
Chapter 7

Only one chance to make a first impression: Characterisation in the opening scenes of TV series pilot episodes

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ABSTRACT

Due to the centrality and stability of protagonists in TV series, their characterisation plays an important role for a series' reception. As a consequence, introducing characters is a central function of pilot episodes. While characterisation in TV series has been studied from various perspectives, the question of how exactly characters are introduced to the audience when they first appear has received little attention so far by linguists. This means that a number of questions require further investigation, such as: What kinds of verbal resources are used to establish characters in TV series? Who provides character definitions? And how does verbal information interact with visual information when presenting characters for the first time?

This study presents a linguistic analysis of how protagonists are introduced to the audience in the opening scenes of pilot episodes of 18 US TV series. The main focus of the study lies on direct characterisation, i.e. the explicit naming of information relating to a character's identity. The study shows that while almost all series rely very strongly on direct verbal characterisation, they differ considerably with respect to the ways in which this characterisation is presented. In addition, a case study demonstrates that characterisation in opening passages can be extremely effective, establishing a large proportion of central character traits within just a few minutes.

Keywords: Characterisation, Dialogue, Conversation Analysis, Multimodal Discourse Analysis.

1. INTRODUCTION

Characters are central to TV series. Most series are based on a premise that revolves around a small number of characters, who tend to remain stable over time (see Bednarek 2017: 144; Mittell 2015: 133). These characters are soon known to the audience for certain personality traits, patterns of behaviour and styles of speaking. Tensions that drive the plot are often created through contrasts between different characters (e.g., the nerd and the waitress) and through contrasts between personality traits and roles of individual characters (e.g., the CIA agent with bipolar disorder; the meth-cooking high-school teacher). Thus, rather than character development, most TV series employ

“character accumulation”, which refers to the process in which characters gain depth and become more elaborate by accumulating life experiences, while not changing in fundamental aspects (Pearson 2007: 56). This central role of stable characters means that the way in which they are introduced is crucial for how a TV series is received by the audience. Adopting a linguistic perspective, this study takes a closer look at how exactly this introduction of characters takes place in pilot episodes of US TV series.

Pilot episodes of TV series have to fulfil a number of important functions. On a very practical level, they often function as “test runs” for the production of a series, and their success decides whether or not a series is actually realised (Mittell 2015: 55–56). From the point of view of the audience, the pilot needs to present the premise of a series quickly and convincingly, and it has to immediately raise the viewers’ interest in the series (2015: 56). In order to introduce the audience to a new series, pilot episodes simultaneously need to present the main characters, communicate the key information about the setting and the rules of the fictional world in which the TV series takes place, and establish the main themes that drive the plot of the TV series. This requires extremely efficient strategies for presenting characters to the audience “such that their personalities and relationships are clear within moments” (Mittell 2015: 56).

In this study, I analyse how the protagonists of TV series are introduced in the opening passage – defined as the first two scenes or the first four minutes – of pilot episodes. Based on a selection of 18 pilot episodes from US TV series, I investigate two related aspects from a linguistic point of view. First, I establish what resources the pilots use for characterisation, focusing in particular on direct characterisation, i.e., the explicit naming of character traits. I compare how commonly direct characterisation through the narrator, the protagonist, and other characters is used across the pilots. In addition to verbal strategies, I also look at how visual elements contribute to direct characterisation, and I identify more specific characterisation strategies that can be observed across the series. In the second part of the analysis, I investigate the extent to which protagonists are established within the opening passage of pilots. In this case study, I compare the characterisation of Sheldon in the opening passage of *The Big Bang Theory* to previous findings by Bednarek (2012), who studied the characterisation of Sheldon in the entire first season of the series. The results of the case study indicate that many of the most central aspects of the protagonist’s character traits are already communicated in the opening passage of the pilot. This shows that pilots in general – and opening passages in particular – fulfil a crucial function for the characterisation of protagonists and, as a consequence, they provide excellent data for studying characterisation.

2. RESOURCES FOR CHARACTERISATION

Characterisation has attracted the attention of linguists working in the fields of literary stylistics and pragmatics of fiction for some time now (for an overview, see

Culpeper & Fernandez-Quintanilla 2017). While early work on the topic has mainly been based on literary works in the form of novels and plays (e.g. Culpeper 2001; Culpeper 2002a; Culpeper 2002b), the focus has shifted more recently to include fictional works from film and television series (e.g. Bednarek 2010; Bednarek 2011; Bednarek 2012; Bubel 2006; Schubert 2017). The approaches include quantitative corpus-based approaches (e.g. Bednarek 2011; Bednarek 2012) as well as close reading (e.g. Bubel 2006) and multi-modal discourse analysis (e.g. Bednarek 2010: Ch. 7), and most studies combine linguistic analysis with approaches from other fields, such as literary studies, film studies and psychology.

With respect to theoretical approaches to characterisation, the distinction between direct and indirect characterisation is important for the present study. Direct characterisation, also sometimes referred to as direct definition (Rimmon-Kenan 2002: 60) and explicit characterisation (Culpeper & Fernandez-Quintanilla 2017: 106), refers to instances in which a character's traits are stated verbally. In contrast, in indirect characterisation, also known as indirect presentation (Rimmon-Kenan 2002: 61), implicit characterisation (Culpeper & Fernandez-Quintanilla 2017: 106) and character revelation (Kozloff 2000: 43), a character's identity and traits are presented through their actions, their behaviour towards other characters, the attitudes they express and their style of speaking.

In this study, the focus lies on direct characterisation, which can be realised in different ways. In self-presentation, characters reveal information about themselves to others. Usually, this takes place in the form of dialogues between characters, such as in Example (1) from *Grey's Anatomy*, in which Meredith presents information about herself to another character (direct characterisation underlined). However, monologues are also possible, as in Example (2) from *Breaking Bad*, where Walter White records a message on a camcorder.

- 1) Meredith: I moved two weeks ago from Boston (*Grey's Anatomy*)
- 2) Walter: My name is Walter Hartwell White. I live at 308, Negra Arroyo Lane, Albuquerque, New Mexico, 87104. (*Breaking Bad*)

In other-presentation, a character describes another character, either addressing the character who is described (Example 3) or in interaction with a third party (Example 4).

- 3) Luke [to Lorelei]: You're shameless. (*Gilmore Girls*)
- 4) Asher: Yeah, she's a ballbuster.
[...]
Student: Dershowitz has the upper hand in the academic world, but Keating's clearly the better defense attorney. (*How To Get Away With Murder*)

Finally, direct characterisation can also take place through the narrator, usually in the form of voice-overs. The narrator can be a character-narrator, describing themselves from an outside perspective (Example 5), or it can be an extra-diegetic narrator (Example 6).

- 5) Narrator [voice-over]: I've always loved getting clean. I love baths, I love showers [...] (*Orange Is The New Black*)
- 6) Narrator [voice-over]: Our story begins 13.5 years ago, when Jane Gloriana Villanueva, was a mere ten years old. It should be noted, that at a mere ten years old, Jane's passions include, in no particular order, her family, God, and grilled cheese sandwiches. (*Jane The Virgin*)

As the examples above show, direct characterisation can present a wide range of character information, including a character's name (Examples 2, 4 and 6), age (Example 6), present and past place of living (Examples 1 and 2), profession (Example 4), interests and passions (Examples 5 and 6), and personality traits (Examples 3 and 4).

In addition to verbal characterisation, the visual representation of a character contributes a great deal to their characterisation in television series. This is in contrast to written works of fiction, which usually rely on verbal descriptions of appearance. In linguistic studies, visual representation has received far less attention than verbal characterisation so far, although it plays an important role for characterisation, both in isolation and in the interplay with verbal information. Visual aspects can be used for any type of character information and they can result in direct or indirect characterisation. In Section 3.3, I will discuss some examples of visual characterisation in detail. It will not be possible to cover all types of information that can contribute to characterisation in the context of this study. For instance, the role of paralinguistic information will not be covered and there are certainly other aspects of non-verbal information that would deserve further attention in future research.

3. INTRODUCING PROTAGONISTS IN PILOT EPISODES OF TV SERIES

An empirical analysis of the beginning of 18 pilot episodes of US TV Series was carried out in order to establish the role that the different strategies play when introducing protagonists. The 18 series were selected based on a user-generated list of "Top 100 most watched tv shows of all time" on IMDb.¹ For the purposes of the current research project, only US series, released after 2000 and set in the present time were included. Excluded were, for instance, historical dramas, as well as fantasy and science fiction series which are set in an imagined past or future.² Animated

¹ https://www.imdb.com/list/ls095964455/?sort=user_rating,desc, accessed on 8 September 2020.

² For instance, the series *Game of Thrones* was excluded because of its setting in an imagined time, which affects the use of language in the series. In contrast, the series *The Good Place* was included in the study. While the latter can also be considered to be a fantasy series, it is set in present time, albeit in an imagined place. At least as far as the protagonists are concerned, they do not have a noteworthy use of archaic language, but they speak present-day English.

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series were excluded, too. Of the remaining series, eighteen series were selected with the aim of achieving a balanced representation of male and female protagonists, while including a broad spectrum of comedy-oriented and drama-oriented series. The series are not perfectly balanced, though. There are slightly more series with female protagonists and, at the same time, there is only one series in the category “Drama” that has only female protagonists. Table 1 presents an overview of the 18 pilot episodes and the protagonist(s) whose characterisation was studied.

Series	Genre	Protagonists included in study	Gender	Duration (min)	Word count
<i>Breaking Bad</i>	Drama	Walter White	male	06:30	309
<i>Brooklyn Nine-Nine</i>	Comedy	Jake Peralata	male	04:00*	627
<i>Desperate Housewives</i>	Drama/Comedy	Lynette Scavo, Gabrielle Solis, Bree Van de Kamp, Susan Mayer	female	07:15	1,048
<i>Gilmore Girls</i>	Drama/Comedy	Lorelei Gilmore, Rory Gilmore	female	07:00	790
<i>Grey's Anatomy</i>	Drama/Comedy	Meredith Grey	female	05:00	658
<i>Homeland</i>	Drama	Carrie Mathison	female	04:15	436
<i>House of Cards</i>	Drama	Frank Underwood	male	05:30	454
<i>How I Met Your Mother</i>	Comedy	Ted Mosby	male	04:00*	668
<i>How To Get Away With Murder</i>	Drama	Annalise Keating, Wes Gibbins, Connor Walsh, Michaela Pratt, Asher Millstone, Laurel Castillo	mixed	04:00	517
<i>Jane The Virgin</i>	Drama/Comedy	Jane Gloriana Villanueva	female	04:00*	352
<i>Mr Robot</i>	Drama	Elliot Alderson	male	06:10	653
<i>New Girl</i>	Comedy	Jessica “Jess” Christopher Day	female	04:00	598
<i>Orange Is The New Black</i>	Drama/Comedy	Piper Chapman	female	04:10	278
<i>Shameless (US)</i>	Drama/Comedy	Frank Gallagher, Fiona, Lip, Ian, Carl, Debbie, Liam	mixed	04:20	462
<i>Suits</i>	Drama	Harvey Specter, Mike Ross	male	06:20	684

Series	Genre	Protagonists included in study	Gender	Duration (min)	Word count
<i>The Big Bang Theory</i>	Comedy	Sheldon Cooper, Leonard Hofstadter	male	05:45	767
The Good Place	Comedy	Eleanor Shellstrop	female	04:45	557
2 Broke Girls	Comedy	Maxine "Max" George Black, Caroline Wesbox Channing	female	04:40	575

Table 1. Overview of analysed opening passages

It should be pointed out that identifying the protagonist(s) was not entirely straightforward in many cases. For instance, I decided to focus on Sheldon Cooper and Leonard Hofstadter as the two protagonists in *The Big Bang Theory*, although one could easily argue that Penny (who is not given a last name, at least not before she is married to Leonard and adopts his name), Howard Wolowitz and Rajesh Koothrappali should be included, too, since they form an essential part of the character dynamic of the first season of the series. Likewise, the protagonists I included for *Desperate Housewives* are Lynette Scavo, Gabrielle Solis, Bree Van de Kamp and Susan Mayer, although one could argue that Edie Britt should be included, too. In some cases, my decision was based on the series title that puts emphasis on one specific character. For instance, the title of the series *New Girl* places a special focus on Jess over her three flatmates. In other cases, the decision was based on the focus that was given to the characters in the pilot episode. For instance, in *Desperate Housewives*, the four characters I included as protagonists are introduced one by one in an identical fashion, whereas Edie Britt is only introduced about ten minutes later and much more briefly. Still, alternative decisions would have been possible in some cases.

The analysis focused on the opening passage of each pilot episode. For the purposes of the present study, the opening passage was defined as the first two scenes of the pilot; in cases in which the first two scenes were very short (below four minutes), the first four minutes of the pilot were analysed instead (see times marked with * in Table 1). Due to differences between the pilots with respect to pace of the initial scenes and placement and duration of the opening credits, the opening passages I analysed range from 4 minutes to 7 minutes and 15 seconds and they include between 278 and 1,048 words.

3.1. Overview of resources and strategies for direct characterisation

In a first step, the presence or absence of direct characterisation was established. As discussed in Section 2, direct characterisation can take place through a narrator,

the protagonist's self-presentation, and other character's other-presentation of the protagonist. Some of the series employ character narrators. For instance, in *Mr Robot* the protagonist, Elliot, comments on events as a narrator in voice-over (see also Landert 2017: 504–509). In these cases, direct characterisation in the narratorial voice was only counted as direct characterisation through the narrator, not as self-presentation. In contrast, characterisation appearing within dialogue with other characters was treated as self-presentation. A special case is *House of Cards*, where the protagonist, Frank Underwood, regularly addresses the audience directly in what has been described as “asides” by Sorlin (2016: 106), thus adopting a narrator-like function while appearing in character. For the purposes of this study, Frank was treated as a narrator whenever he speaks directly to the audience and, thus, characterisation occurring in these passages is classified as narrator characterisation.

Distinguishing between direct and indirect characterisation is not always as straightforward as it may seem from the examples presented in Section 2. In addition to some common and clear patterns of direct characterisation, illustrated in Examples 1 to 6 above, there are also some utterances that clearly imply character information. Example 7 illustrates such an instance.

7) [at high IQ sperm bank:]

Sheldon: We are committing genetic fraud. There is no guarantee that our sperm is going to generate high IQ offspring. Think about that. I have a sister with the same basic DNA mix who hostesses at Fuddruckers. (*The Big Bang Theory*, direct characterisation)

In this passage, the combination of the setting, a high IQ sperm bank, and the character's statement that “there is no guarantee that our sperm is going to generate high IQ offspring” was classified as a character's self-presentation of having a high IQ. Since the characteristic is described verbally, rather than demonstrated, the instance was classified as direct characterisation, despite the fact that it is implied rather than explicitly attributed. In contrast, character revelation – indirect characterisation – can be found in an earlier utterance by Sheldon as illustrated in Example 8:

8) Sheldon: So if a photon is directed through a plane with two slits in it and either slit is observed, it will not go through both slits. If it's unobserved it will. However, if it's observed after it's left the plane but before it hits its target, it will not have gone through both slits. (*Big Bang Theory*, indirect characterisation)

In this passage, Sheldon demonstrates – rather than claims – knowledge of theoretical physics, which was treated as indirect characterisation. Instances of clearly implied direct characterisation, such as Example 7, were not encountered very frequently, but when they were, they were treated as instances of direct characterisation.

The analysis includes all types of character information that relate to a character's identity, personality traits, passions and interests, profession, and permanent appearance. Again, the distinction between temporary states and permanent traits

is not always clear-cut, especially when it comes to the description of emotional states and appearance. Example 9 includes two descriptions of another character's appearance.

- 9) Claire: You need a haircut.
 Frank: You think?
 Claire: A little trim. What are you gonna wear?
 Frank: You mean for the meeting?
 Claire: For the announcement.
 Frank: I'll wear my navy blue, the one with the pinstripes.
 Claire: Good. You look handsome in that suit. (*House of Cards*)

The first description, "You need a haircut", was classified as a temporary state and, as a consequence, it was not treated as an instance of direct other-presentation.³ In contrast, the utterance "You look handsome in that suit" was classified as direct characterisation, because it describes a permanent aspect of the other character's appearance.

The results of the analysis concerning the use of direct characterisation through narrators, self-presentation and other-presentation are presented in Table 2. What the overview shows, first and foremost, is that there is a great deal of variation concerning who delivers the characterisation – indeed, all constellations that are possible can be found across the 18 pilots. In addition, there are no clear patterns with respect to genre of the TV series and gender of the protagonist. However, overall, direct characterisation appears to be a very common way of introducing protagonists. All pilots except for one, *Homeland*, use at least one form of direct characterisation within the opening passage, and most pilots combine two or even all three types of direct characterisation. For *Homeland*, direct characterisation appears for the first time in the form of other-presentation at the beginning of the third scene, just after the end of the opening passage studied here. Instead of direct characterisation, the first two scenes of *Homeland* rely on character revelation, for instance by presenting (extreme) behaviour by the protagonist, such as her disregard of her personal safety.

³ Of course, the utterance is still relevant for the characterisation, albeit in the form of indirect characterisation. The fact that Frank is in a relationship with Claire, a woman who tells him when to have a haircut, reveals a great deal of information about both characters.

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Series	Narrator	Self-presentation	Other-presentation	Types of direct characterisation
<i>Breaking Bad</i>	no	yes	no	1
<i>Brooklyn Nine-Nine</i>	no	yes	yes	2
<i>Desperate Housewives</i>	yes	no	no	1
<i>Gilmore Girls</i>	no	yes	yes	2
<i>Grey's Anatomy</i>	yes	yes	yes	3
<i>Homeland</i>	no	no	no	0
<i>House of Cards</i>	yes	no	yes	2
<i>How I Met Your Mother</i>	yes	yes	no	2
<i>How To Get Away With Murder</i>	no	yes	yes	2
<i>Jane The Virgin</i>	yes	yes	no	2
<i>Mr Robot</i>	yes	yes	no	2
<i>New Girl</i>	no	yes	no	1
<i>Orange Is The New Black</i>	yes	no	yes	2
<i>Shameless (US)</i>	yes	yes	yes	3
<i>Suits</i>	no	yes	yes	2
<i>The Big Bang Theory</i>	no	yes	yes	2
<i>The Good Place</i>	no	no	yes	1
<i>2 Broke Girls</i>	no	yes	yes	2
Total	8/18	13/18	11/18	

Table 2. Direct characterisation in the opening passages of pilot episodes

In addition to the presence of different forms of direct characterisation, the analysis of the opening passages revealed more specific characterisation strategies that are shared by many of the pilots. These include, for instance, the use of introduction sequences and the interplay between visual and verbal information. These two strategies will be further discussed in what follows.

3.2. Introduction Sequences: Meeting strangers

For TV series, it can be difficult to reconcile direct characterisation with the aim to present naturalistic dialogue. One way of solving this is by having protagonists meet strangers. For instance, in the second scene of *How To Get Away With Murder*,

two of the protagonists meet for the first time, providing them with an opportunity to provide information about themselves in a way that feels natural – or at least plausible – to the audience (Example 10). Likewise, in Example 11, Jessica introduces Harvey Specter to a client, providing an opportunity for other-presentation.

- 10) Wes: I'm not usually a first-row kind of guy, but I promised myself I wouldn't hide in the back of the class.
 Michaela: I'm engaged. (*How To Get Away With Murder*)
- 11) Jessica: This is Harvey Specter. He is our best closer. (*Suits*)

Such introduction sequences are common in the opening passages of pilot episodes. Half of the pilots I studied, 10 out of 18, included an interaction between a protagonist and a stranger within the opening passage. In several series, this interaction introduces central characters to each other: In *New Girl*, Jess applies as a future flatmate, meeting Nick, Schmidt and Coach for the first time. Likewise, in *The Big Bang Theory*, the two friends Sheldon and Leonard meet their new neighbour Penny for the first time. In both these instances, the introduction sequences include direct characterisation of the protagonist(s), while simultaneously establishing the relationship dynamic between the characters.

Several of the pilots use the introduction sequences in a playful way. Prototypical introductions take place at the beginning of interactions and in them speakers reveal information about themselves to the addressee, but some pilots deviate from this for humorous and dramatic effect. In *Grey's Anatomy*, the pilot starts with a "morning after" scene between Meredith Grey and Derek Shepherd. They had met for the first time the night before and although they had spent the night together, they are still unaware that they are going to work at the same hospital. The scene ends with Meredith realising that she does not even know Derek's name (Example 12). Thus, the introduction sequence is placed at the end of the scene, foreshadowing the pair's complicated love life in later episodes.

- 12) Meredith: Look, I'm gonna go upstairs and take a shower, okay, and when I get back down here, you won't be here, so (...) um (...) goodbye (...) um (...)
 Derek: Derek.
 Meredith: Derek. Right. Meredith.
 Derek: Meredith. (*Grey's Anatomy*)

A different kind of twist can be found in the opening scene of *The Good Place*, a series that takes place in the afterlife. Here, the pilot starts with the protagonist, Eleanor, waking up in the afterlife's waiting room, being greeted by the afterlife's "architect" Michael, who explains her death to Eleanor.

- 13) Michael: Eleanor? Come on in. Hi, Eleanor. I'm Michael. How are you today?
 Eleanor: I'm great. Thanks for asking. Oh, one question. Where am I? Who are you? And what's going on?
 Michael: Right. So, you, Eleanor Shellstrop, are dead. Your life on earth has ended, and you are now in the next phase of your existence in the universe. (*The Good Place*)

In this example, it is the new acquaintance who presents information about the protagonist, including her name and the fact that she is dead.

In sum, introduction sequences are a common and versatile way of providing direct characterisation of protagonists in the opening passages of TV series pilots. The fact that they are used so regularly in opening passages means that studying introduction sequences can be a good way of identifying and analysing direct characterisation.

3.3. Characterisation through multimodal resources

In the evaluation of direct characterisation strategies in Table 2, only verbal characterisation was included. However, visual aspects play an important role as well. For instance, in about half of all pilots (8 out of 18), the protagonist is visible in the first shot. These visual representations can provide a great deal of information about the character, ranging from physical attributes, such as height, skin colour and body build, to approximate age and gender. In addition, the context in which the protagonist is presented and the clothes they are wearing can provide further information about their character, profession and interests. For instance, in the first scene of *The Big Bang Theory*, Sheldon is wearing a T-Shirt of the superhero Flash and plaid trousers, revealing both his interest in comics, as well as his lack of interest in fashion. In principle, visual representations can also be divided into direct and indirect characterisation. For instance, while Sheldon's plaid trousers can be interpreted as indirect characterisation, revealing his lack of interest in fashion through his choice of clothing, Max's uniform in *2 Broke Girls* could be argued to define her as a waitress in a rather direct way. However, the distinction between direct characterisation and character revelation is less clear-cut for visual representations than for verbal characterisation.

In addition to physical appearance and clothing, there are many other ways in which visual elements can contribute to characterisation. The opening passage of *Breaking Bad* provides particularly rich examples. Compared to other series, *Breaking Bad* includes less spoken dialogue and relies more strongly on nonverbal communication and visual transmission of information (see also Schubert 2017: 29). The entire opening passage of 6 minutes and 30 seconds includes only 309 words. In comparison, the much faster paced sitcom *2 Broke Girls* includes the same number of words in the first 2 minutes and 45 seconds. Verbal characterisation of Walter White takes place mainly in the form of a character monologue by the protagonist himself, which he delivers when recording a message for his family on a video cam. Compensating for the lower reliance on verbal characterisation, visual elements present crucial pieces of character information.

The first visual representation of Walter White shows him wearing just his underwear and a gas mask, driving an RV at very high speed through the desert, in a highly agitated state (see Figure 1). This image of Walter White is contrasted in the second

scene with his presentation as a quiet family man having breakfast (see Figure 2). These images present the audience with some basic information about the protagonist, such as his family status, and, at the same time, they point to the complexity of his character.



Fig. 1. Walter White driving RV through desert in his underwear, wearing a gas mask (*Breaking Bad*)



Fig. 2. Walter White having breakfast with his family (*Breaking Bad*)

In addition, some of the shots in the second scene present very specific information about Walter White, including his education and his age. In one of the shots, we can see a plaque, honouring Walter's professional achievements (see Figure 3).



Fig. 3. Award plaque (*Breaking Bad*)

The text on the plaque provides the protagonist's full name (which had been mentioned once before), his former profession and evidence of his past professional achievements and success (Example 14).

- 14) Science Research Center, Los Alamos, New Mexico, Hereby recognizes Walter H. White, Crystallography Project Leader for Proton Radiography. 1985. Contributor to Research Awarded the Nobel Prize (*Breaking Bad*)

In a different shot, even Walter White's age is established through visual means, in the form of a plate of scrambled eggs and (veggie) bacon, which is arranged to read "50" (see Figure 4). His wife, Skyler, places the plate in front of Walter with the words "Happy Birthday". In combination, the spoken words and the visual presentation of the breakfast plate establish the information that we are witnessing the protagonist's 50th birthday. Thus, even such highly specific information about characters can be provided in a direct and explicit way through images.



Fig. 4. Breakfast plate (*Breaking Bad*)

4. CASE STUDY: INTRODUCING SHELDON

So far, I have discussed the range of resources and strategies for characterisation that are used in the opening passages of pilot episodes. In this section, I turn to a brief case study that provides evidence for the extent to which a protagonist is characterised within the opening passage. In other words, I will show how quickly a character can be presented to the audience. The case study focuses on Sheldon, one of the protagonists of *The Big Bang Theory*. The case study analyses the characterisation of Sheldon in the first two scenes of the pilot, which have a total duration of 5 minutes and 45 seconds. The analysis is carried out through repeated viewing of the opening passage to identify and analyse the characterisation of Sheldon.

Sheldon's characterisation in the opening passage is compared to the results of Bednarek (2012), who studies the characterisation of Sheldon in the entire first season of *The Big Bang Theory*. Based on transcripts of all 17 episodes and using corpus-based analysis, she studies how Sheldon is presented as a stylised representation of the "nerd" stereotype. By studying concordances, Bednarek identifies eight character traits that are often associated with nerdiness and that are attributed explicitly to Sheldon. Table 3 presents the eight traits identified by Bednarek (2012: 208–209), together with instances of direct characterisation in the opening passage that illustrate four of these traits.

Trait	Direct characterisation in opening passage
Believes in his own intellectual superiority	[at high IQ sperm bank:] We are committing genetic fraud. There is no guarantee that our sperm is going to generate high IQ offspring. Think about that. I have a sister with the same basic DNA mix who hostesses at Fuddruckers.
Was a child prodigy	I did a series of experiments when I was twelve [...] my work with lasers
Struggles with social skills	I'm no expert here but I believe in the context of a luncheon invitation, you might want to skip the reference to bowel movements. Chat? We don't chat, at least not offline
Is different	(indirect characterisation cues)
Is health obsessed / has food issues	(attributed to Leonard)
Has an affinity for and knowledge of computer-related activities	I do yearn for faster downloads I have 212 friends on myspace
Does not like change	(indirect characterisation cues)
Does not drive	–

Table 3. Direct characterisation of Sheldon as a "nerd" in opening passage of *The Big Bang Theory*. Traits based on Bednarek (2012: 208–209)

The first of these traits, “believes in his own intellectual superiority”, is established through a combination of the setting of the opening scene in a high IQ sperm bank (“is this the high IQ sperm bank?”) and several utterances by Sheldon and Leonard that express their belief that they are eligible donors. An example for such an utterance is given in Table 3, where Sheldon talks about his sister as sharing much of his DNA, but not his intellectual abilities. As discussed in Section 3.1, Sheldon does not explicitly label himself as intelligent, but this information is clearly implied in his statement, thus resulting in direct characterisation. In addition, this character trait is further supported by indirect characterisation in the form of demonstrating knowledge about theoretical physics and use of scientific vocabulary. The second trait, “being a child prodigy”, is established at the beginning of the second scene, when Sheldon refers to scientific experiments he carried out when he was a child. The trait “struggles with social skills” is expressed by Sheldon directly, for instance when he refers to himself as being “no expert” on how to invite someone for lunch. In addition, this trait is also reinforced extensively through indirect characterisation throughout the opening passage, for instance in awkward greeting sequences when meeting Penny for the first time. The final “nerd” trait established through direct characterisation in the opening passage is Sheldon’s affinity for and knowledge of computer-related activities, for instance in his utterance “I do yearn for faster downloads”, which provides the motivation for the friends’ visit to the sperm bank.

While the four remaining traits are not clearly expressed through direct characterisation, there is still indirect evidence for some of them. The clearest of these is the trait “is different”, which is implied by many pieces of information, such as the fact that Sheldon has never met any of his social media friends, that he does not chat offline, and that he would not love his own son if, as a toddler, he didn’t “know if he should use an integral or a differential to solve the area under a curve”. With respect to “does not like change”, Sheldon’s justifies his reluctance for inviting Penny for lunch by arguing that they never invited their old neighbour, thus demonstrating that he tends to follow the same routines. Interestingly, the trait “is health obsessed / has food issues” is not established for Sheldon, but only for Leonard. When Leonard invites Penny to join them for lunch, he adds that “curry is a natural laxative” and that “a clean colon is just one less thing to worry about”. Thus, while this trait is not part of Sheldon’s characterisation, it is still present in the opening passage. The only trait that is completely absent from the opening passage is “does not drive”, which is not mentioned in the pilot episode.

In sum, of the eight character traits identified by Bednarek (2012) based on the entire first season of *The Big Bang Theory*, four are clearly established through direct characterisation in the first six minutes of the pilot, while two more are expressed through indirect characterisation and one is assigned to another character. Moreover, the opening passage adds additional aspects of Sheldon’s characterisation, which

are not included in the nerd-related traits studied by Bednarek. This includes information on Sheldon's sexual orientation (heterosexual), his family (he has a sister), his education (he attended a boarding school) and his love for comics and science fiction (he is wearing a T-Shirt of superhero Flash and he wants to re-watch the second season of *Battlestar Galactica* with commentary). This shows that opening passages of pilots can be extremely rich in characterisation.

5. CONCLUSION

This study has addressed several aspects of characterisation that have received little attention by linguists so far. The first of these concerns the role of the opening passage of pilots for characterisation. The evaluation of the opening passages of 18 US TV series has shown that almost all of them include at least one form of direct verbal characterisation. In addition, the case study on the introduction of Sheldon in *The Big Bang Theory* has demonstrated that many of the most central traits of a protagonist can be introduced within the first few minutes of a pilot. This means that opening passages of pilots provide extremely rich material for studying the linguistic resources for characterisation. For instance, further studies of such opening passages could focus in more detail on the linguistic structure of utterances used for direct characterisation, on the various types of information provided about protagonists (e.g. profession, interests) and on the relation between the type of information and the form in which characterisation is presented.

The second aspect of interest in the present study concerns the interplay between verbal and visual information for characterisation. I have shown that visual information can contribute to characterisation in a large variety of ways, going far beyond the mere presentation of physical attributes of the character. Especially in combination with verbal information, visual elements can present very specific information in explicit ways. In the sample of pilots studied here, *Breaking Bad* clearly stood out with respect to the use of visual elements for characterisation, and it is likely that this is due to the specific style of the series. Still, a more systematic study of the interplay between visual, verbal, as well as paralinguistic information for the characterisation of TV series protagonists presents a promising avenue for future research.

Finally, while there has been an increase in linguistic research on characterisation in TV series over the last few years, much of this research has focused on the study of one specific series. For instance, researchers have demonstrated the stability of one specific character, or they have compiled an inventory of resources used for characterisation in one series. However, there has been little attention on comparing the resources for characterisation across different series. Such stylistic approaches to the study of characterisation in TV series deserve further attention. As my analysis of the presence and absence of different types of direct characterisation in opening passages has shown, there

is considerable variation in how characterisation is realised. At the same time, there appear to be certain strategies that are very common across different types of series, such as the use of introduction sequences, as well as flashbacks and flashforwards, which are often used to create character depth, and which could not be discussed in the context of this paper. Identifying such strategies and comparing them across different TV series – as well as to films, written novels and performed theatre – could reveal further patterns with respect to characterisation across different styles and genres of fiction.

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