourse, Grammaticality, and Language Awareness

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Abstract

English-language, and especially US-American TV series have been identified as a major point of contact with the target language for learners of English as a Foreign Language, and the discourse represented there constitutes authentic material that is easily accessible. While the potential of using TV discourse in language education has been widely recognized for aspects such as listening comprehension and vocabulary development, the area of grammar has remained less well investigated. This may be due to the fact that TV discourse, which regularly aims to approximate spoken usage, stereotypically has been associated with “ungrammatical” content in terms of highly informal and non-standard usage. The present study explores sections of the TV Corpus to assess the actual presence of such usage (e.g. hedges like sort of, ain’t as a negator, double comparatives, etc.). From a language-educational perspective, it is suggested that TV discourse is well suited to illustrate different kinds of grammaticality and appropriateness in specific registers in a contextualized manner, with a particular view on informal spoken usage, a topic commonly considered underrepresented in language-pedagogical practice. It is further argued that grammaticality and appropriateness may differ across varieties of English as represented in TV discourse and that engaging with these issues will help to raise students’ language awareness.

Keywords: *TV discourse, telecinematic language, language awareness, grammaticality, appropriateness, pop culture*

Television Drama, Language Awareness and L2 Acquisition

Telecinematic language, and especially the fictional narrative represented in TV series has been assigned an increased “cultural legitimacy” (Mittell, 2015, p. 37), particularly in the past two decades. The associated type of scripted narrative, conventionally labelled TV discourse (TVD) or telecinematic discourse (see Piazza, Bednarek, & Rossi, 2011 for discussion), has been assessed from both linguistic and language-educational perspectives. A converging finding of descriptive linguistic studies is that the conversation as represented in TVD is similar to or at least approximating naturally occurring conversation in most respects (see, e.g., Levshina, 2017; Quaglio, 2009). Others, however, have noted that there are some differences due to the markedly different production and reception circumstances between the scripted and the natural variants, and certain subgenres, for instance sitcoms vs. soap operas (see Al-Surmi, 2012) may resemble natural

conversation more than others. This closeness of TVD to natural conversation has sparked interest among language educators, who have engaged with the topic for a considerable time (for early studies, see, among others, Handscombe, 1975; McLean, 1976; Peters, 1980) and have come to support TVD as a “surrogate or model of spoken English in the English language teaching classroom” (Bednarek, 2018, p. 244).

TVD seems to be particularly relevant in teaching contexts for several specific reasons. One is the persisting under- and misrepresentation of speech and the peculiarities of conversational grammar in language-educational textbooks and materials (Carter & McCarthy, 2017; Cullen & Kuo, 2007), which may lead to learners’ speech sounding unnatural and too formal (Dose, 2013b; Gilmore, 2010). Very much on a related note, but taking into account potential difficulties that learners may have when confronted with authentic (non-scripted) conversational material, Dose (2012, p. 103) has called TVD an “auspicious compromise between artificial textbook dialogues and the overwhelming ‘messiness’ of genuine language data”. She refers to the fact that TVD as a rule lacks performance errors and contains fewer instances of overlapping speech, which may be hard to process by language learners, especially in earlier stages of proficiency.

In addition to its inherent quality of “polished” spokenness (see Queen, 2015), other rationales mentioned for using TVD in the language classroom are its everyday relevance and interest for the language learner, as well as its authenticity. As to the former, a recent survey has shown that TV is the medium most commonly used by European citizens (84% claiming daily use) and that watching over the internet is increasingly popular among the younger population (European Commission, 2018). This practice, nurtured by the widespread online availability (e.g., on streaming services) and easy accessibility of relevant artifacts, facilitates watching TV in a foreign language (Montero Perez & Rodgers, 2019; Peters & Webb, 2018).

As regards authenticity, it has repeatedly been suggested that using relevant authentic materials, such as TVD, may (i) offer learners the chance to encounter realistic (spoken) language beyond the confines of the foreign language classroom, that is, the type of language they are most likely to encounter outside of an institutionalized context (Grant & Starks, 2001) and (ii) lead to heightened levels of learner motivation, a key variable in the language learning process (Jones & Cleary, 2019; Willmorth, 2005). Another basic rationale for employing TVD for language-educational purposes is grounded in cognitive psychology, where, according to the “multimedia principle” (Mayer, 2014), rich multi-channel input (i.e., speech and moving images in the case of TVD) results in higher learning gains (Gilmore, 2010, 2011; Montero Perez & Rodgers, 2019; Webb & Rodgers, 2009; see also Vanderplank, 2010).

Against the background of these more general arguments, a considerable number of studies have been conducted to explore the specific potentials of using TVD for language-educational purposes. While the focus traditionally has been on listening comprehension (as stated in Al-Surmi, 2012; Gilmore, 2010) and (incidental) vocabulary learning (e.g., Csomay & Petrović, 2012; d’Ydewalle & van de Poel, 1999; Frumuselu, de Maeyer, Donche, & Colon Plana, 2015; Neuman & Koskinen, 1992; Peters & Webb, 2018; Webb & Rodgers, 2009), we also find investigations (i) that specifically consider TVD for the teaching of pragmatic aspects (e.g., Abrams, 2014; Bardovi-Harlig & Mossman, 2016; Bruti, 2018; Grant & Starks, 2001; Washburn, 2001), (ii) that highlight the multiple options that working with TVD offers beyond the development of mere language skills (for example in terms of serving as a stimulus for follow-up tasks or as a content resource; Donaghy, 2019), (iii) that have a practical focus and present and evaluate concrete lesson series and plans and resources (e.g., Bonsignori, 2018; Gilmore, 2010; Urisman, 2014; Wang, 2012), (iv) that conduct experimental intervention studies to assess learning gains (e.g., Jones & Cleary, 2019) or (v) that specifically discuss implications for materials design (e.g., Jones, 2017).

What seems to be underrepresented, however, are studies that explicitly focus on grammar (for an exception, see Jones & Horák, 2014) and related wider domains, such as register awareness (but see Dose, 2013a; Jones & Cleary, 2019) and sociocultural awareness (but see Kaiser, 2011; Washburn, 2001). This is surprising, as the suitability of using TVD for “teaching pupils or students about many different aspects of language use, including expressions that might traditionally be neglected in textbooks or classroom teaching” (Bednarek, 2018, p. 245), that is, language variation observable in terms of informal spoken and non-standard features (and their sociocultural implications), has been mentioned in the literature.[1] Thus, authors apparently value using TVD as a pedagogical option that facilitates contextualized language practice (Donaghy, 2019; Grant & Starks, 2001) and recurrently have acknowledged the potential of TVD for relevant activities in passing (Wang, 2012; Willmorth, 2005; see also Liu & Lin, 2017). However, they have left the connection of informality and non-standardness to the broader topics of grammaticality[2] and language awareness implicit. This is unfortunate, given the fact that, crucially despite ample descriptive linguistic research, language-educational practice still is largely oriented toward a (written, formal, and often, British) standard and remains ignorant of variation and linguistic diversity. Informal and non-standard features are therefore persistently viewed as “inappropriate”, “incorrect” or “ungrammatical” in teaching (Mumford, 2009; Saraceni, 2017).

The present investigation attempts to put such beliefs into perspective, starting from the simple observation that scripted TVD mirrors conversation and thus carries important characteristics of its unscripted counterpart. The main line of argumentation pursued is that the occurrence of variation, inherently manifest in the occurrence of informal and non-standard features (Queen, 2015), and the alleged ungrammaticality of relevant features should be embraced rather than ignored in language education. This does not imply that learners do not need to be familiarized with the conventions of standard English. However, it is suggested that dealing with variation and contrasting relevant features with standard usage opens avenues for work on the broader goal of raising the students’ (meta-)language awareness.

Language awareness has been shown to be an important generic factor for successful foreign language learning (Andrews, 2008) and can be defined as “explicit knowledge about language, and conscious perception and sensitivity in language learning, language teaching and language use” (Svalberg, 2012, p. 376). It is a multifaceted construct that includes issues such as register awareness (context-dependence of the appropriateness/grammaticality of various structures) as well as the recognition of variation and complexity (e.g., of the co-existence of various dialects and sociolects). Activities related to language awareness have been claimed to foster noticing as a “conscious registration of attended specific instances of language” (Schmidt, 2010, p. 725), with the eventual aim to transfer input to intake, so that language learners are enabled to deal with different forms of language they are confronted with in various situations (see Jones & Cleary, 2019). It will be argued that using TVD as an authentic type of dramatized material holds particular potential for developing register awareness. At the same time, it is suggested that using TVD to these ends may help to counter persistent approaches in language-educational practice that misrepresent speech (Jones & Horák, 2014), that do not reflect variation, and that ignore non-standard features (Saraceni, 2017). On another note, given the extent of contact that students have with TVD outside of institutional contexts, an analysis of relevant material may be informative for language educators in terms of which textual and linguistic varieties learners encounter in their day-to-day contact with English (Grau, 2009).

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: To contextualize the present research, the following section provides a more detailed overview of statements on the issues of informality and variation in previous linguistic and language-educational research, both in general and pertaining

to TVD specifically. After a few notes on data and methodology, the next section contains the results of a corpus-based investigation of TVD with a view on variation and non-standard usages. Based on this exploration, the concluding part discusses the issues of grammaticality and appropriateness, and relates this to language-educational implications for the broader domain of language awareness.

Conversational and Non-standard Grammar, and the Properties of TV Discourse

Quantitative corpus-based analyses (see, e.g., Bednarek, 2018; Berber Sardinha & Veirano Pinto, 2017; Levshina, 2017) have shown that certain linguistic features, such as routine speech-act formulae (e.g., for greetings and apologies), discourse features characteristic of referential immediacy (e.g., first- and second-person personal pronouns, temporal and spatial deixis), or markers of expressivity (e.g., evaluative adjectives, swearwords) are overrepresented, while other features, such as disfluency markers or past-referring tense-aspect forms are underrepresented when TVD is compared to unscripted conversational data. However, a large degree of linguistic overlap has been universally acknowledged. Thus, it is not surprising that from a language-educational perspective TVD has been welcomed as a rich and authentic source of input that resembles naturally occurring informal conversation to a considerable degree (Al-Surmi, 2012; Donaghy, 2019; Grant & Starks, 2001; Peters & Webb, 2018; Quaglio, 2009; Quaglio & Biber, 2006). Further, it has been submitted that the informal nature of TVD contributes toward the realism of TVD (Bednarek, 2012, 2018). Such findings have led to statements that using TVD may even be preferable to textbook dialogues in terms of contextualization and perceived naturalness (Dose, 2013b; Jones & Horák, 2014; Washburn, 2001).

These views are grounded in a general discontent with traditional materials and approaches to grammar that are biased toward various versions of standard written grammar (see, e.g., Cullen & Kuo, 2007). By contrast, using authentic (conversational) material is viewed favorably in the recent literature on grammar instruction. There, conversational grammar is recognized as equally systematic and relevant, and therefore worth studying in its own right (Carter & McCarthy, 2017; Fernández Gavela, 2015; Hilliard, 2014; Larsen-Freeman, 2011; Leech, 2000; Thornbury & Slade, 2006), a view echoed in studies that focus on what Urisman (2014) – somewhat vaguely – has labelled “real language and grammar” in TVD specifically. It is clear that such a perspective is diametrically opposed to traditional ones that tended to stigmatize spoken discourse as “unsystematic”, “ungrammatical” or simply “bad” language (Grau, 2009; Willmorth, 2005), so that a revised and more nuanced conceptualization of “grammaticality” may be required (see “Discussion and conclusion”). Note, however, that, despite positions advocated in the literature, the traditional view may persist in language-educational practice. Grau (2009), for instance, in her survey of attitudes of EFL teachers in Germany, noted that “[s]ome teachers expressed concern about the English language TV programmes available to their students, considering the fact that they often feature a language that differs strongly from Standard English” (p. 170).

To pave the way for the assessment of whether TVD can be employed to illustrate instances of “ungrammatical” language (in terms of informal use and (non-standard) variation), it is crucial to establish an inventory of potential grammatical features to be tested. Note that fairly broad conceptualizations of “grammar” as well as of “informality” and “(non-standard) variation” are applied, also taking into account the fact that boundaries between “informal” and “non-standard” usage may be fuzzy, while items toward the non-standard end “would be regarded by linguistic purists as ungrammatical” (Cullen & Kuo, 2007, p. 365; see, e.g., Category C in Table 1). What unites the features in question, however, is that they are unlikely to regularly and frequently appear in textbooks (Carter & McCarthy, 2017; Fernández Gavela, 2015).

Two baselines are taken. The selection of grammatical items studied first relies on the list provided in Cullen and Kuo (2007), which has served to inform several previous studies, including ones on TVD (Jones & Horák, 2014). They divide the features into three categories, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Features of informal grammar (adapted from Cullen & Kuo, 2007)

	Feature	Example(s) (from Cullen & Kuo, 2007)
Category A: productive grammatical constructions (i.e., with grammatical encoding)	Noun phrase prefaces (“heads”)	<i>This little shop, it’s lovely.</i>
	Noun phrase tags (“tails”)	<i>I reckon they’re lovely. I really do, whippets.</i>
	Past progressive with reporting verbs	<i>He was telling me that they’d died of the frost or something.</i>
	Ellipsis	<i>[We are] Too old to change, aren’t we?</i>
Category B: fixed lexicogrammatical units	Particles (hedging devices)	<i>Sort of, kind of</i>
	Vagueness tags	<i>And things (like that), or something, and stuff (like that)</i>
	Modifying expressions (polite hedging)	<i>A (little) bit</i>
	Discourse markers (“inserts”)	<i>You know, I mean</i>
Category C: informal features sanctioned in prescriptive grammar (potentially related to language change)	<i>Less</i> instead of <i>fewer</i>	<i>You would have less cars on the road and less accidents</i>
	Analytic comparative with one-syllable adjective	<i>It’s definitely cheaper and more fresh.</i>

A second point of reference is the extensive list of non-standard features established in the *electronic World Atlas of Varieties of English* (eWAVE; Kortmann, Lunkenheimer, & Ehret, 2020). eWAVE is a survey-based, typologically-inspired “interactive database on morphosyntactic variation in spontaneous spoken English mapping 235 features from a dozen domains of grammar” (Kortmann et al., 2020) that covers 50 different varieties of English and illustrates non-standard usage in English worldwide. eWAVE was chosen as a baseline as it is widely used among descriptive linguists and freely available online, therefore also potentially serving as a point of reference for language-educational work. The intention is to merely show the broad scope of variation in TVD, serving as a basis for dealing with the issues of grammaticality and language awareness, so including all of the potential 235 features in a comprehensive manner would exceed the limits of this paper. Rather, a selection of salient example(s) from the twelve broader grammatical domains listed in eWAVE is presented, based on frequency criteria. This choice also facilitates comparison to earlier work that has explored the opportunities of using pop lyrics as another (conversational) text type to illustrate grammaticality and language awareness (Werner, 2019). Features and examples are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Features of non-standard grammar (based on Kortmann et al., 2020; adapted from Werner, 2019)

Feature area (eWAVE feature code(s))	Feature	Example(s) (from Werner, 2019)
Pronouns (34, 35)	Alternative forms or phrases for the second person pronoun <i>you</i>	<i>Ya, yuh, youse, y'all, you guys, you people</i>
Noun phrase (68, 78, 79)	<i>Them</i> instead of demonstrative <i>those</i>	<i>We ain't like them other fools, who don't compare to us</i>
	Double comparative	<i>Diamonds are my bestest friend</i>
	Extension of synthetic marking	<i>But the beautifullest treasures lie in the deepest blue</i>
Adverbs and prepositions (220)	Unmarked degree modifier adverbs	<i>I know we're gonna have a real good time</i>
Adverbial subordination (214)	Double conjunctions	<i>I was giving good loving yet still you strayed</i>
Verb morphology (130, 131, 147)	Past tense forms replacing the past participle	<i>If your girlfriend has went to any season opener basketball game...</i>
	Past participles replacing past tense forms[3]	<i>You ask me where I been?</i>
	<i>Was</i> for <i>were</i> in conditional clauses	<i>If I was you, I wouldn't like me either</i>
Tense and aspect (104)	<i>Done</i> (+ past participle) as a marker to express completed action/perfectivity	<i>I done seen you before what you got on them big rims</i>
Modal verbs (126)	Quasi-modals expressing aspectual meanings	<i>Excuse me but who are you fixing to be?</i>
Negation (154, 155, 157)	Multiple negation	<i>We don't need nobody 'cause we got each other</i>
	Multiple negation with negator <i>ain't</i>	<i>On the avenue, there ain't never a curfew</i>
	<i>Ain't</i> as a generic negator appearing before a main verb	<i>See I ain't try to hurt you</i>
Agreement (172, 174, 177)	Existential <i>there's</i> (and related forms such as <i>there is</i> and <i>there was</i>) with plural subjects	<i>There was tears on the steering wheel, dripping on the seat</i>
	Deletion of auxiliary <i>be</i> in progressive contexts	<i>Hey what Ø you looking at</i>
	Deletion of <i>be</i> as a copula	<i>Boy you Ø cute</i>
Complementation, relativization and discourse organization (204, 235)	<i>As/than what</i> in comparative clauses	<i>Tryna live on more than what I got</i>
	Quotative <i>like</i>	<i>I'm like "My skin, is it startin' to work to my benefit now?"</i>

Where possible, contributions from the Yale Grammatical Diversity Project (Zanuttini, Wood, Zentz, & Horn, 2018), a free online database that offers broad contextualization of grammatical variation in the US and that may also be used as an educational resource, are cross-referred in the results section.

Data

Bednarek (2018) has drawn attention to the fact that some linguistic variability exists between individual series and has cautioned against “drawing conclusions on the basis of analysing one TV series” (p. 124), as commonly done in earlier work (e.g., Al-Surmi, 2012; Jones & Horák, 2014; Quaglio, 2009). This does not imply that the results of these studies are without value. However, as stated above, the intention of this investigation is to assess the general potential of TVD for illustrating informality and variation with a view to raising language awareness. Thus, if a broader picture should be established (in terms of generalizations from the corpus findings to TVD as a whole), corpus data that are maximally representative of this type of language (variety) are required.

Therefore, it was decided to rely on the freely available *TV Corpus* as the most recent and largest collection of TVD available to date. It totals c. 326 million words from hundreds of English-language TV series and covers the period 1950–2017 (see also Davies, forthcoming). It was compiled from the OpenSubtitles database (Lison & Tiedemann, 2016). In this regard, it is important to note that subtitles intend to represent the actually spoken (performed) texts in written form and are subject to certain production constraints (e.g., only a certain number of words allowed per line, per time unit, etc.). However, earlier research has found that subtitles closely approximate the conversational nature of TVD as “subtitlers make an effort to achieve [. . .] realism” (Levshina, 2017, p. 312; see also Veirano Pinto, 2018).

For the purposes of the present study, a subsample (totaling c. 141 million words) of the *TV Corpus* was used that only contains the data for the most recent decade (2000–2017) and that is restricted to Northern American (US-American and Canadian) series. The rationale for limiting the data is that the selection most likely represents the type of TVD that learners worldwide engage with on a regular basis. All corpus searches were conducted on the English-Corpora.org interface, which allows both word- and part-of-speech-based queries within the “List” and “Chart” search options.

Results

Based on the inventory of informal and non-standard features established above, the extent of variation in TVD will be explored in the following sections. This is done to empirically assess claims that TVD is “ungrammatical” in the sense described above, that is, containing a broad range of informal and non-standard elements. This issue could also be approached in a purely quantitative fashion (e.g., How many standard second person singular pronouns do we find and how many non-standard ones? What is their relative proportion?). Arguably, however, the establishment of such information may be of more interest from a descriptive rather than a language-pedagogical perspective. Note that lexical aspects, such as lexical innovations and slang, would merit a separate treatment and thus are disregarded here unless they impact on grammatical aspects.

Informality

Productive grammatical constructions. The first focus is on productive grammatical items typical of informal spoken production (Category A in Cullen & Kuo, 2007). Among these, noun-phrase prefaces (“heads”) are listed, which are characterized by coreferentiality between a noun phrase and a pronoun in the subsequent clause. Noun-phrase prefaces (as well as tags, on which see below) have been viewed as devices facilitating processing on both the part of the speaker (increased planning time) and the listener. A broad range of relevant items can be found in the data, selectively illustrated in (1) to (5).

1. No, *this painting* it’s staying right here. (Parks and Recreation, Jerry’s Painting, 2011)[4]

2. But *the second guy*, he is smarter. (Rookie Blue, A Real Gentleman, 2015)
3. *Your dad*, he is so thoughtful, to the end. (Under the Dome, Speak of the Devil, 2013)
4. You know, when a girl is gonna look clean, *the accessories*, you really notice them, so it has to be really something special. (Project Runway, It's a Party, 2010)
5. *All the noise*, I just wanted it to be quiet, so I could hear. (Flashpoint, Fit for Duty, 2012)

A related phenomenon are noun phrase tags (“tails”), which regularly occur as a kind of appendix after an utterance and are assigned the function of “immediate reminder of what has been said, or what is important” (Cullen & Kuo, 2007, p. 367). Examples such as (6) or (7) are illustrative here.

6. They've gone, *the girls*. (Cucumber, Episode#1.8, 2015)
7. No, you don't think it's a good idea for you, but Jason is a very good idea for us. Jason is gonna make a lot of money, Ray. [...] I mean he's full-service, *Jason*. (Hung, Money on the Floor, 2011)[5]

Note that noun phrase tags may also include a verbal element, as in (8).

8. It's tougher than you think, *flesh is*. (Cardinal, Woody, 2017)

Another relevant productive grammatical construction characterizing conversation is the use of the past progressive with reporting verbs such as *say* and *tell* to introduce direct and indirect speech, typically with the functions to provide evidence for a previous statement, as in (9), or to express a non-assertive stance (Cullen & Kuo, 2007), as in (10).

9. Hey, we all make mistakes. Hers *was telling* me she did a porn. (Anger Management, Charlie & the Warden's Dirty Secret, 2014)
10. Look, I *was telling* you that I would vacuum, and I don't know that I would do that. (The Mindy Project, The Desert, 2014)
11. As your nurse monitor, I'm *telling* you that you cannot afford to get arrested again. (Nurse Jackie, High Noon, 2015)

The data also yield examples in the present progressive with a non-assertive function, as in (11). This complements Jones and Horák (2014), who report for the series they studied (*EastEnders*), that *say* is predominantly used in the present progressive whenever further explanation is provided (as in (12)) and the simple past (as in (13)) whenever speech is reported.

12. A: Listen, if you want to accuse me, you should have the guts to come right out and accuse me.
B: I don't have proof of anything.
A: I think you just want to be in charge again.
B: I'm *saying* you had plenty of motive. (SGU Stargate Universe, Space, 2010)
13. Yeah, Carly Wellin, she *said* that she'd rather lick a toilet seat than kiss you. (Alphas, Never Let Me Go, 2011)

A final area within the wider domain of productive grammatical constructions is situational ellipsis, that is, the omission of structural elements “retrievable from the immediate situation” (Cullen & Kuo, 2007, p. 368), resulting in reduced grammatical encoding. This phenomenon appears to be fairly widespread in TVD, as examples from the *TV Corpus* show, and affects various items such as auxiliaries (as in (14) and (15)), relative pronouns (as in (15)), personal pronouns (as in (16) to (18)), or even clauses (as in (17) and (18)), often at the beginning or end of utterances.

14. [Do] You understand me? (24, Day 8: 1:00 a.m.–2:00 a.m., 2010)

15. [I have] Got a witness [who] says you were doing exactly that. (Cold Case, Bombers, 2010)
16. [I] Saw your friend at the crash site. (Off the Map, Es Un Milagro, 2011)
17. I really like the man that you've become. [It's] Too bad you don't [like the man you've become] (Leverage, The Zanzibar Marketplace Job, 2010)
18. A: [Do you] You know him?
B: Yeah. [I] Sort of [know him]. (Iron Fist, Snow Gives Way, 2017)

Fixed lexicogrammatical units. In addition to the productive grammatical constructions, a number of non-modifiable lexicogrammatical items, either in the form of single words or short phrases, are considered characteristic of informal conversation (Category B in Cullen & Kuo, 2007). As these are “fixed” in their form and regularly occur in the same syntactic positions, they have been viewed as more manageable for learners compared to the productive items discussed in the preceding section.

Cullen and Kuo (2007) mention the particles *sort of* and *kind of* as conversational hedging devices that serve to create vague reference. While previous research on TVD is suggestive of an underrepresentation of vague items in comparison to unscripted conversation, as the audience “has only limited knowledge of the context and cannot seek clarification” (Levshina, 2017, p. 330), particles regularly appear in the corpus data and combine with items from various parts-of-speech categories, as illustrated in (19) to (23).

19. In your own weird, dysfunctional, *sort of* half-not-there way, you care about her. (Players, Barb's Husband, 2010)
20. You were... really not very good, and now I've *sort of* lost confidence in you as a therapist. (Desperate Housewives, The Glamorous Life, 2010)
21. That would *sort of* be antithetical to the whole. (13 Reasons Why, Tape 6, Side A, 2017)
22. Well, it seems *kind of* strange that Hassler would choose you for this one. (Wayward Pines, Where Paradise Is Home, 2015)
23. Can't really remember the host's name, but he was... he was *kind of* in his 60s. (Arrested Development, Borderline Personalities, 2013)

Bednarek (2018) notes that highly informal contracted forms of the particles are to be taken into account, and indeed they also occur widely in the TVD data, as in (24) or (25), which seems to be illustrative of the practice of subtitlers to aim at maximizing realism.

24. I'm *sorta* planning on being me for the rest of my life. (Ultimate Spider-Man, Venom, 2012)
25. *Kinda* makes you think, doesn't it? (Lost, Everybody Loves Hugo, 2010)

A conceptually related domain are vagueness tags, items “used frequently at the end of utterances in conversation to allow the listener to identify a general set of items based on the characteristics of the items given before the tag” (Cullen & Kuo, 2007, p. 370). Similarly to particles, they are used to hedge statements, as variously shown in (26) to (30).

26. You meet a lot of people at Comicon, fan expos, *and things like that*. (Lost Girl, Flesh and Blood, 2012)
27. Just do me a favor, start packaging lemons and limes *and things*, make it seem like we package. (It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia, Charlie Work, 2015)
28. She's beautiful, she graduated magna cum laude from, like, Brown *or something*. (UnREAL, Two, 2015)

29. I remember a room filled with toys *and stuff*. (Heroes Reborn, Project Reborn, 2016)
30. Listen, you got to tell me when you're grounded *and stuff like that*. (Nashville, Your Wild Life's Gonna Get You Down, 2014)

Yet another feature with a hedging function is what Cullen and Kuo (2007) refer to as the "modifying expression" (p. 370) *a (little) bit*, which serves to politely qualify adjective and noun phrases. Relevant examples, such as (31) to (33), are widespread in the TVD data.

31. So I think I'm *a little bit* justified. (I Hate My Teenage Daughter, Teenage Party, 2013)
32. Although he was hit by a truck and it was my fault, so I have *a little bit* of guilt. (Girls, It's About Time, 2013)
33. Well, I got off to *a bit* of a rocky start with Cliff. (The Deep End, Pilot, 2010)

A last feature set to consider are the discourse markers *you know* and *I mean*, alternatively referred to as inserts. These usually stand outside the syntactic structures they attach to and are seen as a regular feature of interactive conversation. *You know* carries the function of indicator of shared knowledge or as a pause marker to increase planning time for the speaker, as illustrated in (34) and (35), while *I mean* more often is used when a speaker clarifies or reformulates (Jones & Hórák, 2014), as in (36).

34. A: Until we get married a third time, you guys will never have to see each other again.
B: Well, *you know*, actually that's not the case. (The Big Bang Theory, The Conjugal Conjecture, 2016)
35. *You know*, you've been questioning my client for over five hours now. (Damages, Your Secrets are Safe, 2010)
36. A: You don't like the idea?
B: No, *I mean*, yeah, yeah, uh... absolutely. (Damages, Your Secrets are Safe, 2010)

Informal features sanctioned in prescriptive grammar. The final area of usage selectively highlights informal features that would explicitly be sanctioned as "ungrammatical" when a prescriptivist stance toward grammar is taken, given that a more formal (prescriptively "correct") variant exists in standard usage (Category C in Cullen & Kuo, 2007). Such features nicely illustrate the fuzzy nature (and potential overlap) of the concepts informality and non-standardness.

For the TVD data, it is interesting to note that the proportion of combinations of plural nouns preceded by the informal variant *less* ($n = 487$), as shown in (37), and the standard variant *fewer* ($n = 506$) is approximately balanced, which could be considered indicative of the fact that both formal and informal language feature in TVD (Bednarek, 2018).

37. So ask *less questions*, and make more money. (It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia, Mac and Dennis Buy a Timeshare, 2013)

Another feature sanctioned as "ungrammatical" are analytic comparative constructions with one-syllable adjectives (*more* + adjective). While the standard variant, synthetic comparison through adding *-er*, is widely more common in TVD, the analytic variant does occur, as in (38) to (41). Further, it has to be noted that a coordinated two-syllable adjective follows in (39), so that the use of the analytic form could be considered as a mere result of linguistic economy. Variation also seems to occur with recent additions to the lexicon, such as adjectival *fun*, as contrasted in (40) and (41).

38. And if you take a look, our line is undeniably *more fresh*. (How to Make it in America, Mofongo, 2011)

39. I thought, you know, I needed to be *more hip* or sexy (Satisfaction, Through Self Discovery, 2014)
40. We need to make sure Cattleman’s Ranch is *funner* than it’s ever been (Fresh off the Boat, Phil’s Phaves, 2016)
41. Is there a *more fun* way to say that? (Veep, Thanksgiving, 2016)

In addition to the items listed by Cullen and Kuo (2007), further informal lexicogrammatical features have been identified with which TVD “artfully and selectively simulates naturalistic speech, creating realism” (Bednarek, 2018, p. 180) and which are characterized by the existence of both a more formal and informal variant. While contracted forms in general are the majority variant in the data (e.g., $n = 989,312$ for *I’m*; $n = 107,048$ for *I am*; i.e., a proportion of 90.3% for the former), given that they are the default option in conversation, various patterns exist for auxiliary/modal constructions. Figure 1 shows the proportions of the informal (prescriptively sanctioned) variants (in combination with a lexical verb) in relevant contexts.

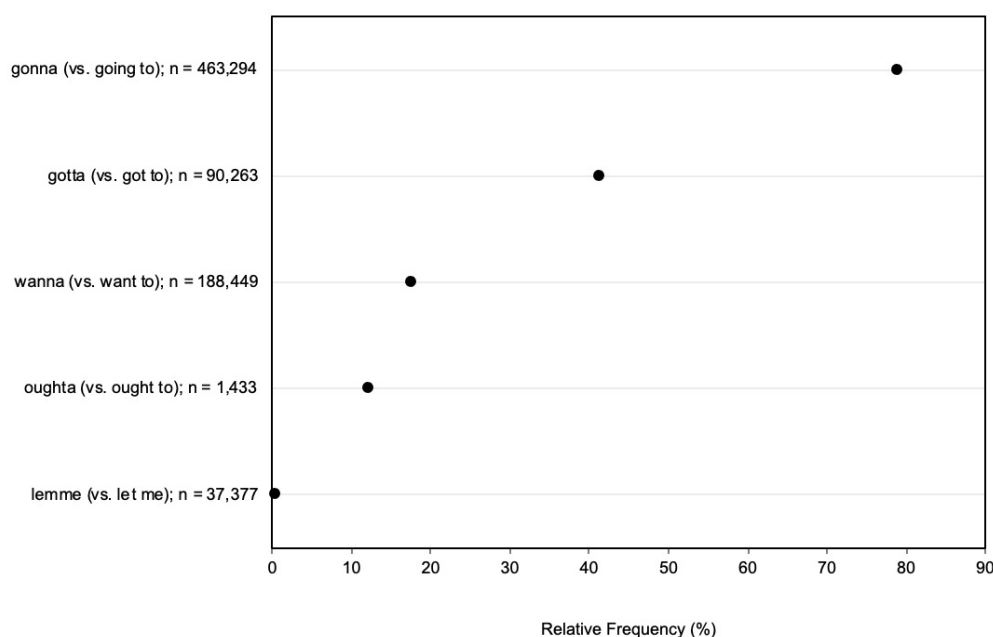


Figure 1. Proportion of informal variants of selected auxiliary/modal constructions (+ lexical verb) in the TV Corpus (2000–2017, US/CA section; n = added frequency informal + formal variants)

It is noteworthy that – also unlike for the combination *less/fewer* + noun (see above) – one of the variants seems to be the strongly preferred one in TVD, with an intermediate pattern attested for *gotta*. Even though it may be argued that this merely represents subtitling practice, it is indicative of the varying (and at times high) amount of highly informal usage encountered in TVD and the degree to which particular informalisms are established in TVD.

Variation

While observers such as Stamou (2014) have noted a presence of non-standard language forms in modern media in general (but cf. Moody, 2020), Bednarek (2018) has recognized that TVD in particular is fairly open to the usage of non-standard features, again with the multiple aims of characterization, creating realism, and constructing relationships between characters. Indeed, the data contain a wide range of non-standard items that illustrate linguistic variation, as detailed in the following.

Pronouns. Alternative forms or phrases for the second person pronoun *you* (eWAVE 34/35) are a feature where considerable variation is attested in the corpus. Several variants were retrieved, including *ya* (as in (42)) and *youse* (as in (43)), as well as the plural forms *y'all* (as in (44)), *you guys* (as in (45)), and *you people* (as in (46)).

42. Yeah, I'll see *ya*. (Leverage, The Bottle Job, 2010)

43. A: What?

B: We know where you can find drugs.

A: You ratting someone out?

B: Yeah, but not one of us. One of *youse*. (Orange is the New Black, Empathy is a Boner Killer, 2015)

44. *Y'all* are gonna knock it out of the park! (Nashville, When There's a Fire in your Heart, 2016)

45. Are you sure *you guys* don't want a muffin? (Damages, It's not my Birthday, 2010)

46. I told *you people*, I don't know anything! (Lost, The Package, 2010)

Noun phrase. The next area where variation occurs is the noun phrase. A salient feature here is the use of *them* instead of demonstrative *those* (eWAVE 68), as exemplified in (47). Note that this example further contains an example of existential *there's* with a plural subject.

47. *There's wolves* in *them* hills now, more than I've ever seen. (Game of Thrones, The Ghost of Harrenhal, 2012)

Within the noun phrase, another noteworthy feature in defiance of standard usage is the extension of synthetic marking, resulting in a regularized comparative (superlative) (eWAVE 79), as in (48) to (50). This pattern can be considered an opposing one to the analytic comparative constructions with one-syllable adjectives (*more* + adjective) as presented above. Note that it may involve semantic inversion, as exemplified in (50), where *baddest* implies 'skilled, able, effective'.

48. But on the Upper East Side, the *slipperiest* ice. . . (Gossip Girl, Damien Darko, 2011)

49. Did you ever hear the story of the *unluckiest* man in the world? (Chicago P.D., Justice, 2016)

50. Honestly, if it was my sister, I would get the biggest, *baddest* prick of a prosecutor I could find, and I'd tell him to go for the jugular. (Damages, Drive it through Hardcore, 2010)

In addition, double comparatives (eWAVE 78; Wood, 2012), as in (51), that may even combine synthetic marking and suppletion or that combine synthetic and analytic marking, as in (52), occur.

51. I wanna be the *bestest* actor in the world, like ever. (La La Land, Episode #1.5, 2010)

52. It is beautiful. It's the *most beautifullest* country I've ever seen. (Jersey Shore, Going to Italia, 2011)

Adverbs and prepositions. A feature that could be considered as either nonstandard or merely as part of informal spoken standard usage within the "minor" parts-of-speech, are unmarked degree modifier adverbs that formally correspond with adjectives (eWAVE 220). These are illustrated in (53) and (54). Example (54) further contains a noun phrase preface (see above).

53. Smells *awful* good in here, Mr. Besh. (NCIS: New Orleans, Help Wanted, 2016)

54. *Your dad*, he's been *real* worried about you. (Preacher, El Valero, 2016)

Adverbial subordination. Relating to the domain of adverbs, in the TVD data double conjunctions linking two clauses occur (eWAVE 214), as in (55) and (56). In standard usage, a single conjunction would be expected.

55. I can swim in the ocean, *yet still* remain dry. (Teen Wolf, Echo House, 2014)

56. And I appreciate it, Neil, *but still*, it's the least you could do. (Unites States of Tara, The Road to Hell is Paved with Breast Intentions, 2011)

Verb morphology. In the area of verbal morphology, leveling of past tense/past participle forms occurs. Corpus searches yielded examples of both past tense forms replacing the past participle (eWAVE 130), as in (57), and past participles replacing past tense forms (eWAVE 131), as in (58). Example (57) could alternatively be interpreted as elliptical (see Green, 2007).

57. I never *done* anything to you. (Outsiders, It's Good to be King, 2016)

58. The nail *has went* through the soft tissue in both the hands and the face. (Saving Hope, Goodbye Girl, 2016)

The corpus data also contain various instances of *was* instead of *were* in conditional clauses (eWAVE 147), as in (59). While this feature could be considered illustrative of the fuzzy nature of the borderline between spoken informal and non-standard use, it is interesting to note that quantitatively, the standard variant *if I were you* (n = 1,351) outnumbers the non-standard form *if I was you* (n = 187) in the data.

59. I'd start slow *if I was* you. (The Walking Dead, Us, 2014)

Tense and aspect. Variation in tense and aspect marking also features in the data, for instance in the use of the completive/perfectivity marker *done* (+ past participle) (eWAVE 104; Martin, 2018). This is shown in (60).

60. Cause we *done talked* to the state's bacon about that already. (Justified, Over the Mountain, 2014)

Modal verbs. As regards modal verbs, recently emerging quasi-modals expressing aspectual meanings (eWAVE 126), as in (61), occur, some of them with a strong regional association, such as be *fixin(g) to* (as in (62)) with the US South (Staub & Zentz, 2017).

61. That Russian bitch *finna* ['is about to'] upset the whole apple cart. (Claws, Avalanche, 2017)

62. Well, I'm *fixin' to* ['am about to'] un-complicate it. (GCB, Adam & Eve's Rib, 2012)

Negation. The grammaticality of certain features related to negation has traditionally been fiercely discussed, and negative concord/multiple negation (eWAVE 154; Matyiku, 2011), which involves the negative marker *not/n't* in combination with (an)other negative or negated item(s), has been stigmatized in the prescriptive literature. This stigmatization occurs despite its widespread actual usage, especially with Mexican American, African American, Southern American, and working-class speakers (Dose, 2013a). (63) to (67) illustrate relevant instances.

63. He *doesn't* know *nothing*. (Prime Suspect, Ain't no Sunshine, 2012)

64. No, man, no. I *don't* need *none* of those things. (The Strain, The Blood Tax, 2017)

65. That's why he *don't* trust *nobody* (Harry's Law, Send in the Clows, 2011)

66. I was *gonna* tell you I love you, and I *ain't never* said that to *nobody*, except this one guy before. (Orange is the New Black, Trust no Bitch, 2015)

67. And there *ain't no* Santa Claus *neither*. (True Blood, Who are you, Really?, 2013)

As shown in (66) and (67), examples of negative concord frequently include the non-standard negator *ain't*, a feature that has been found to regularly appear in collocation with further non-standard variants (e.g., *gonna* in (66)). A similar observation seems to hold for negative concord without *ain't* (see the zero third-person marking, as in (65)). Thus, it is justified to consider such

forms “social stereotypes; that is, speakers are consciously aware of these features and they are associated with value judgments” (Bednarek, 2018, p. 169). *Ain't* (with or without negative concord) serves as a negated form of *be* (eWAVE 155), as in (68), *have (got to)* (eWAVE 156), as in (69), or as a generic negator before an inflected or uninflected main verb (eWAVE 157), as in (70) and (71), respectively.

68. They're running the sickest game in town, *ain't* they? (Aquarius, Episode #2.7, 2016)

69. I *ain't got* much time. (United States of Tara, Crunchy Ice, 2011)

70. Bet you *ain't had* no father growing up. (The Killing, Seventeen, 2013)

71. I *ain't know* anybody else was in here. (Snowfall, Cracking, 2017)

Agreement. Other widespread non-standard features relate to the domain of agreement, for instance the use of existential *there's* (*there is/there was*) with plural subjects (eWAVE 172), as illustrated in (72) to (74).

72. I mean, *there's* worse *things* on American Apparel billboards. (Casual, Home, 2015)

73. Everywhere I look in this hospital, *there is* inappropriate *relationships*. (Grey's Anatomy, Start me up, 2011)

74. He said *there was problems* in the marriage. (Durham County, Family Day, 2010)

Other features pertaining to agreement found in the corpus are the deletion of auxiliary *be* in contexts where the progressive would occur in the standard (eWAVE 174), as shown in (75). Example (76) contains deletion of copula *be* (eWAVE 177; Parsard, 2016). These features could also be related to situational ellipsis (as shown in (14) to (18)).

75. What \emptyset you looking at, huh? (Empire, Sins of the Father, 2015)

76. Why \emptyset you so hot to join up? (Revolution, Memorial Day, 2014)

Complementation, relativization, and discourse organization. TVD data may further serve as a source for clause- and discourse level-related features. This area comprises *as/than what* in comparative clauses (eWAVE 204), as in (77), as well as quotative *like* (eWAVE 235), as in (78).

77. I'm sure it's a lot better *than what* you get in this dump. (Burn Notice, Split Decision, 2011)

78. And I'm *like*, I don't want to get in the middle of it. (Treme, Santa Claus, do you ever Get the Blues?, 2011)

Discussion and conclusion

It is evident from the overview presented in the foregoing sections that TVD as represented in the *TV Corpus* comprises a copious inventory of features illustrative of informality and non-standard variation. While such features are largely conventionalized in TVD, they can be considered highly salient in language-educational contexts as they are associated with non-standardness and/or conversational informality, areas commonly ignored or at least underrepresented in standard-oriented instructional practice. They are also salient as they feature in a type of artifact that is central to the lives of many, if not all, EFL learners.

Next, it is outlined how, based on the salience of these items, TVD can be more comprehensively exploited in language education to discuss the wider issues of grammaticality and appropriateness with a view to eventually raising learners' overall language awareness (Dose, 2013a; Grant & Starks, 2001). It is evident that such an approach goes beyond merely introducing individual structural features and their combinations (cf. Donaghy, 2019) and may contribute to complement

the traditionally “at best patchy” (Cullen & Kuo, 2007, p. 361) coverage of features of conversational grammar.

One caveat applies: Given statements in the literature and empirical evidence that the acquisition of grammatical structures does not occur incidentally (Gilmore, 2010; Van Lommel et al., 2006), it is likely that an “explicit” approach is required to achieve noticing of relevant structures on part of the language learners. While this certainly is an issue that necessitates empirical study on its own, in practical terms it is conceivable, based on the list of features and examples provided in this article, to compile a language-educational database of clips from TV series to illustrate the multitude of features and issues presented,[6] with raising language awareness as an overarching language-educational goal.

More specifically, showing instances of informal and non-standard usage as represented in TVD (see the examples above) opens many opportunities for assessments of grammaticality and appropriateness as context-dependent constructs (Fetzer, 2004). For instance, their usage could be contrasted to those in (unscripted) conversation and formal writing (as two potential points of comparison) to raise learners’ awareness that – rather than representing unified and uniform wholes – languages have diversified registers. In this respect, stylistic and pragmatic appropriateness and resulting social consequences could be highlighted (why are double negatives and the negator *ain’t* appropriate in TVD and informal conversation, but not in a job interview or a written application?). This similarly applies to issues of naturalness and fluency in conversation (when do I use markers such as *you know?* see also Dose, 2012; Mumford, 2009). A related issue that may be of particular interest to more advanced learners is an explicit consideration of the fuzzy and changing nature of the categories “(non-)standard” and “(in)formality” (is the use of *less* + plural noun or of *if I was* instead of *if I were* in conditionals a non-standard or rather merely an informal feature?).

In this regard, and with an additional view of raising learners’ “televisual literacy” (Bednarek, 2018, p. 243) and overall media literacy, it is further important to highlight the unique properties of scripted and performed texts, such as TVD. Scripted texts represent a hybrid category that unites characteristics of (typically) spoken and (typically) written production (Bednarek, 2012; Dose, 2013b; Queen, 2015). Thus, TVD texts are also representative of language use in the domain of pop culture (Werner, 2018; Werner & Tegge, 2021), which may differ from usages in unscripted conversation to some degree.

While some observers have been cautious in view of the potential danger of overburdening learners with language varieties (see, e.g., Dose, 2012), others have forcefully argued for a recognition of linguistic diversity in language education (e.g., Saraceni, 2017; Willmorth, 2005). In addition to register variation, it is suggested here that non-standard material as conveniently contained in TVD may also provide a welcome way to introduce regional and social variation (see also Sanne, 2019).[7] One essential aspect is to raise learners’ awareness of how “a language” can actually be defined, and to make them notice that in reality they will not only encounter the standard variety (or even rather a single standard variety) as represented in the bulk of language-educational textbooks and materials, but rather a diverse range of real-life usages. More specifically, the issue to be made evident is that actual language use and the ensuing occurrence of non-standard features may to a certain degree be determined by the social and regional background of the speakers, or rather the characters displayed. This could be highlighted by analyzing stretches of TVD where relevant characters (e.g., of different ethnicities) converse and systematically use non-standard items (see, e.g., the “who says this?” Section of Matyiku, 2011, focusing on multiple negation). Presenting and analyzing a stretch where speakers of African-American English interact, for instance, may lead learners to re-assess what counts as grammatical and appropriate in a certain

social or cultural context, and may provide an opportunity for introducing issues such as covert and overt prestige and cultural awareness. Such an embedded approach addresses longstanding calls (e.g., Little & Singleton, 1991) for the integration of pragmatic, socio-linguistic and social information into grammar instruction.

Lastly, assessments of grammaticality and appropriateness could be related to broader sociolinguistic topics. In general, using TVD material can be viewed as an opportunity to exploit a natural platform for the discussion of language topics and to introduce “syllabus-independent [...] grammar” (Dirven, 1990, p. 8); that is, grammatical variants (often informal or non-standard) that do not regularly form part of institutionalized language education but are highly instrumental in actual language use. The illustration of non-standard features of a language (in connection with register variation; see above) may facilitate moving away from viewing (and teaching) foreign languages as something stable and fixed (Pennycook, 2010; Wolfram 2014, 2019). Using relevant material may help to counter prescriptivist attitudes and practices as well as preconceived notions of languages being static and the standard variety as the “pure” form of a language (Saraceni, 2017). This has appropriately been summed up by Leech (1994), who argues that “[t]he discovery that native speakers use the language in unforeseen ways and in ways which may even contradict the grammar ‘experts’ is itself a salutary experience, which teachers can hand to their own learners” (p. 20). Using TVD arguably offers ample opportunity for encountering such “unforeseen” (i.e., informal and non-standard) uses.

At the same time, closer linguistic analysis may serve to show that linguistic variation of all types (register, social, regional, etc.) is universal, systematic, and regular. Following language-educational suggestions predominantly developed within the context of cross-language comparison for grammar instruction (see, e.g., Oomen-Welke, 2000; Rödel, 2018; Rothstein, 2010), it is argued that an approach that recognizes and discusses “deviant” structures – that is, deviant from the point of view of standard(ized) classroom usage, and as widely represented in TVD, for instance – creates the necessary distance to grammar on part of the learners (as a mere means to an end they know and apply). Such an approach enables them to adequately analyze and reflect on structures of their foreign (as well as their native) language(s).

From a different perspective, and again with a view to media/televsual literacy, starting from the usage of particular linguistic features and their combinations in TVD, it is also conceivable to discuss how they are consciously used for purposes of characterization and identity representation on screen (e.g., the non-standard second person pronoun *y’all*), and how this may lead to or undermine linguistic stereotyping (e.g., of Southern Americans) and ideologies (e.g., of a monocultural, monolingual United States; Metz, 2019; Stamou, 2014).

Overall, it is suggested that activities that aim at fostering the development of language awareness as a sociolinguistic competence through using TVD have the following advantages over traditional approaches: (i) they take into account pertinent findings both from descriptive linguistics (Saraceni, 2017); and (ii), from a language-educational perspective, they could inform a view of grammar as a pragmatically adequate “grammar of choice” (Larsen-Freeman, 2011, p. 59). This conceptualization of grammar arguably also does more justice to the degree of informality and types of variation learners encounter in their daily contact with a foreign language. While the development of relevant materials that reflect contextually, regionally, and socially motivated grammatical variation has repeatedly been advocated (e.g., Wolfram, 2014), it is suggested here that the potential of TVD (and other pop culture artifacts; see, e.g., Werner, 2019) could be exploited more to complement pertinent efforts of contextualized teaching of language variation. Even though relevant forms will not necessarily be actively used by the learners themselves (see Carter & McCarthy, 2017), they may benefit from metalinguistic analysis as an authentic classroom

activity, facilitating the development of a critical stance toward linguistic prescription, language-related prejudice, and language ideologies.

About the Author

Valentin Werner is an Assistant Professor of English Linguistics at the University of Bamberg, Germany. His research interests include Applied Linguistics, Corpus Linguistics, Media Linguistics, Stylistics, as well as the study of language variation and change. He has recently published articles in *Corpora*, the *Journal of Second Language Teaching & Research* and the *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics*, and has co-edited volumes on pop culture in language education (Routledge, 2021) and on tense and aspect in second language acquisition and learner corpus research (John Benjamins, 2020).

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- [1] In this regard, it is further noteworthy that, contrary to what studies investigating incidental vocabulary acquisition through TVD (see above) have shown, there is no conclusive evidence for incidental grammar learning (van Lommel, Laenen, & d’Ydewalle, 2006), an issue to be revisited in the discussion section.
- [2] For the purposes of this article, “grammaticality” is conceived of as “acceptability” in terms of actually attested usage in performance (as evidenced in the corpus data).
- [3] These occurrences could alternatively be analyzed as ellipsis (see Table 1), which again is illustrative of the fuzzy nature of categorization boundaries between informal and non-standard.
- [4] All example labels have the following structure: series, episode title/number, year.

[5] Slightly more context is provided here to highlight that *Jason* is not a vocative in the example, as the referent is not part of the conversation.

[6] See, for example, the *Lumière* database of the *Berkeley Language Center*.

[7] A further restriction of is that due to the data sample used in the present study, worldwide varieties of English could not be considered. Peters (1980), however, has already noted that TVD may be used “by the serious English language researcher for the study of particular dialects of English and/or for the study of particular sociolinguistic/sociocultural differences among the various nations that use English” (p. 18). Such studies would be facilitated by the *TV Corpus*, if all material contained therein is considered.

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