

Do fictional characters speak just like us?

Informal spoken communication has various characteristics that make it different from other types of communication (e.g. written or online discourse). This worksheet discusses the unique features of informal spoken language and how closely fictional language is to how we speak in real life. We will look at different types of spoken language - from written dialogue in novels, to written-to-be-spoken dialogue in dramas, television and movies, to spontaneous natural conversation.



Key terms

fictional language

dialogue

informal conversation

spoken communication

Task 1

Read through the three excerpts from a novel, a television series dialogue, and a naturally occurring conversation. All three texts contain conversations involving teenagers. Focus on the way the conversation runs, the words used and the structure of the sentences. What differences have you noticed? Consider the differences at the level of (a) vocabulary, (b) sentences, (c) interaction between the speakers and (d) communicative style.

Excerpt A: _____

Excerpt B: _____

Excerpt C: _____

Task 2

One of the most frequent words in Extract C is 'yeah'. However, this word does not appear much in extracts A and B. Do you think 'yeah' is typical for spoken conversation? Go to BNClab, search for 'yeah' and consider the following questions:

- What is the overall frequency in 'yeah' in the corpus? In general, does it make it a frequent or an infrequent word in spoken informal conversation?
- What is the function of 'yeah' in informal, spoken communication? (Tip: You can check some examples of 'yeah' going to the Concordance button).
- In your opinion, why does this word not appear so frequently in the fictional dialogues below?

Did you know...

A study on the 90s hit series Friends by Roberts and Tagliamonte (2005) found that the characters did reflect current trends in the use of intensifiers (words such as really, very and so) and even showed higher frequencies for the new and incoming forms, seemingly closely reflecting ongoing language change in the society and maybe even helping to spread the innovation in language more quickly..

Linguists are still debating possible influence of television and movies on our language. What do you think, does TV change the way we speak?

Task 3

Think about the differences between spontaneous informal speech and fictional dialogues (on television or in novels) that you identified in Task 1. Think about why these genres have these characteristics and note down the reasons:

(a) Natural conversation: _____

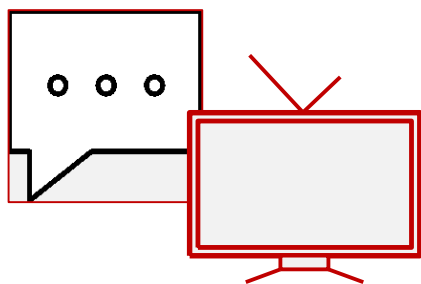
(b) Fictional dialogues: _____

Task 4

Looking at the dialogues in excerpts A and B and based on your own experience of watching television and reading novels, can you rewrite the conversation from excerpt C into (a) a fictional television series scene or (b) a dialogue from a novel? [Please use a separate sheet of paper for this].

After you've finished writing, compare your text with your neighbour. What features of the original text have you changed and what features have you kept? Explain the reasons for your decisions.

Research bite



Previous research by Monika Bednarek, a linguist from the University of Sydney in Australia, found that there are quite a few differences between the language of television series and everyday spontaneous talk. The reason for that is that language in scripted contexts (novels, dramas, television, movies and radio) has to do multiple jobs at once. Bednarek (2010:65) writes “television discourse needs to be comprehensible to the audience (avoiding unintelligible and vague language); entertain the audience (including emotional and aesthetic language; avoiding repetition, long monologues or narratives) (...)”.

Bednarek, M. (2010). *The language of fictional television: Drama and identity*. Bloomsbury.

Tagliamonte, S. & Roberts, C. (2005). So weird; so cool; so innovative: The use of intensifiers in the television series *Friends*. *American speech*, 80(3), 280-300.