Chapter 1
Language in a Mediated World

Mad Men in a Modern Family World

On November 7, 2012, the political commentator Matthew Dowd said that the GOP had become “a Mad Men party in a Modern Family world.” His comment was meant to partially explain the reelection of Barack Obama; however, when I heard it I was struck by his use of two popular television shows as the metaphorical representation for that morning’s political reality. The fact that his comment was repeated frequently and posted to social media venues like Facebook and Twitter illustrates its resonance. What he seemed to mean with the first part was that the GOP was living in, and appealing to, a past in which the leaders of the party were the same kinds of white, upper-class, men in their thirties, forties, and fifties depicted as the main characters in the series Mad Men (2007–2015), a show set in a 1960s Manhattan advertising agency and renowned for its realistic connection to a specific time and place but as seen through an early twenty-first-century set of eyes. The show also captures the start of the transition in the United States from post-World War II sensibilities about the homogeneity of political and social life to a seemingly messier engagement with heterogeneity.

Dowd contrasts the world of Mad Men with the one that is presumably more centrally located in 2012, namely the diverse suburban California world inhabited by the extended family depicted in Modern Family (2009– ). On Modern Family, the social hierarchies are transparently unstable, shifting as scenes and relationships change. It is never entirely clear who, if anyone, is “in charge,” and as Gina Bellafante (2013) notes about the show, it “[mainstreams] the various and sweeping changes in domestic life.”
*Modern Family* captures the contemporary outcomes of many of the nascent changes caught by *Mad Men*. Through its lens, the focus of attention shifts from a political, public, and domestic life that was idealized as homogenous to one that celebrates its diversity.

Of further interest in this analogy is the fact that *Mad Men* is a modern testament to historical detail and to capturing a feel of a time, while also critiquing that very time and many of the values and personal qualities the characters of the show hold as dear and inevitable. It’s by design that the kings of *Mad Men* are womanizers and that the few people of color who populate their world rise no higher in the social hierarchy than the hired help. On the other hand, *Modern Family* presents an idealized view of the modern suburban United States and captures a feel of the early part of the twenty-first century. The show attempts to portray the messiness of difference. At the same time, the show celebrates the power of things that are shared, like family connections, shared histories, love. Like *Mad Men*, *Modern Family* is visually of its time, with a deep embedding of electronic forms of communication and “mockumentary” moments in which characters let the audience in on their true feelings even if they don’t actually share those feelings with the other characters.

While neither show is specifically about language (and, in fact, few media products ever are), language is of course an inextricable component of both shows and helps to sustain the general settings, the internal consistency of the characters, and the unfolding of both the broad and the narrow narrative arcs. Language can function this way primarily because of what linguists refer to as variation, by which they broadly mean alternative ways of using grammar, of pronouncing vowels and consonants, of structuring conversations, and of selecting particular words over other similar words. The *Mad Men* and their families are mostly not the New Yorkers depicted in films like the *Midnight Cowboy* (1969) or shows like *All in the Family* (1971–1979) – audiovisual products set in roughly the same time period in the Manhattan of the 1960s and 1970s. They are not Taxi Drivers or George Jeffersons. They speak in ways that provide consistency for their characters as “masters of their own destiny.” They use Standard American English and the general linguistic style that modern audiences associate with aristocrats and the Golden Age of film and television. They use a formal style no matter the situations in which they find themselves. As John McWhorter (2009) writes:

More generally, however, the writers at *Mad Men* seem to have an idea that in the early sixties, people spoke more “properly” than they do now. And they did, in formal and public settings. Until the late sixties, there was a sense that language was to be cosseted and dressed up in public in the same
way that one wore deodorant. Think of the old gesture of clearing your throat before Making a Speech, the speech having been carefully written out and practiced, as opposed to today when we prefer looser “talks.”

This same style is interestingly echoed in *Modern Family* in the character of Manny, the half-grown son of the one non-native English speaker in the cast of characters. Manny’s speech style is extremely formal in virtually all settings and contrasts directly with the much more casual style of most of the other characters. Each of the characters is a recognizable *type* and their language supports their *typification*: for example, the spacey, shallow teenage girl; the brainy, nerdy teenage girl; the sexy Colombian wife and mother; the geeky, gadget-obsessed white dad who tries too hard to be cool; the flamboyant gay uncle; and, yes, even a gruff, old, white master of the universe in the family’s patriarch. While all the characters save the non-native speaker of English use more or less Standard English, just like the characters in *Mad Men*, it is a Standard English that relies on variation to help distinguish the characters from one another. The older teenage daughter peppers her lines with ‘like’; the goofy younger son says ‘dude,’ as does his trying-to-stay-hip father. One of the gay uncles uses extremely precise color terminology, and both uncles are masters of snark.

Even though *Modern Family* and *Mad Men* differ in fundamental ways, their similarities as contemporary media products make them available as metaphorical reference points. While Matthew Dowd’s quote was a comment on politics, it also serves as a useful illustration of why I’ve written this book. People use media broadly as a way of understanding, organizing, and categorizing their experiences. Matthew Dowd could have made his critique, as many others did, based on some of the actual political events and players, but doing so would have missed the nuance and creativity that the juxtaposition between *Mad Men* and *Modern Family* specifically highlighted. For as much as the facts of our actual lives influence our perceptions and understandings, the facts of our stories do the same. As I’ll show throughout this book, language has an important place as part of the package we use for those perceptions and understandings.

**Why Does a Linguist Care about *Mad Men* or *Modern Family***?

Before moving too deeply into the substance of language within the mass media, it’s important to understand the specific perspective of this book and me as its author. *Language* is a topic in which many different kinds of
people, including many different kinds of scholars, take keen interest. While ostensibly talking about the “same” issue when we focus on “language,” in fact linguists, including me, have a particular way of thinking about language and of posing questions related to language. A linguist is someone focused on the broad understanding of language as a characteristic of the human species, an understanding that is oriented fundamentally around the question, “What do you know when you know a language?”

Answering that question leads us in various directions, and linguists explore lots of different things about language—from the details of the sounds of language, how speakers of languages create words and sentences, how language changes over time and what constrains that change, how meaning works, how writing is related to speech, how children acquire language, how adults acquire new languages, how language comes to be understood as a resource for social information, what things languages have in common, and in what ways languages differ. Regardless of the wide variety of questions and conversations about language that linguists find intriguing, virtually all of them are united by an interest in what it is about human beings that makes us language users. Linguists also tend to agree that even though all humans are predisposed toward becoming users of language, one critical ingredient must trigger that process. In order to become language users we require some kind of linguistic input, and the primary mechanism by which we get the input is through interaction with other people.

Social interaction is not only the source of our language input, though; it is also one of the major functions facilitated by language. As we interact with one another, we constantly monitor both our own speech and that of the people we’re interacting with, sometimes shifting our language to be more like that of those we’re interacting with and sometimes shifting it to be more distinct. For instance, if you notice someone you really like using a word that you are unfamiliar with, you are likely to find ways to use it in your own speech once you have determined what the word means. In this way, you add to your own vocabulary and indicate to your conversational partner that you want to be somehow more connected to her. As you use the new word in interactions with new people, the process repeats itself. If the new folks also know your original conversational partner, then they may connect the two of you via your similar use of language. They may also notice that the two of you are using a word that other people don’t. In other words, even as you are linguistically similar to one another, you differ from people who don’t use that word.

The use of a single word is obviously highly simplified as an illustration of the role of language for social interaction. Language turns out to be infinitely more complex than just a series of words, and it can vary across
sounds, words, and sentence constructions. In a more direct connection to social interaction, language can also vary in areas like how it’s used to produce stories, indicate whose turn it is to speak, and say hello and good-bye, to name a few. We’ll delve into these details further in Chapter 2, where we’ll see that language variation is often tied to characteristics of speakers such as where they are from, who they are, and their underlying motivations and experiences. For right now, it’s important to see the inherent connection between social interaction and language variation.

Language is just as important to setting up a story and making that story believable as are the visual, audio, and other special effects that may be used. For instance, language mediates between my own conceptual world and yours. In other words, language is the mechanism by which you gain access to my thoughts and by which I can make my thoughts (or at least parts of them) available to you. Like language, the mass media provide a set of channels that connect different conceptual worlds. This connection can be related to the “real” world as we see in informational media, which curate, package, and deliver specific representations of the world we live in. And of course it can also be related to the conceptual worlds generated through imagination and creativity, the worlds that are the main focus of this book.

Language and media share other characteristics as well. One of the curious ones is that their workings are typically rather hidden from their users. For instance, “the media” consist of regular people, just like the audience does, and thus are not really separate from the audience. The people who produce the media rely on many of the same social, cultural, and political contexts to make sense of their experience as the audience does. They draw on many of the same stylistic and linguistic repertoires to make their art and stories accessible to others. In other words, “the media” don’t do things independently of the communities of which they are a part. They exist in those communities in the same way that schools and churches and ice cream shops are parts of communities. The media represent institutions and as such have their own particular systematic structures that affect how they engage and are engaged by the people who use them. Claudia Bubel (2006, 58), for instance, writes the following about the process of producing a television show:

Once these ideas are realised as scripted dialogue, verbal interactions between actors/characters are shot by the camera team, with the camera focusing in on the face of the speaking or listening actor/character and sometimes all of the conversationalists. The filmed material is then edited in a joint effort by cutters, directors, and producers... All of this process is relevant in the design of utterances for the overhearers so that the
co-construction of meaning in screen-to-face discourse is a joint effort of the audience in front of the screen, the actors, the directors, the screenwriter, the story editors, the producers, the camera team and the cutters involved in the editing process.

This very collective process of constructing a media product is part of what makes exploring language variation in the media so fascinating and also explains why it differs so significantly from the capture of everyday language (such as we see in many homemade videos on YouTube, for instance). Like “the media,” language is a highly structured system – or really a system of systems, but its rules are not always transparently available to its users and it does not lend itself entirely easily to change. All human beings are users of language, and yet we frequently have a very poor sense of how language really works, tending to focus mostly on “words” and what they mean. We think of language as primarily a mechanism of communication, and, while it is certainly that, there is much more to it than most of us realize.

Another characteristic that media and language have in common is that their users have many opinions about them. The media are frequently the culprit when other kinds of social anxieties arise. During politically charged times, the media are blamed for being partial to one side or another. Similarly, language is often a focus of deep concern and seen as an emblem of societal decay. As Jim and Lesley Milroy have discussed it (Milroy and Milroy 1999), language becomes the focus of moral debates when anxieties about morality more generally arise. It connects, for instance, to questions of being a good citizen when immigration becomes of social concern or to questions of standards when technologies, such as the Internet, bring anxieties about social change occurring too rapidly. To return to one of the media products that began this chapter, we can look at a scene from Modern Family in which an area of current linguistic change is the focus of a scene.

This scene illustrates how language may be simultaneously part of the overall contextualization of the story, including the contextualization of the characters themselves, and also can be a mechanism of moving the plot forward. The scene involves the mother, Claire, who can be described as a “helicopter parent”; Haley, Claire’s daughter, who is a stereotypical teen-aged American girl, and an unnamed friend of Haley’s. This scene is a flashback scene tied to an earlier discussion in the episode of issues different members of the family want to avoid. Claire wants to avoid having to drive Haley around and this flashback scene explains why. Driving together is often the scene of arguments.

In this scene, Haley is in the back seat with her friend, talking animatedly about clothes, and Claire is listening in as she drives. (You can
find a list of the some of the conventions linguists use, and that are being used in this book, on page 00. These conventions capture various components of spoken language that are not usually written out formally.)

Example 1.1 Modern Family, “Fears,” Season 1, Episode 16, Christopher Lloyd and Steven Levitan (creators), ABC, March 2, 2010

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1 Haley: And then I’m like “There’s no way I’m wearing that” and she was like “If you don’t wear it then you can’t play.”
2 [Claire shakes her head as she listens]
3 Claire: Like! [turns toward the girls while still driving]
4 Haley: And I was like “That’s fine by me.”
5 Claire: Honey, like!
6 Haley: And she was like “If you don’t play then “=
7 Claire: = Like!
8 Haley: Mom! Stop!
9 Claire: Stop saying like all the time
10 Haley: [You’re embarrassing me! Sto:::p<screams incoherently>
11 Claire: [Like like like like<screams incoherently>

This scene illustrates a juxtaposition of characters primarily linked to age. Haley is using a newish form of the word ‘like’ in which ‘like’ together with a form of ‘to be’ can be used as a verb of quotation. ‘Be like’ is the
focus of frequent commentary outside the media world and is especially associated with teenage girls even though it is used with more or less equal frequency among males and females and across the age spectrum, including among speakers as old as 80 and as young as 3 (D’Arcy 2007).

This scene, however, captures a fairly typical dynamic in which an adult is bothered by a younger person’s language use. The scene thus exemplifies something familiar and recognizable for the audience. First, it illustrates why Claire would want Haley to earn her driver’s license. Claire doesn’t wish to continue driving Haley around because she’s worried about arguments erupting. The fact that the example argument Claire thinks of has to do specifically with language is notable, especially because this source of disagreement appears to need no further contextualization or clarification. Claire’s dislike of the use of quotative ‘be like’ is assumed to be clear, recognizable, and largely independent of any broader context.

Second, within the context of the show as a whole, the encounter over ‘be like’ captures the broader tensions between Claire and Haley in which Claire continually seeks to change her daughter into a more mature, thoughtful person and Haley resists that change, finding her mother intrusive and embarrassing. The scene provides further support of Haley’s characterization as a stereotypically teenaged girl with shallow interests and concerns, who is portrayed as not very intelligent. Haley’s character is in many ways the quintessential Valley Girl, and character bios of her that are available in various places, including the show’s Internet home page, frequently characterize her as a Valley Girl (and always characterize her as a stereotypical teenager girl). This characterization of Haley runs throughout the show as Haley is regularly presented as something of an airhead and juxtaposed with her sister, Alex, a nerdy, smart, but not very popular girl. It is difficult to imagine a more iconic indication of a shallow, non-school-oriented teenage girl in the United States in the early part of the twenty-first century than the use of ‘be like.’

**Food for Thought**

Think of three or four characters who appear in one of your favorite movies or one of your favorite television series. Write a character bio about each of those characters that includes something about how they use language. Then, compare your bios to those that are available online for the same characters.
Beyond being part of characterization, language can also be an integral part of moving the plot forward, either because it is used to explain or narrate something that has happened outside the narrative, such as when a character tells part of her back story in order to explain something about her actions, or someone divulges his inner thoughts while he was involved in doing something and that narration changes the course of the action.

Sometimes, the very form of language itself is the action, such as in the following scene from the film *Love Actually* (2003). This film explores various aspects of love through several different stories about people who will turn out at the end of the film to be either casually or coincidentally related to one another. The vignette in Example 1.2 involves a young man, Colin, who is generally inept at courting young women, and so he decides to exploit his Britishness by going to the United States to try and pick up women there, drawing on his understanding of the prestige his British accent will afford him. He ends up in a bar in a small town in Wisconsin in the middle of the winter.

**Example 1.2** *Love Actually*, Richard Curtis (dir.), 2003, Universal Pictures

1  [Colin comes into the bar.]
2  Bartend: Can I help you?
3  Colin: Yes. I’d like a Budweiser please. King of Beers.
4  [woman slowly looks up from her drink]
5  Bartend: One Bud comin’ up.
6  Stacey: Oh My God. Are you from England?
7  Colin: Yes. [smiling]
8  Stacey: Oh [hhh]. That is so cute [removing coat hood] [...] Hi, I’m Stacie.
9  [They shake hands and each giggle]
10 Stacey: Jeannie?
11 Jeannie: [at jukebox, turns around] Yeah?
12 Stacey: This is [..]
13 [cut to Colin]
14 Colin: Colin. [shakes Jeannie’s hand] Frissle. [removes knit cap]
15 Jeannie: Cute name. Jeannie.
16 Stacey: He’s from England.
17 Colin:Yep, Basildon. <noticeable British-accented first vowel [basIldn]>
In this scene, the basic characterization is established and the individual characters are set up. The two dialects of English – American English and British English – are central to the overall contextualization and setting of the interaction and are fundamental to the various characters. In this sense, the accents are a property of the characters, just like the clothes the characters are wearing and the general setting in a bar are central to the overall context. Who these characters are is tied to how they speak, and how they speak helps create them as recognizable and believable characters. The young women for example use a distinctive style of American English, indicative of people who are geographically and socially somewhat provincial. They also represent very clear images of young women who spend their leisure time in bars hoping to create romantic liaisons with desirable men.

As the scene continues, it becomes clear that language is also fulfilling a different function. Rather than being used only to establish the context, it becomes the vehicle of the actual plot development.

1 [A few minutes later. Colin, Stacey, Jeannie, and Carol Anne at a table laughing. There are lots of empty beer bottles on table.]

2 Stacey: That is so funny. @@@@ Wha% whaddya call that? [points to beer bottle]
As we see from the continuation of the bar scene, the juxtapositions of British and American English pronunciation are central to the plot and Colin is able to do what he set out from England to do: pursue young women by making use of the prestige of his Britishness, even though his fundamental awkwardness has prevented him from being successful in Britain where he has no such capital to work with. In the bar, the narrative moves to the characters having a lot of fun together as they exoticize (and sexualize) their linguistic differences. This is particularly evident in lines 4 and 7 where the women try to mimic Colin’s pronunciation and then show disappointment in lines 10–12 when it turns out that the British and American pronunciations of “table” are the same. Still, Colin ends up being invited back to stay with the girls and eventually returns to England, triumphantly involved with the fourth roommate, Harriet. This scene highlights the two major functions language variation plays in the context of the mass media, *characterization* and *plot development*. On the one hand, the characters are partly created through the juxtaposition of the variety of English they use, and on the other, the specific differences between those varieties provides a central mechanism for advancing the narrative plot.
It’s exactly these two functions of language within the context of the mass media that make the mass media interesting for people who are interested more broadly in language from a linguistic perspective. Although linguists have traditionally been fairly skeptical of the narrative media as a source of interesting information about language variation (Chambers 1998; Labov 2000), scenes like this one illustrate just how intriguing and analytically rich an examination of language in the media can be.

**Narrative Media as a Site for Linguistic Exploration**

Narrative media as I envision them for this book involve people who are representing someone other than themselves, usually someone fictional or historical. This differs from informational media in that information-oriented media typically have people representing themselves (or at least some version of themselves) in particular kinds of situations (cooking, talking to a host, delivering the news, and so on) (see the following for further discussion of this distinction: Thompson 2003; Kolker 2009; Cullen 2014). I assume narrative media to be tied largely to fictionalized content, though there is no clear-cut line for unambiguously distinguishing fiction and non-fiction or imagination and information. For instance, virtual online communities, such as *Second Life* (2003), or multiplayer video games, such as *World of Warcraft* (2004), have non-fictional as well as fictional components. Reality television presents another genre of popular representation that is difficult to clearly delineate as fictional or non-fictional. Like a documentary, reality television frames a narrative in
particular ways and for particular purposes, but the people and events being represented are fundamentally representations of themselves. Like more canonical fictional television, though, the situations in which reality television characters find themselves are often scripted for them and they may be encouraged by the show’s producers and directors to highlight similarities and differences with other characters.

Media is a massive construct, made up of various kinds of technologies, products, people, and activities. A medium is a channel through which information, entertainment, communication, and so on can flow. At some level, of course, language itself is fundamentally a medium, an intermediary between my thoughts and yours. In the more conventional sense, and in the sense being used here, media act as an intermediary, or a channel, between particular content and its audience. For instance, broadcast media are a channel through which content is transmitted electronically to an audience that is not in the same place as the content. Print media, on the other hand, are a channel in which content is presented via some kind of material object such as a book. Finally, news media refers to channels through which specific content – news – is delivered. These can include both print and broadcast channels. In this book, I am interested in the broader spectrum of commercial media, namely, those media that create information and entertainment products to be delivered to a public. Commercial media are financed either directly by that public (for instance, via taxes or subscriptions) or by advertisers who hope to use the media product as a vehicle for connecting advertised products and services to the public.

Canonically, most people mean “mass media” when they speak of “the media.” Examples of mass media include broadcast, print, and electronic forms of content distribution that are available simultaneously to a broad range of recipients, regardless of those recipients’ geographic or temporal location. Non-mass forms of media are those forms that are not designed or intended for a broad and largely unknown audience and which are not focused on some kind of commercial appeal. These include products like home movies, telephone calls, and texting.

The distinction between mass and non-mass is largely idealized and gradient rather than specific and categorical. The gradience is apparent in the changing nature of the meaning of “mass” from being primarily about mass delivery of a media product at a specific point in time, such as when a movie opens in theaters or a television show is broadcast, to being a system in which the distribution of media products is independent of time so that an individual viewer may access the product when s/he wishes. This change to the distribution mechanisms makes it less likely that many
people are watching the product at the same time even though it is available to them all at the same time (and at virtually all times). The notion of *gradience*, as compared to *categoricity*, recurs throughout this book and is applicable to a wide range of conceptual distinctions concerning media as well as language.

A second distinction worth bearing in mind with respect to the media is the one between media products that are informational as compared to imaginative. Informational media are largely those media that are representing actual events, people, or situations, such as the news media, sports broadcasts, awards broadcasts, documentary films, and game shows. In contrast, imaginative media emerge from the media producer’s imagination and are largely fictional in nature. These types of media include novels, situation comedies on television, non-documentary films, and so on. Of course, the difference between informative and imaginative is not a strict distinction, and there are many ways in which the functions of both broad types are shared. For instance, both can be centrally connected to the commercial nature of entertainment. Further, it’s easy to imagine cases where the two types blend together. For instance, several types of reality television programming combine aspects of informational and imaginative orientations and that combination is part of their specific appeal. Still, in a reality program, as compared to a situation comedy, the people being depicted are portraying some version of themselves rather than characters created out of whole cloth for the purpose of the show. In this book, I will primarily discuss language variation in the context of imaginative mass media.

A third distinction worth considering is between scripted and unscripted (or edited and unedited) mass media. As with the distinctions between information/imagination and mass/personal, the distinction between scripted and unscripted serves to define two edges of a continuum. The distinction matters because of the complex relationships between the writer, director, actor, and character involved in producing scripted, performed language. At some level, characters are not themselves animators of language because they are always the product of an author’s, an actor’s, a director’s, and an audience’s imagination. As Richardson (2010, 3) writes,

[Television] repeatedly displays people talking, showing audiences how characters behave in the varying circumstances of their narratives. These stories, and the talk they give rise to, mediate between the familiar and the extraordinary, and engage the imaginative powers of their receivers as well as their creators.
In addition to the different set of participants involved in producing and receiving media, the evolution of technologies of production and distribution also plays an important role when thinking about the place of language in the mass media (Cullen 2014). At some level, the story of language in the mass media goes back at least to the medieval period when the majority of the population couldn’t read, but when works of imagination nonetheless relied on language variation to do some of the work of plot development and characterization. Very early works of fiction, such as *Don Quixote* (1605, 1615), the *Inferno*, and *The Canterbury Tales* (both fourteenth century), for instance, relied on the vernacular, rather than Latin, to represent their respective stories. Further, the characters Don Quixote and his trusty sidekick, Sancho Panza, speak differently from one another, with Don Quixote using the chivalrous language of knights and Sancho Panza speaking as an uneducated peasant. Similarly, Chaucer made use of regional dialects in his famous *Canterbury Tales* to differentiate the characters in particular ways. Language variation was part and parcel for some of the earliest forms of mass media and has remained so through various technological advances such as recording sound, linking sound and image, and electronically broadcasting to a wide audience via radio waves, physical cables, or satellite, and doing so in both analog and digital formats.

As Bauman (2011, 39) notes, media forms always carry some of their contextual history with them, and that contextual history matters for thinking about language variation. The representation of language variation and the role of language variation for character and plot development are linked to the contextual histories of the media channels.

Some of the most interesting historical moments for language variation in the narrative mass media occur at those points of transition facilitated by

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<th>Medium</th>
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<td>Novels and narrative poems</td>
<td>As early as the fourteenth century (<em>Canterbury Tales, Inferno, Don Quixote</em>)</td>
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<td>Early sound recordings</td>
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<td>Silent films</td>
<td>Late nineteenth century–mid 1930s</td>
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<td>Radio broadcasts</td>
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<td>“Talkies”</td>
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<td>Television</td>
<td>Late 1930s, commercial viability by late 1940s</td>
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<td>Internet and digital media</td>
<td>Late 1980s–early 1990s</td>
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technological change. For instance, the transition from stage performance to audio-recorded performance brought with it an introduction from an actor who would go on to animate the recorded narrative, often using a different vocal persona (generally his own – recorded actors were typically male). This introduction did the work of framing the narrative for the listening audience and setting up language variation to mark stylistic shifts (Bauman 2011, 27). Similarly, the transition from recording performance on discs to electronic broadcasting changed the audience experience from one of listening to disconnected performances to one of following characters and plots in a serial fashion. This transition linked authenticity and authority, especially in language, to the experience of consuming mass media products. That transition also heralded the channeling of media products through networks as commercial endeavors, which simultaneously linked the audience to advertisers via those products. That relationship further focused questions of authenticity and authority. Finally, the transition from audio-only-oriented media, such as radio, and visual-only media, such as silent films, to the synchronization of sound and image made the experience of mass media products much more similar to the experience of everyday communication than it had been. Imagine sitting in a theater and hearing language come from the screen for the very first time. It’s almost impossible to imagine given how awash we are today in audiovisual media. And, yet, there was a time where silence gave way to speech.

Food for Thought

How do you experience and use different media channels? What devices do you use for different media experiences? What media channels do you use by yourself? Which ones do you experience with friends? Are there any that you engage with without multitasking? Are there any that you always use at the same time? How has your experience of the media changed over time and do you find the changes overall positive or negative?

The ability to sync the audio and the visual channels made it possible to hear dialogue (in the case of film) and see radio (in the case of television). The technical ability to synchronize sound with the moving image proved to be a game-changer in the history of film precisely in the area of
language as you can see in the movie poster for Blackmail shown in Figure 1.1. One of the earliest, and most profound, effects was a new ordering of the actors and studios comprising the silent film industry. As the film Singin’ in the Rain (1952) highlights, the connection between the visual image of the actor and that actor’s actual voice suddenly became paramount (see Taylor 2009). Michael Rogin (1996, 81) writes of The Jazz Singer (1927), widely considered to be the first successful commercial film to synchronize dialogue with dramatic action,

The second sound interval is even more startling. When the grown Jack Robin (formerly Jakie Rabinowitz) sings “Dirty Hands, Dirty Face” at Coffee Dan’s, for the first time in feature films a voice issues forth from a mouth. Jack then breaks free of both the intertitles that have carried the dialogue and the musical accompaniment that has carried the sound, and speaks his own words. “Wait a minute. Wait a minute. You ain’t heard nothin’ yet,” says Al Jolson, repeating the lines he’d already made famous in vaudeville. These first words of feature movie speech, a kind of performative, announce – you ain’t heard nothin’ yet – the birth of sound movies and the death of silent film. The vaudeville performer, Al Jolson, has killed silent movies.
The Jazz Singer highlights three important points with regard to language and language variation in the mass media. First, we have in that first line of synchronized dialogue the symbolic moment that categorically shifts one form of mass media production to another. Second, we see the contextual history noted above in which a vaudeville star (Al Jolson) brings his live performance persona to life in the fictional character Jack Robin specifically by uttering a bit of speech made famous, and hence recognizable, in live performances by Al Jolson. Finally, and of special interest for this book, we have the actual form of that first line. Those eleven words include examples of linguistic variation that many people consider “bad” grammar, grammar that is available to be ridiculed and its speakers to be shamed – the word ‘ain’t’, two negatives, and the “dropped g” in ‘nothin’.

Why did the various producers of the film use that particular line, said in that particular way, as the very first line of synchronized dialogue in a film? As we’ll see again and again in this book, the reasons are complex and point to the cultural tensions embedded in linguistic difference. On the one hand, those three elements of “bad” grammar each retain a long-standing connection to more colloquial, vernacular, or slangy language use. Together they make a kind of package that locates the character in the context of the film and locates the film in the context of the cultural and historical moment of which it was a part. On the other hand, those three elements transcended that moment to link to many of the same tensions we deal with today, such as struggles over equality and struggles over the place of religion, class, and ethnicity in our cultural lives. The power in that line didn’t, and doesn’t, really come from the content embedded in it. Rather, it comes largely from its difference from we might call Standard English.

Unlike film, television arrived on the media scene as a vehicle for porting existing radio programming to an audiovisual medium. Whereas the ability to synchronize audio and video brought language variation more centrally into focus in the case of film, being able to broadcast synchronized audio and video to a large audience displaced in space was the key technological advance for television. For early television, this meant especially being able to broadcast live programming across space. It also meant that, rather than the concerns about the fit of the voice to the persona of the actor that animated the transition to “talkies” in film, the concern for television was much more about whether the visual image matched the persona created by the voice. This concern, for instance, led to an actor shift for the situation comedy Amos ’n’ Andy (1951–1953), the first
television situation comedy (Kolker 2009). In the radio program, the characters were animated by white actors performing as if they were black. For the television program, some aspects of the problematic nature of this kind of performance were recognized and black actors were hired to animate the characters (of course, the stereotypical and biased representation didn’t change all that much in terms of the situations the characters found themselves in).

Another area in which narrative television differs from film is in the nature of serialization (Thompson 2003). While television broadcasts include a variety of live and non-narrative productions, such as sports events, lifestyle programming, awards programming, and news, as well as feature-length films and single-time productions, a hallmark of television is in fact its serial nature in which either the same basic set of characters comes together in more or less similar sets of circumstances (as in *Mad Men* and *Modern Family*) or in which more or less the same set of circumstances is shown over and over (as in the *Twilight Zone* [1959–1964] or *American Horror Story* [2011– ]). The bulk of narrative television programming consists of the former type of show – serialized encounters among groups of semi-stable characters. This means that language variation plays a different role in television than in film.

Finally, in addition to the technological changes that have resulted in the narrative audiovisual landscape we experience today, the various funding models, and the changes to them, have been important (Cullen 2014). For television, control over funding shifted from sponsored producers of programming (*Kraft Television*; *Texaco Star Theatre*; *Goodyear Playhouse*) to the networks airing the programming. The quiz show scandal of the late 1950s and televised news programming, especially the McCarthy hearings, effectively shifted control for the development of television programming away from corporate sponsors and to networks, which saw themselves as more capable of managing the relationship between media products and the audience (Kolker 2009, 189). The networks then sold corporate sponsors time during programming in which to advertise their products. This model was challenged beginning in the late 1970s when subscription television became more widely available. The subscription model of funding has enhanced the move to niche programming and also to content that does not have to answer to corporate sponsors or federal regulators (Archive of American Television 2013). Both of these changes, which also affect the non-subscription-based networks, have meant changes to how language variation is used in the context of both plot and character development in television series, as we’ll discuss more in Chapters 6 and 7.
For film, the transition of funding models differed in that the early period of film (from the turn of the century through about the 1950s) was one in which most of the financial power was concentrated in the hands of studios. Actors, writers, and producers were more or less employees of studios and were told by studio executives which films they would be involved in. Studios also owned the rights to film distribution in that they owned most of the theaters in which their products were shown. Studios thereby controlled both the process and the product (Kolker 2009, ch. 6). A legal challenge in the late 1940s to this perceived monopoly meant that studios lost their ability to own both the production and distribution rights and thus also their ability to keep certain films – for instance, independent films or films that pushed social and cultural boundaries – from being shown in theaters. The weakening of the studios also meant that the participants in film production could manage their careers more as free agents and were no longer bound to their studio employers. These changes had the effect of bringing more diversity to the kinds of products that were produced and thus also increased the possibilities for different kinds of linguistic variation to be woven into those products. This diversity is particularly apparent in the rise of the independent film movement, from the success of the only X-rated film to ever win an Oscar, *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), to the fantastical, magical realism caught in the voice of a 6-year-old using the English of the Louisiana Bayou in *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012).

**Language Variation in the Narrative Media**

All language in the media is primarily performed, or representational, in that it does not present “real-life,” face-to-face conversation. The majority of studies that have used media data for thinking about linguistic variation have focused on print and broadcast news media or other forms of largely unscripted media such as talk shows, sportscasts, and broadcasts of live events. The fact that the vast majority of the scholarship on language variation in the mass media is drawn from unscripted media sources can largely be explained by the assumption that the language of scripted, imagined media is somehow less authentic than either unscripted language in the media or real-life communication (see Coupland 2007 for a discussion of authenticity in the media).

However, 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.
The primary difference between the scripted media and other sources of information about sociocultural life is that what appears in the media derives from imagination and thus represents a highly edited version of social and cultural life. Thus, the scripted media offer a fairly contained, and edited, microcosm of the places from which their players come. In this sense, they are no more and no less “real” than the unscripted media.

The idea of language variation is built directly into the production and reception of media products, particularly narrative or imagined products. If it weren’t the case that viewers expect some degree of variability, all characters in all kinds of programming would speak more or less the same way. But that is not how media products are produced or how we as audience members experience them. We want female characters to sound like females; children to sound like children; non-human aliens to sound different from humans. If the connection between the voice and the actor can be decoupled, such as in animation, then the actors animating the characters need not embody the broad demographic characteristics of the characters themselves – as many people know, the character Bart Simpson, a pre-adolescent boy, is voiced by Nancy Cartwright, a middle-aged woman. If voice and body can’t be decoupled, then we also want the actor to look like we expect the character to look.

Things get interesting when characters who should sound a particular way based on who they are don’t. For instance, in the film *Pocahontas* (1995), the title character would likely speak with a non-native English accent; however, in the film, she speaks with a fairly unmarked Standard American English accent.

**Food for Thought**

Imagine a story that you might want to tell. How would you use language to construct part of the context of the story and the characters?

Language and variation in language are as intrinsic to our experience of media products as costume, scenery, and musical score. As Spitulnik (1996) has explained, one of the real benefits of looking at the media, and especially the place of language in it, lies in the ways that media give (and reflect) the linguistic values of a given cultural moment. Those linguistic values can be found in representations of events that have actually
happened, such as in news reports or documentary films; in live representations of events, such as in talk shows or live sports broadcasts; and in representations of fictional narratives, such as in much of our movie and television culture. Spitulnik further notes that media products provide fodder for socialization, for discussion and critique, for cultural reflection, and for the broad circulation of culturally relevant/salient ideas, terms, and beliefs. This fodder emerges through the processes that use language to delineate social identities (the subject of Chapter 6) and its availability to facilitate interaction between producers and consumers (the subject of Chapter 8). Fictional narrative requires the creation of interrelationships between a plot, characters, and a particular (fictional or factual) time and place in which events unfold. As we’ll see throughout the book, those interrelationships are inextricably bound to the knowledge of language and language variation that media producers and consumers bring to the experience of interpreting fictional narrative, knowledge that we’ll explore in a lot more detail in Chapters 2–4.

For the most part, this book focuses on language variation that occurs in the context of fictional representation. Further, although there are many different channels for the delivery of fictional content, this book takes the fairly narrow representational context of fiction that is delivered via synchronized video and audio. Thus, this book focuses primarily on fictional television and film products rather than similarly interesting sources such as novels, radio dramas and podcasts, gaming situations, online communities, and so on. However, I hope that by constraining the kinds of data that we explore here, the concepts and methods of analysis will prove highly portable to those other areas as well.

This focus is not intended to afford a particular primacy to the language of the narrative audiovisual media or to suggest that narrative audiovisual media represent the key exemplars of language variation. Rather, it takes advantage of the unique properties of narrative audiovisual media as stories that, once created, can be repeatedly rehearsed and performed. Language in the narrative media differs from other forms of language in its paths of circulation and its relative polish once produced, and yet it shares with other forms of language an utter dependence on an audience and interaction. Narrative audiovisual media involve linguistic events that highlight the intention of the writers, actors, directors, and producers to entertain and engage the audience. Narrative audiovisual media also depend on predictable, recognizable forms of language that combine with the skills and styles of the people involved in the production, and the response of the audience, to form multilayered representations of social life.
Notes

1 Robert LePage and Andre Tabouret-Keller (1985) have talked about this kind of move as an “act of identity.” This move also forms the basis of an idea promoted by Howard Giles and his colleagues that people increasingly act similarly to one another unless something intervenes to cause them not to do so (Giles and Ogay 2007).

2 This change has been noted as early as the late nineteenth century; however, it has become more prevalent since about 1970 in most varieties of English. Further, like is undergoing several changes that won’t be discussed here, but see D’Arcy (2007) for some discussion.

References


