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Stylistics, pop culture, and educational research: A systematized review and case study

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Abstract

This paper explores how educational research and stylistics, fields that rarely intersect, can be in closer dialogue in the study of pop culture texts, artefacts of interest to scholars in both disciplines. I establish in a systematized critical interpretive synthesis that educational research tends to treat pop culture texts as documents. I show that this in turn tends to drive content-focused analyses that stay, from a linguistic point of view, at the surface of the texts. In response, I offer a stylistic analysis of a pop culture text, an episode from the situation comedy *The Big Bang Theory* that features an English language learner. I employ conversation analysis to interpret the dialogue and demonstrate how a linguistic approach opens up readings on the discursive construction of phenomena such as belonging and exclusion.

Keywords: Research synthesis, systematized critical interpretive synthesis, interdisciplinary approaches, telecinematic language, conversation analysis

1. Introduction

Mainstream educational research has not always welcomed the study of pop culture which, following Werner (2018: 7), we can characterize as “mainstream media and entertainment culture” that tends to be “commercial and globalized” in nature and “Western” and “contemporary” in focus. While investigations of pop culture texts do take place in educational research (see Ellsmore 2005; McCulloch 2009), they tend to occur in specialist publications (see *Paedagogica Historica* or *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*). With respect to her own work on teachers in film and television, for example, Ellsmore came to understand that she had entered a niche area, as her work “was not in line with other mainstream educational research” (Ellsmore 2005: vi). Making a similar point in his analysis of “veteran teachers” in literature and drama, McCulloch noted fiction was “an underused source in educational research” (McCulloch 2009: 410). Current trends in educational research tell a similar story.

In the six issues of volume 47 of the *British Educational Research Journal* published throughout 2020, for example, none of the 90 papers featured the analysis of pop culture texts.

In this article, I take a closer look at this relatively neglected area in the educational research tradition. In Sections 2–4 I present a systematized review of existing educational research on pop culture (mainly depictions of teachers and teaching in film and television drama). After discussing the findings of the review in Section 5, I put forward in Section 6 an alternative, an original analysis of a pop culture text concerned with an educational issue. The text, an episode of the situation comedy *The Big Bang Theory*, depicts an English language learner seeking, without much success, to interact with a group of native speakers. Through the analysis in Section 6, I show how a stylistic approach can extend the way pop culture texts are read and valued in educational research.

2. Pop culture texts in the education research tradition: A systematized review

While a traditional narrative review would be more typical in a contribution such as this, I present here a *systematized critical interpretive synthesis*. Before detailing my procedures and setting out what I found (detailed in Sections 3 and 4), some explanatory remarks on systematic reviewing are necessary.

Systematic reviews are studies of studies that seek to answer a research question (Punch 2014: 107). Qualitative systematic reviews are those that employ “a method for integrating or comparing the findings from qualitative studies” (Booth 2006: 422). Best practice in a full review is to assemble a team to increase coverage and reach consensus on the many judgement calls (Noblit & Hare 1999: 118) required (what the search strategy should be; which papers to include; what should be extracted from each study; and so on).¹ As Grant & Booth (2009: 102–103) point out, however, full reviews are not always possible or appropriate and in such cases a *systematized review* can be employed. Such reviews do not claim to be

¹ On conducting full qualitative systematic reviews, see Booth (2006); Booth *et al.* (2016); Britten *et al.* (2002); Butler *et al.* (2016); Sattar *et al.* (2021).

fully comprehensive (Grant & Booth 2009: 102) but instead focus on being systematic (Booth *et al.* 2016: 2). They do this by “includ[ing] one or more elements of the systematic review process” (Grant & Booth 2009: 102), so that the procedures undertaken are transparent and the possibility of selection bias is minimized (Booth *et al.* 2016: 19). It is this kind of *systematized review* that I have conducted here, as a full systematic review was beyond the scope of this paper and was in any case not my purpose, as I am not seeking to aggregate a body of studies to answer a “what works best” question (Booth *et al.* 2016: 22). Rather, my aim is more exploratory: I want to develop a deeper understanding of how a particular set of pop culture texts, those that depict teaching and learning, are dealt with in the educational research paradigm to inform my investigation of how an approach to these same kinds of texts from a different discipline, stylistics, can be in dialogue with this tradition. Given the scope and purpose of my review, I have therefore conducted a *systematized critical interpretive synthesis* (Booth *et al.* 2016: 17, 23). This kind of review is particularly appropriate here as interpretive reviews “use the process of synthesis as a means of explaining a particular phenomenon” (Booth *et al.* 2016: 308), and the critical interpretive synthesis “encourages a critique of literatures and the questioning of taken-for-granted assumptions about concepts and methods” (Booth *et al.* 2016: 304) to build new theory (Booth *et al.* 2016: 23) and “provide a ‘launch pad’ for a new phase of conceptual development” (Grant & Booth 2009: 93).

While a standard method for synthesizing research in qualitative reviews has yet to emerge (Booth 2006: 422; Britten *et al.* 2002: 210; Whitemore *et al.* 2014: 455), a commonly employed procedure is *meta-ethnography* (Booth *et al.* 2016: 309; Sattar *et al.* 2021: 2; Whitemore *et al.* 2014: 455). Originally devised by Noblit & Hare (1988, 1999) to synthesize ethnographic studies, meta-ethnography is based on the principle that the synthesis of interpretive research should itself proceed in “an inductive, interpretative” manner (quote from Sattar *et al.* 2021; see also Noblit & Hare 1999: 95). They suggest a

seven-phase process (Noblit & Hare 1999: 110–112) and it is these phases that I outline in subsequent subsections, with modifications² given the scope of my review:

- 1) establishing why the synthesis is worth doing;
- 2) locating studies and deciding what is relevant;
- 3) reading the studies and extracting data;
- 4)–6) coding and synthesizing the data;
- 7) setting out the synthesis.

2.1 Phase 1: Reasons for the review

The value of offering a systematized review is two-fold. Firstly, I am acutely aware as a linguist specializing in the stylistic analysis of pop culture that I approach the educational research on these texts as an outsider. Thus, to state my bias plainly, I come to this body of research primed to see what a linguistic approach can add. A conscious effort must therefore be made to keep an open mind while I analyze this body of work. A systematized review, with its systematic and transparent procedures, is the best way to achieve this. Secondly, systematized reviews allow for the creation of a knowledge base (Noblit & Hare 1999: 106). While there are those, as Britten *et al.* (2002: 214) point out, who question the whole enterprise of synthesizing qualitative research, I share their position on the need for qualitative review as “the full contribution of qualitative research will not be realized if individual studies merely accumulate and some kind of synthesis is not carried out” (Britten *et al.* 2002: 214).

2.2 Phase 2: Deciding what is relevant

It is during this phase, as Sattar *et al.* (2021: 3) point out, that the search strategy for locating studies is established and carried out. Drawing on the advice of an expert librarian (Michelle Walker, to whom I

² On the evolving nature of meta-ethnographies see Sattar *et al.* (2021: 2, 11–12).

extend my gratitude), I used the search string “representation OR depiction OR portrayal OR stereotype OR image AND film OR movie OR television OR screen OR media AND teach* OR student* OR classroom* AND British” to systematically search four specialist databases in educational research (*Education Research Complete*, *British Education Index*, the *Modern Language Association International Bibliography*, and *ERIC*). As the search progressed, it became apparent the terms *classroom*, *stereotype*, *image*, and *student** led to manifestly irrelevant papers, and so the search string was amended accordingly. The database search was followed by a manual search of the references in the papers located and inclusion and exclusion criteria were then applied: work was included if it was peer reviewed (journal article or chapter in an edited volume); dealt with the depiction of teaching and/or learning in film and/or television drama; and published in English. Work was excluded if it was book length; if it featured represented principals, head teachers, or other educational managers; or if it dealt with depictions of teaching and learning in media texts such as newspapers. In total, 15 papers were located for review (listed in Appendix 1).

It is fully acknowledged that this total is not all, or even most, of the possible papers that could be found. My cut-off for finding articles was somewhat arbitrary and the manual searching of references could have gone on indefinitely. As Sattar *et al.* (2021: 3) point out, however, it is increasingly recognized even in full reviews that exhaustive searches are not always possible (see also Booth 2006: 425; Noblit & Hare 1999: 111) – it is the developing and following of the transparent search protocols (Booth 2006: 425) that is of primary importance. In addition, both the search for papers (as detailed above) and the coding of what was extracted (see Section 2.4) suggests saturation was reached.³ Fewer and fewer new sources were turning up on the reference lists and no additional codes after the first five stabilized were necessary.

³ On reaching saturation as accepted practice in qualitative synthesis, see Miller (2011: 313) and Sattar *et al.* (2021: 4).

Of arguably greater significance during this phase was the decision not to carry out a quality assessment. Reviewers in qualitative reviews sometimes subject studies to a “systematic process of examin[ation]” (Booth *et al.* 2016: 312) to ensure that all the included articles meet a certain threshold of rigor. The use of these assessments is, however, debated (see, for example, Alexander 2020; Britten *et al.* 2002: 209; Butler *et al.* 2016; Sattar *et al.* 2021: 4). While a quality assessment makes sense if a review is seeking to evaluate the effectiveness of a given intervention (Booth *et al.* 2016: 30), it has less of a role to play in a critical review, where the point is the ideas that emerge (Grant & Booth 2009: 97). In the systematized review I offer here, a quality assessment is of even less relevance. Diverging from what is typical, I am applying meta-ethnography not to a body of empirical studies, but to a body of studies that analyze pop culture texts. Since each study is an interpretation, synthesizing them to find some sort of “best” analytic method or “definitive” reading cannot possibly apply. Thus, if studies were peer-reviewed and met the inclusion criteria they were included. No further quality assessment was carried out.

2.3 Phase 3: Reading the studies

In this phase, the articles are read and “the main concepts” (Britten *et al.* 2020: 211) identified and extracted. I read the articles carefully and recorded key observations, arguments, and conclusions. While full reviews often make use of data extraction forms during this phase, I took detailed notes.

2.4 Phases 4–6: Determining how the studies are related, translating the studies, and synthesizing translations

While the phases of meta-ethnography are set out in a series of linear steps, in practice they “are not discrete but may overlap and run in parallel” (Sattar *et al.* 2021: 2; see also Noblit & Hare 1999: 110). I found this to be especially true of these three phases and so have collapsed them into a single sub-section. After the studies are read and the key information extracted, reviewers need to determine why that

information matters (Grant & Booth 2009: 93; Sattar *et al.* 2021: 5). The central issue tackled is: What does a body of previous work add up to? (see Noblit & Hare 1999: 95). It is during phases (4), (5), and (6) that questions such as this are addressed. In Noblit & Hare's (1999) original work, these final phases involve "translation", a process whereby the studies are "translated one into another" and then those translations "synthesized" (Noblit & Hare 1999: 95). However, as Sattar *et al.* (2021: 7–8; see also Nye *et al.* 2016: 64) acknowledge, this process is not entirely clear. How exactly do reviewers go about *translating the studies one into another* and then *synthesizing the translations*? Attempts at further definition tended (at least in my estimation) to compound the mystery. From Noblit & Hare's (1999) original account, we have "the translation of studies takes the form of an analogy between and/or among the studies" (Noblit & Hare 1999: 94). A page later, we are told meta-ethnography "reduces the accounts while preserving the sense of the account through the selection of key metaphors and organizers" (Noblit & Hare 1999: 95). While subsequent work in meta-ethnography does cover the translation phase, the process remains rather mysterious (see, for example, Britten *et al.* 2002: 210 on the need to "preserve the structure of relationships between the concepts within any given study").

The clearest articulation I could find occurred in an online post (Pagatpatan 2017), where the query was asked what *translation* meant in meta-ethnography, and the reply was "translation is the process of comparing, contrasting or connecting the findings of previous studies". Since this answer essentially suggests a process of thematic coding and there is precedent for using thematic coding in the translation phase (see Sattar *et al.* 2021: 5–7), that is how I proceeded. While Noblit & Hare (1999: 111) and Sattar *et al.* (2021: 5) suggest listing the concepts, themes, arguments, observations, and interpretations from the studies so that they can be juxtaposed and compared, I did this through a card-sorting technique process. I converted the material gathered in my notes into cards so that each card included a single piece of extracted information. I then sorted these cards, putting like with like until patterns began to emerge. These patterns were coded to express the higher-level concepts that the

material represented.⁴ For example, the following items, examples (1)–(3), are three observations from my notes that were captured from three different studies.

(1) The worlds that real teachers inhabit are less glossy [than film teachers], more tedious, though arguably richer for all of their blemishes (Renga 2015: 41).

(2) Though scenes of students studying late into the night are common, scenes of teachers teaching content are not (Delamarter 2015: 5).

(3) Hollywood’s “good” teachers are generally not part of the institutionalized curriculum – that’s precisely what make them “good” (Dalton 1995: 26).

As I was sorting, I noticed that these observations all fit under the concept of *how teachers are portrayed*. This became a code, and I then sorted additional material from the extracted data that also fit under this code. Five codes were identified this way. In addition to the teacher portrayal code, I identified *historical readings*; *synchronic readings*; *instrumental teacher training explorations*; and *analyzed as art*.

3 The synthesis

For Noblit & Hare (1999), synthesis is the process of “making a whole into something more than the parts imply” (Noblit & Hare 1999: 112). In a critical review, this *something more* “includes a degree of analysis and conceptual innovation” (Grant & Booth 2009: 93) and is typically in the form of a model or theory (Grant & Booth 2009: 93) that “constitutes a fresh contribution to the literature” (Britten *et al.* 2002: 214).

As I considered “the parts” (Noblit & Hare 1999: 112) – the observations, arguments, concepts, and conclusions from the 15 studies – by sorting, coding, and discovering the emerging patterns and how they related, the “whole” that emerged, the “fresh contribution”, was this: the educational research paradigm as it is currently constituted, at least as reflected in the papers located for review here, approaches pop

⁴ While there are software packages that can be used for such purposes, I am old-school about these things and have yet to be convinced that such tools are, in my case, any more useful than the manual procedures I have employed. In addition, there are precedents in the literature for using such manual methods (see, for example, Amundsen & Wilson 2012: 96).

culture texts primarily as *documents* within documentary research rather than as representational art drawn in language. Documentary research is “a kind of social enquiry that uses documents as its source of data” (Denscombe 2017: 244), and *documents* can be defined as “record[s] of an event or process” (McCulloch 2017: 215). Judging by the examples that educational research methodology textbooks tend to give, documents are largely factual texts such as “policy reports, records of parliamentary debates, contemporary books and treatises, textbooks, autobiographies [and] newspapers” (McCulloch 2017: 215; see also Denscombe 2017: 244–247; Punch & Oancea 2014: 204). While pop culture texts do sometimes appear on such lists (see McCulloch 2017: 215), they do so far less frequently and tend to be swept up with the more factual exemplars. As I will show in the next section (Section 4), this tendency to look at pop culture texts as documents rather than art has consequences for how these texts are understood and valued in mainstream educational research. In keeping with the codes noted above (see Section 2.4), the discussion will begin with *historical* and *synchronic* readings, move on to consider *instrumental teacher training considerations*, and then look at *how teachers are portrayed*.

4. Results of the review

4.1 Historical readings

While Ellsmore’s (2005) book-length treatment could not be included here due to the exclusion criteria (see Section 2.2), she articulates a point that is useful in our current discussion: in the educational research paradigm, films are “important for image-based research as *historical documents*” (Ellsmore 2005: xi, emphasis mine). Some of the studies located for review followed this path. Harmes (2020), for example, makes much the same case for television that Ellsmore (2005) made for film: “the way television presents education is an important aspect of education history” (Harmes 2020: 176). Treating the post-apocalyptic television programmes *Survivors* (1975) and *Threads* (1984) “as historical artefacts made during periods

of heightened anxiety about nuclear and bacteriological war” (Harmes 2020: 165), he suggests these texts “are steeped in the educational concerns of their era” (Harmes 2020: 176) and argues they “reveal themselves as subversive” in the way they employ “fictional presentations of education to challenge official assurances” (Harmes 2020: 166) produced at the time, such as the government-issued *Protect and Survive* (1980) pamphlets (Harmes 2020: 167–168). Coman (2013), surveying films featuring teachers in the 1950s and 1960s against the backdrop of Britain’s shift from grammar schools to comprehensives, detects a change in attitudes towards teacher authority. In the films of the 1950s, “teachers’ positional authority remained intact” (Coman 2013: 420) and they were trusted “as representatives of a fundamentally sound, if somewhat stiff education system that benefitted all” (Coman 2013: 420). By the next decade, however, teacher authority based on status was no longer a taken-for-granted assumption as, “in its absence, teachers in the 1960s films inclined toward an authority based on personality” (Coman 2013: 410). Jones and Davies (2001), writing about the television series *Grange Hill* and the film *Kes*, place these texts historically “during a moment – a long moment – of unresolved educational crisis, in which questions of educational value and meaning were the subject of sharp ideological conflict” (Jones & Davies 2001: 141). While these readings may be substantive, they reduce pop culture narratives to a single dimension, their role as evidence in histories of education.

4.2 Synchronic readings

Alongside historical analyses, we also find *synchronic readings* focusing on the way film and television dramatize current debates in education. Several papers (Blake & Edwards 2013; Dalton 1995; Delamarter 2015; Irwin-Devitis & Devitis 2015; Renga 2015) investigated how personal, relational, inspirational and aesthetic approaches to teaching were often contrasted with technical, systems, and content-driven approaches. Liston & Renga (2015) analyzed the film adaptation of *The History Boys* to steer a course through the social justice vs. cultural literacy dichotomy back to meaningful education. Harmes (2020)

looked at apocalyptic dramas to question whether what we currently think needs to be taught is of any value given an unknowable future, while Liston (2015) looked at how four approaches to education (progressive, conservative, radical, and spiritual) were reflected in two popular films, *Dead Poets Society* and *Stand and Deliver*. These synchronic readings also took a keen interest in the way films and television programmes mediated public discourses about schools and teaching by, for example, exploring their potential to shape views, however distorted, of what good teaching looks like (Blake & Edwards 2013; Dalton 1995; Jones and Davies 2001; Renga 2015). They also looked at how these texts can shape views on why education is failing (Barlowe & Cook 2015; Blake & Edwards 2013), and their potential to hide from view some very pressing but “uncinematic” problems, such as teacher shortages and underinvestment (Barlowe & Cook 2015). Blake & Edwards (2013), looking at three depictions of British schooling, *Hope and Glory*, *Waterloo Road*, and *Ahead of the Class*, analyzed the way these texts fed public ideas about two supposed “crises” in education, one on standards and the other on student well-being (Blake & Edwards 2013: 795).

4.3 Instrumental teacher training explorations

Treating pop culture texts as documents also led to them being read *instrumentally as potential teacher training material*. Several papers (Ahn & Leggo 2019; Delamarter 2015; Grunder 2016; Liston 2015; Tan 2006) valued “Hollywood-teacher films” (Ahn & Leggo 2019: 123) as tools to use in pre-service and on-going teacher education. Ahn & Leggo (2019) used such films “as a mode to engage pre-service teachers in reflecting about what it means to be a teacher” (Ahn & Leggo 2019: 124); Liston’s (2015) students were encouraged to question their assumptions about education by watching teachers and teaching in film; and Grunder (2016) notes that even negative representations of teachers can stimulate useful reflection (Grunder 2016: 155–161). Two sub-themes that emerged under this code were the way represented teaching contexts could be used to counter trainees’ sometimes unrealistic expectations of the profession

(Ahn & Leggo 2019: 119, 123; Delamarter 2015: 1–4), and the way they could be used “to allow teacher candidates to explore their own identities as emerging teachers” (Ahn & Leggo 2019: 125; see also Delamarter 2015).

4.4 How teachers are portrayed

Of particular interest in the papers reviewed was the way films and television programmes *portrayed teachers* and how this did or did not relate to actual practice (Ahn & Leggo 2019; Barlowe & Cook 2015; Dalton 1995; Delamarter 2015; Grunder 2016; Harmes 2020; Irwin-Devitis & Devitis 2015; Renga 2015; Rhem 2015). The papers commented on positive, if unrealistic (Delamarter 2015) portraits: so-called *good* teachers are often shown as working outside the establishment; are mavericks and heroes; make costly personal sacrifices for the sake of their students; relate to students on a human level; and learn from students (see Barlowe & Cook 2015: 27; Dalton 1995: 27; Delmarter 2015: 4). Positive portraits were also problematized. It was noted, for example that films seldom took an interest in the necessary but more tedious aspects of teaching (Delamarter 2015: 5; Renga 2015).

Teacher education programmes are sometimes devalued in films, as the first thing a “good” teacher does in many of them is abandon their training, which they discover to be irrelevant, and start anew (Ahn & Leggo 2019). The role of collaborative working amongst teachers is often ignored (Barlowe & Cook 2015: 26); and the teacher-as-hero trope often means other teachers, the foil characters, are portrayed as poor educators (Dalton 1995: 24, 27; Barlowe & Cook 2015: 27).

The papers also comment on double-edged portraits. Heroic film teachers may be inspiring, but these depictions may nevertheless be misleading (Delamarter 2015). For some, Hollywood teachers are ultimately regressive. Heroes they might be, but they tend “to leave the status quo intact” (Dalton 1995: 41). They are often portrayed as middle-class characters of privilege who swoop in to save a class of poor,

underprivileged students and while these instances may lead to individual successes they do little to address the underlying inequalities (Dalton 1995: 37, 41; see also Renga 2015; Barlowe & Cook 2015).

5. Reading pop culture texts as documents: The consequences

As shown in Sections 4.1–4.4, the papers located for review cover substantive issues but tend to treat pop culture texts as documents. This, as we have seen, drives historical readings of how these texts reflect shifts in educational policy, contemporary explorations of how they dramatize current pedagogical debates, investigations of how they can be used in teacher training, and analyses of how teachers are portrayed. While the “record of an event or process” definition cited earlier may work well for factual documents, shoehorning pop culture texts into this category has had limiting effects. This is because pop culture texts are not best described as *documents*; rather, they are *interpretations*, pieces of fiction, and what McCulloch (2017) advises for the study of novelistic depictions of teachers and teaching in educational research applies equally well here: such texts are “not intended to convey the literal truth about particular events [but] may *represent deeper realities about social experiences*” (McCullough 2017: 217, emphasis mine).

The review reveals that treating pop culture texts as documents provides limited avenues for accessing these “deeper realities about social experiences” (McCulloch 2017: 217). In the literature to date thus far, we learn about teachers, about historical trends in education, about contemporary pedagogical concerns, about teacher training, and about the relationship of teachers to their screen counterparts. We have not, it can be suggested, moved much beyond the surface of the texts. The question then becomes how, as analysts, we can access these “deeper realities about social experiences”. Addressing this question from a linguistic standpoint is the subject of the next section.

6. Pop culture as art in language: Taking a linguistic approach

Only two of the papers ventured in the direction of analyzing pop culture *as art*. Jones & Davies (2001) offered an analysis of visual effects in relation to themes, and Blake & Edwards (2013) investigated characterization, narrative structure, and genre theory. Neither of them, nor any of the other papers reviewed, offered a linguistic analysis of the texts studied. This seems an odd omission, not simply because I am a linguist, but because telecinematic dramas as art (as well as many other pop culture artefacts) are drawn, in large part, in language (Kozloff 2000). When we engage with drama we are overhearing represented conversations “arranged to be overheard on purpose” (Short 1989: 149). Setting out his embedded discourse theory of drama, Short (1989) goes on to note that as characters speak to each other additional meanings can be communicated to the listening audience (Short 1989: 149). The greater our explicit awareness of how language works, the greater our ability to understand and interpret these possible meanings (Short 1996: 205; see also Bubel 2008 for film audiences). Drawing on what is now established practice in stylistics (see Bowles 2010; Culpeper *et al.* 1998 and the papers therein; Herman 1995; Hoffmann 2023; Schubert 2023; Short 1996), I apply conversation analysis in the interpretation of fictional dialogue, in this case a scene from an episode of the popular situation comedy *The Big Bang Theory*.

While the scene analyzed does not feature a formal educational setting, it focuses on the experience of an English language learner and as such is likely to be relevant to educational concerns, especially in English-as-an-additional-language contexts. Conversation analysis, an approach to the study of talk pioneered in ethnomethodology, seeks to understand how participants in conversation interpret their own act(s) of participation (Levinson 1983: 295). The pioneering findings are set out in Sacks *et al.* (1974). Noticing in their study of many different conversations a set of “grossly apparent facts”, behaviors that could be observed “in any conversation” (Sacks *et al.* 1974: 700), they set out to explain what could account for this. Their answer is a set of turn-taking rules in which speakers either select others or

themselves to speak in a recurring fashion (Sacks *et al.* 1974: 704). These rules, simplified from Levinson's (1983) frequently cited summary, are set out in Figure 1.

<p>Rule 1</p> <p>(a) If a current speaker selects a next speaker, then the current speaker must stop speaking and the next speaker must speak next.</p> <p>(b) If the current speaker does not select a next speaker, then any other speaker present can self-select.</p> <p>(c) If the current speaker has not selected a next speaker and no one self-selects, the current speaker can but does not have to continue.</p> <p>Rule 2</p> <p>When rule 1 (c) has been applied by a current speaker, rules 1 (a)–(c) re-apply</p>
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Figure 1 *The turn-taking rules* (from Sacks *et al.* 1974, as articulated by Levinson 1983: 298, with some simplifications)

It is the turn-taking rules and the various implications that flow from them – adjacency, preference, repair, and recipient design – that I have drawn on in my analysis.

While the turn-taking system is set out as a series of *rules*, *norms* is perhaps a better term. As Sacks *et al.* (1974) note, it is because of the *rules* that we notice breaches of those rules; thus, both observance and breach (Herman 1995) are meaningful for participants (hence our many folk-linguistic terms for those who interrupt, talk too much, and so on) (Sacks *et al.* 1974). As Short (1996) notes, these meanings are also available when we “overhear” dramatic dialogue: “turn-taking patterns and deviations from relevant turn-taking norms can easily become meaningful in texts” (Short 1996: 205). It is to these kinds of textual meanings, revealed by an analysis of turn-taking, that I turn to next.

6.1 The stylistic analysis of a pop culture text

The text for analysis is from “The Fetal Kick Catalyst” (episode six from season ten of *The Big Bang Theory*), which, as noted, features the experience of an English language learner and foregrounds an educational issue. In the excerpt, two main characters, Sheldon and Amy, are hosting a brunch. Two friends have been invited, Stuart and Bert, and an acquaintance, Mrs. Petrescu, a neighbor who is a non-native speaker of English. Upon a first reading of the scene (transcript, as done by the author, available in Appendix 2), it is clear that Mrs. Petrescu is, as the educational research tradition would term it, *discursively constructed* as “other”. But how exactly does this “discursive construction” happen? While it might be argued that attention to the obvious snatches of news and advertising language that pepper Mrs. Petrescu’s dialogue (e.g. *Now back to you; Story at 11:00*) would be of major concern, I show that Mrs. Petrescu’s othering emerges from the way deeper linguistic structures of talk are represented in the text, namely speaking turn allocation, preference organization, recipient design, and repair. The analysis will start by looking at how the scene represents talk between the native-speaking participants (Sections 6.1.1–6.1.3) and then look at the contrasting patterns that emerge when Mrs. Petrescu seeks to enter the talk (Section 6.2).

6.1.1 *Turn-taking between the native speakers*

As the scene opens (in example (4)), Sheldon and Amy are talking about the brunch Sheldon has planned.

- (4) Sheldon: I took matters into my own hands and arranged a brunch.
- Amy: That’s so nice! Who’s coming?
- Sheldon: Oh... er, Stuart, Bert from the geology lab and Mrs. Petrescu from downstairs.
- Amy: You mean the Romanian lady from the second floor?
- Sheldon: Yes.

What we see here is a near match to the turn-taking norms set out by Sacks *et al.* (1974). One speaker speaks at a time (Sacks *et al.* 1974: 700), the turns alternate with only two speakers present (Sacks *et al.* 1974: 712), and the transitions follow the commonly observed pattern of “no gap and no overlap” (Sacks

et al. 1974: 700) between speakers. As is typical in ordinary talk, the overall direction is towards harmony (Brown & Levinson 1987; Tsui 1994). This is further supported by a little remembered but very apt observation from Sacks *et al.* (1974): “the presence of turns suggests an economy”, as speaking turns are currency and can be “valued, sought, or avoided” (Sacks *et al.* 1974: 696, 701). In this sense, we might liken them to Bourdieu’s concept of social capital, as the two ideas, socio-cultural status as *capital* and speaking turns as *currency*, are clearly compatible. In the talk between Amy and Sheldon presented in example (4), this capital is equally distributed, with each speaker clearly valuing the other’s turn. They each have equal rights to the conversational “floor” (the conceptual speaking space), they understand each other to have that right, and they orient toward that mutually held and understood right in the locally managed, turn-by-turn distribution of the talk.

6.1.2 Preference organization and the native speakers

The harmonious nature of the native speaker talk is also evident in the represented *preference organization*. As Sacks *et al.* (1974) noticed, speakers can organize the distribution of turns amongst themselves by paying attention to the content of those turns. If as a current speaker you ask someone a question, you are not only selecting that someone as next speaker; you are also calling forth an answer in the expected next turn (Sacks *et al.* 1974: 716). Such pairs have been termed *adjacency pairs* (Schegloff & Sacks 1973) and Levinson (1983: 303) lists *greeting/greeting; offer/acceptance; apology/minimization* as additional “prototypical” examples. The first utterance in such pairs is the first pair part and its rejoinder is the second pair part.

For many pair types, however, alternative second pair parts exist but are not treated equally by speakers (Levinson 1983: 332). Consider, for example, a first pair part that contains an invitation, such as *Fancy seeing a film?* The recipient of such an invitation can either accept it or reject it. Work in conversation analysis (Levinson 1983; Pomerantz 1984; Sacks *et al.* 1974; Schegloff & Sacks 1973; Tsui

1994) has repeatedly shown that acceptances (and similar second pair parts such as agree and comply) are made readily and without hesitation; occur without hedges; and may be accompanied by positive intensifiers (*Sounds great!*). Rejections, disagreements, and declining acts, on the other hand, are typically more complicated. They tend to include delaying devices (filled pauses, partial repeats, hesitations, etc.) and mitigators such as pseudo-accepts or agreements (*Er... a film? Well, maybe... mmm it sounds fun, but I'm afraid I can't make it*). The explanation for such patterns that Pomerantz (1984: 77) gives with respect to assessments, first pair parts in which speakers offer an evaluation of some kind, applies to many pair types: when participants agree, they experience this as “comfortable, supportive, reinforcing, perhaps as being sociable and showing that they are like-minded” (Pomerantz 1984: 77). When they disagree, they experience this as “uncomfortable, unpleasant, difficult, risking threat, insult or offense” (Pomerantz 1984: 77).

The agreeing/accepting/complying second pair parts are known as *preferred* responses; the disagreeing/rejecting/declining second pair parts are known as *dispreferred* responses. While a recipient of a first pair part can of course do other things, such as remain silent or change the subject (Tsui 1994), anything that is not the preferred second pair part tends to be treated as dispreferred (Pomerantz 1984; Tsui 1994). In the scene analyzed here, the preference organization represented when the native speakers address each other (set out in Table 1), again indicates harmony (pair part classifications are modified from Tsui 1994).

Speaker	Utterance	Pair Parts	Preference
Sheldon	<i>I took matters into my own hands and I arranged a brunch.</i>	Report	
Amy	<i>That's so nice!</i>	Supportive acknowledgement	Preferred
Amy	<i>Who's coming?</i>	Question	
Sheldon	<i>Oh... er Stuart, Bert, from the geology lab and Mrs. Petrescu from downstairs.</i>	Answer	Preferred

Amy	<i>You mean the Romanian lady on the second floor?</i>	Request for confirmation	
Sheldon	<i>Yes.</i>	Confirmation	Preferred
Stuart	<i>Hey guys.</i>	Greeting	
Amy	<i>Hi Stuart.</i>	Return greeting	Preferred
Stuart	<i>These are for you.</i>	Offer (of flowers)	
Amy	<i>Oh! They're pretty. Thank you.</i>	Accept with gratitude	Preferred
Stuart	<i>So, what did I miss?</i>	Question	
Bert	<i>We watched Sheldon open a bottle for fifteen minutes.</i>	Answer	Preferred

Table 1: Preference organization amongst native speakers in “The Fetal Kick Catalyst”

While drama thrives on conflict (Culpeper 1998: 84), the apparent lack of conflict here in the dialogue of the native speakers indicates something significant. More than just a structural option in talk, preferred seconds, particularly a consistent pattern of them, show what Pomerantz (1984: 59) terms *coparticipation*. They are an indication that speakers are willingly participating in what they both ratify as a welcome experience and as such they convey a sense of belonging. To return to Sacks *et al.*'s (1974) economy idea, the native speakers show the other's turns are valued as appropriate tender in these exchanges.

6.1.3 Recipient design in the native speaker talk

A similar pattern of harmony occurs when we consider *recipient design*. This refers to how we structure our turns so they show “an orientation and sensitivity to the particular other(s) who are the co-participants” (Sacks *et al.* 1974: 727). Each of Amy's contributions, illustrated in examples (5)–(6), for instance, is designed to ratify Bert as a legitimate co-participant in the talk.

(5) Bert: I once left orange juice in my fridge so long it tasted like mimosa.

Amy: How old was it? ←

Bert: It's hard to say. I don't remember much after I drank it.

(6) Bert: I lived with my old girlfriend. She was a geologist, too.

Amy: Things didn't work out? ←

Bert: I came home from work one day and she had taken everything. I'm warning you – hide your good rocks!

She is similarly supportive of Sheldon in the example detailed in Table 1, repeated here for convenience as example (7).

(7) Sheldon: I took matters into my own hands and I arranged a brunch.

Amy: That's so nice! Who's coming? ←

Her questions, seemingly simple, are nevertheless significant, as they occasion further contributions from her interlocutors, ratifying them as valued co-participants.

6.2 The contrasting pattern: The native speakers and Mrs. Petrescu

As shown in Section 6.1, it is patterns in turn allocation, preference organization, and recipient design that discursively construct the native speaker talk as mutually supportive. This matches our intuitive sense of conversations between friends. However, the turn-taking system can be manipulated (Sacks *et al.* 1974: 711) and this too conveys meaning. As I will show in the current section, turn-taking, preference organization, and recipient design radically alter when the native speakers interact with Mrs. Petrescu and it is this contrasting pattern that discursively constructs her as “other”.

6.2.1 (Not) turn-taking with Mrs. Petrescu

While theoretically Mrs. Petrescu has as much right as anyone to be “potential next speaker” (Sacks *et al.* 1974: 711), the talk is structured to devalue her turns. Apart from the greeting sequence when Stuart

enters, she is selected as next speaker in only one harmonious adjacency pair, when she accepts Sheldon's offer of a mimosa.

(8) Sheldon: Would you like one Mrs. Petrescu?

Mrs. Petrescu: Yes.

At this point, she extends her turn with what we can be read as an assessment:

(9) Mrs. Petrescu: Drink is fun and good friends. Applebys.

Despite the advertising language here in example (9), Mrs. Petrescu's turn shows features of recipient design that orient towards Sheldon as the maker of the offer. With the references to *fun and good friends*, for example, she can be understood as strengthening her acceptance with tokens of goodwill (Tsui 1994). While the native speakers have the opportunity here to notice this and proffer turns to ratify the sharing of an experience, they do not take this opportunity. Instead, they stare at her, an unmitigated dispreferred response. As noted in Section 6.1.2, dispreferred responses are "normatively oriented to as offensive, compromising, wrong, or for some reason uncomfortable to perform" (Pomerantz 1984: 95), and this is why they are typically made with such care. With their naked stare, however, the native speakers perform their dispreferred act with impunity.

After the dispreferred silence that follows Mrs. Petrescu's first attempt to contribute to the talk Sheldon self-selects.

(10) Sheldon: She's learning English from TV.

Mrs. Petrescu: TV's good. Now back to you.

By speaking about Mrs. Petrescu in the third person in example (10), Sheldon acts as though she is not present, and so selects any speaker except her as next speaker. This leaves Mrs. Petrescu in a bind. She can save her turn by remaining silent but will then have to forgo contributing. Or, she can self-select after being effectively de-selected, spending a turn when it has already been indicated that her currency, her talk, is not valued in the on-going exchange. As shown in example (10), she chooses the latter, and winds up squandering one of her turns (*TV's good. Now back to you*).

Mrs. Petrescu's third attempt to join the talk also meets with native-speaker rejection.

(11) Bert: We watched Sheldon open a bottle for fifteen minutes.

Mrs. Petrescu: Fifteen minutes can save you fifteen percent or more on car insurance!

[Mrs. Petrescu receives an odd look from Stuart]

Stuart: Anybody else coming to this thing?

Here, Mrs. Petrescu self-selects after Bert leaves the floor open and again finds herself the recipient of an unmitigated dispreferred response, an odd look from Stuart. When Stuart self-selects, he makes it clear that he will not spend any of his currency – his turns at talk – on Mrs. Petrescu by addressing everyone else present except her (*Anybody else coming to this thing?*).

Mrs. Petrescu's final attempt to join the talk is perhaps the most revealing. Sheldon has started a topic on living with one's romantic partner and this starts a round of matching stories (Bowles 2010: 58), another typical feature of ordinary conversation indicative of harmonious speaker relations. Bert makes his contribution in example (6), and this is followed by a rejoinder from Mrs. Petrescu that is *almost* completely acceptable.

(12) Bert: I came home from work one day and she had taken everything. I'm warning you – hide your good rocks!

Mrs. Petrescu: My sister's husband took all her things too! Story at 11:00.

Stuart: Really, no one else is coming?

Following Bert's story in (12) above, Mrs. Petrescu replies with a similar tale. What could be an opportunity for a shared experience is, however, once again an occasion for exclusion. While Amy, as we saw earlier, consistently ratifies Bert and Sheldon as legitimate participants by prompting them to elaborate on their stories, she does not do this with Mrs. Petrescu. Stuart once again signals his refusal to spend any of his currency with Mrs. Petrescu (*Really, no one else is coming?*); and Mrs. Petrescu's turn is constructed so that she effectively cancels her own "deposit" (*Story at 11:00*).

6.2.2 (Not) talking with Mrs. Petrescu: Repair and audience positioning

Before concluding there are two final points to make about turn-taking and the discursive construction of exclusion. Firstly, most of Mrs. Petrescu's turns create the opportunity for *repair*. While turn-taking allows participants to engage in orderly talk when there is no plan for who will speak about what and when, there are of course "errors, violations, and troubles" that come up and when they do we have repair mechanisms such as asking questions, showing confusion, and requesting clarifications (Sacks *et al.* 1974: 701; 709; 723). While Mrs. Petrescu's turns are awkward in places as a learner of English, the native speakers do not meet her halfway by offering repair. They could, for example, respond to the parts of her message that do make sense, or they could indicate polite confusion to prompt her to reformulate her turns, hopefully more successfully. As shown in example (12), neither of these things happens. Stuart, however, is offered repair. The sting in the tail of the scene is that the brunch is "the practice round" to which Sheldon has invited his *b*-list friends and acquaintances. Stuart is furious when he discovers this (*So, I'm like a lab rat before your real friends come over?*) and Sheldon responds with numerous attempts at repair (e.g. *Stuart, perhaps we do take you for granted and that is not acceptable. Please know that you truly are a valued member of our social group*). Keeping the channel open with Stuart apparently matters in a way that it does not with Mrs. Petrescu.

Secondly, audiences are encouraged to participate in the exclusion of Mrs. Petrescu and this too is accomplished through the represented turn-taking. In the opening talk between Amy and Sheldon, Sheldon proffers this assessment of Mrs. Petrescu.

(13) Sheldon: Oh, fun story. She grew up with ten siblings. Or possibly penguins. Her English is atrocious.

[Laugh track plays]

As Pomerantz (1984) notes, assessments preferably expect agreeing assessments as second pair parts, and the laugh track can be read as that agreement. The experience to be shared throughout the scene

analyzed here, unfortunately, is the experience of laughing at someone simply because they speak a different language and have only a partial command of yours.

7. Conclusion

This paper first presented a systematized critical interpretive review of work in educational research that analyzes pop cultural portraits of teaching in telecinematic texts. The review found that the educational research tradition tended to treat these texts not as representational art but as documents. This led to revealing analyses of the way these texts contribute to ongoing debates about education but left an arguably more central purpose of pop culture, its exploration of deeper social realities (McCulloch 2017: 2017), relatively unmined. In response I offered a stylistic analysis of a pop cultural text featuring an issue relevant to many educational contexts, the attempt of a learner of English to communicate with native speakers. My analysis showed that emergent social phenomena in the text, such as the discursive construction of the learner's exclusion, became available for interpretation through the exploration of deeply embedded linguistic structures – turn allocation, preference organization, recipient design, and repair – that documentary approaches cannot access.

My larger purpose, as stated at the outset, was to put two fields of study, educational research and stylistics, into closer dialogue. By way of conclusion, I would now like to draw together some of the wider implications that flow from this endeavor. An apt starting place is what educational research and stylistics can learn from each other and what kind of research possibilities this might suggest. As I have shown, a stylistic approach reveals different ways of reading pop culture texts and this may increase both their scope and value as objects of enquiry in educational research. In addition, a linguistic approach provides a traceable way of accounting for analytic intuition when it comes to the study of discursive phenomena that otherwise remain amorphous. While I have looked at inclusion and exclusion in telecinematic texts through conversation analysis, such work can be applied to other social phenomena

(power, identity) in other pop culture texts (e.g. comics, graphic novels), through other linguistic approaches (e.g. politeness theory, speech act theory).

By the same token, there is much that stylistics can learn from educational research. It is a fair criticism of much work in stylistics, including my work here, that it is primarily concerned with texts and less with contexts, and the focus on single texts in isolation tends to drive a case study approach. Educational research, with its strong empirical traditions, can help forge new avenues of enquiry. When texts clearly signal where laughter should occur, how do audiences respond to such prompts? While analysts may unpick a text at many levels, what kind of status does that analysis have in the “real” world? What happens when we bring our texts and analyses of them into classrooms? Questions such as these are arguably not asked often enough in stylistics and greater engagement with the educational research tradition could be advantageous in this respect.

Finally, if our two fields of study are to be in closer dialogue, we have work to do on the ground, both in terms of how we do research and how we train our researchers. More, and more comprehensive, systematic review work would be valuable. For example, an interdisciplinary team of linguists and educational researchers could look at how a particular social issue – power, perhaps, or class, or identity – was defined and studied across the two traditions of enquiry. Co-interrogations of our accepted methods are also in order. As I interact with educational researchers, I am frequently asked how stylistic analysis is any different from thematic analysis and that question deserves a considered answer.

For these new avenues of research to be pursued, new ways of training, new ways of engagement, and new ways of identifying ourselves as researchers will be required. Interdisciplinary conferences will need to be convened; new methodology textbooks commissioned; and programmes of study, which in many ways articulate how a field sees itself, will have to be reimagined and restructured. It is likely to be a bumpy ride outside of our more comfortable grooves, but the journey will be worth it.

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Appendix 1: Reviewed articles

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Appendix 2: Transcript

The text analyzed is a scene intercut by other scenes from “The Fetal Kick Catalyst” (season 10, episode 6). The transcription was done by the author from *The Big Bang Theory: Complete Tenth Season* (2016, 2017), Warner Brothers Home Entertainment DVD, Disc 1.

Part one

Sheldon: I took matters into my own hands and I arranged a brunch.

Amy: That’s so nice! Who’s coming?

Sh: Oh... er Stuart, Bert from the geology lab, and Mrs. Petrescu from downstairs.

A: You mean the Romanian lady on the second floor?

Sh: Yes. Oh, fun story. She grew up with 10 siblings. Or possibly penguins. Her English is atrocious.

[Laughter from the laugh track]

Part two

Sh: Mimosas coming up.

Bert: I once left orange juice in my fridge so long it tasted like mimosa.

A: How old was it?

B: It’s hard to say. I don’t remember much after I drank it.

[Bert receives odd looks from the others]

Sh: Would you like one Mrs. Petrescu?

Mrs. P: Yes. Drink is fun and good friends. Appleby’s.

[Mrs. P receives odd looks from the others].

Sh: She’s learning English from T.V.

[Stuart enters]

St: Hey guys.

A: Hi Stuart.

St: [offering Amy flowers] These are for you.

A: Oh they're pretty. Thank you.

Sh: Stuart, this is Bert from the CAL TECH geology lab and this Mrs. Petrescu from downstairs.

St: Nice to meet you.

Mrs. P: Hello.

B: Hey.

St: So, what did I miss?

B: We watched Sheldon open a bottle for 15 minutes.

Mrs. P: 15 minutes can save you 15% or more on car insurance!

[Mrs. P receives odd look from Stuart]

St: Anybody else coming to this thing?

Part three

Sh: Until Amy's apartment is fixed she and I are living here together.

B: I lived with my old girlfriend. She was a geologist too.

A: Things didn't work out?

B: I came home from work one day and she had taken everything. I'm warning you – hide your good rocks!

Mrs. P: My sister's husband took all her things, too! Story at 11:00.

St: Really, no one else is coming?

Sh: This is it! You are the practice round.

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