



# TV Series and Research in Pragmatics: From the Discipline to the Object and Back: Humans (Channel 4, 2015-2018) as Case Study

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# TV Series and Research in Pragmatics: From the Discipline to the Object and Back: *Humans* (Channel 4, 2015-2018) as Case Study

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## Introduction

- 1 The discipline of pragmatics rose in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century at the instigation of language philosophers who were what Clark and Bangerter<sup>1</sup> would call “armchair researchers” (such as Searle for example), more theoretically-oriented and relying on their intuitions. Those interested in authentic conversations by ordinary “real” people became known as conversation analysts. Conversation analysts saw recorded and then video-taped data as the only real language. Their approach would correspond to “field research” in Clark and Bangerter’s distinctions. If armchair researchers rely on intuition by working on invented or imagined language in a particular context that is conducive to in-depth theoretical thinking, field research investigates language where it is practiced in its everyday use. This field approach inevitably condemns fictional language, which might explain why, compared to corpus linguistics, pragmatics have been behind in their consideration of fictional texts. Conversation analysis has indeed tended to relegate written/fictional language to the rank of adulterated derivational language unsuitable for their analysis<sup>2</sup>. Thus, pragmatics interested in what can be called the “pragmatics of fiction” always felt they had to apologetically justify their fictional corpus.
- 2 Fortunately, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, linguists and pragmatics are past systematic justification, perhaps because they have shown that the language of TV series is interesting as a cultural artefact in its own right. Nobody would ever claim that scripted language can be put on a par with natural authentic language “out there” in

the field; language in TV series does not reflect our messy, overlapping, interrupted conversations and (very often) unfinished sentences. Some comparisons can be made though (see Quaglio<sup>3</sup>), only because dialogue is rendered as plausible as possible in series and comes quite close to the ordinary functioning of language. TV series dialogues can thus serve as a laboratory for the researcher. “Laboratory research” is the third way of approaching language in Clark and Bangerter’s threefold distinction: it consists in bringing people to the lab so as to have them produce language, or see how they respond to certain samples of it<sup>4</sup>. TV series can be construed as a *laboratory* of their own kind, as actors/actresses are brought in front of a camera to perform scripted language for the benefit of recipients among whom is the linguist-observer.

- 3 As corpora, TV series constitute a wealth of material for pragmatic analysis: first, being mainly based on interactions, they provide a goldmine of illustrative examples on which pragmatic theories can be applied and tested. But more than that, TV series plunge the viewer in a wide range of experiences over a long period of time. Indeed, as compared with literature or cinema for instance where language is also exploited, what is specific to TV series is the fact that they create what Bednarek calls “continuity” as one key function of TV dialogue: the series offer the possibility to study interactions taking into account the circumstances that surround these dialogues and the knowledge of the different participants’ histories, feelings, purposes, and biographies over a large number of seasons. Such continuity makes it possible to ground analyses “both in the locally situated sequential contexts in which they are occasioned, as well as situated with respect to the broader relational histories of those participants<sup>6</sup>.” This is particularly relevant to pragmatics if we define pragmatics as the study of the use of language in its socio-historical context.
- 4 TV series have thus the potential to represent a broad range of human experiences and interactions, which reduces our reliance on lab experiments and brings us closer to the field conditions. These precious “lab-fields” can serve to illustrate pragmatic theories but, in a “return effect”, can also contribute to further pragmatic research. I have shown elsewhere that by staging what cannot be easily experimented or observed in real life (e.g., manipulation or hypocrisy in interactions), they make it possible to build pragmatic theories of these phenomena that take place behind the scenes of everyday life<sup>7</sup>. For this article, I have chosen one SF TV series, *Humans* (Channel 4/AMC 2015-2018) which is a “lab-field” experiment of what life would be like when humans co-habit with machines (called “synths”) for the performance of domestic, administrative and medical tasks. After showing what Science Fiction series can teach us about human language from a sociopragmatic perspective in comparison with “robotic” language, we’ll more specifically see how pragmatics can help explain such a series as *Humans*. Finally, I’ll go on to demonstrate how this particular series can open up new epistemological paths within the discipline of pragmatics itself. *Humans* has led me to new “armchair” theoretical thinking advocating a renewed “pragma-enactive” perspective of language, showing that TV series can foster a most unique combination of the three approaches highlighted by Clark and Bangerter.

# 1. The representation of humanoid language in Science Fiction TV series

- 5 Studying language in Science Fiction (SF) TV series can be seen as quite a paradox. Most SF series taking place in an intergalactic future have the future versions of ourselves speak perfect English. We can think of the Canadian series *Dark Matters* (NBC 2015-2017) whose space adventures imply going back and forth in time. No consideration is given to the impact of time on language use – in contradistinction to the natural evolution of language. In other words, linguistic credibility is sacrificed to intelligibility, as compared to dystopian novels which have demonstrated linguistic imagination<sup>8</sup>. Exceptions must be noted though, such as Star Trek's Klingon language – English however is spoken outside the Klingon Empire<sup>9</sup>– or the TV series *The Expanse* (Syfy 2015-2022) that more realistically reflects languages in contact, resulting from the colonisation of the solar system by humanity. But what is pragmatically interesting is what language is the reflection of. The Klingon language in its lexicon and syntax is clearly a subjugating language of war and domination<sup>10</sup>, and the linguistic differences in *The Expanse* also mirror historical power differences between colonizer and colonized.
- 6 The TV series I'm interested in for this article is the British *Humans* series (Channel 4 and AMC 2015-2018) itself based on the Swedish SF drama *Real Humans* (Sveriges Television 2012-2014). It features a world that is entirely similar to ours except for the possibility to buy substitutes to help you with housework or to take care of children or elders. They can also be used as sex toys via special programming. As more efficient, unemotional, and always operational, these robots are brought in to replace humans' jobs in a logic of time saving and ever-more productivity, leaving the young generation to wonder if, whatever job they choose, they won't be made "redundant". What makes the synths uncanny in *Humans* is that they look like humans and are yet entirely controlled by humans. Some men and women will rebel against this invasion of artificial intelligence in human areas, others will learn to appreciate their anthropomorphic counterparts while some synths will try to take their revenge on their human masters. Here is the synopsis of the series on Wikipedia: The series explores the themes of artificial intelligence and robotics focusing on the social, cultural, and psychological impact of the invention of anthropomorphic robots called "synths". (*Wikipedia*). No mention whatsoever is made of language and communication. How can such a series then be relevant for pragmatics?
- 7 In fact, these anthropomorphic robots called synths are equipped with linguistic and cognitive programmes that predetermine what they can say and do. Although they seem to be speaking like humans, the way they use language reflects their entire subordination to the human owners, called "primary users", to which they are "bonded". Without telling his wife, Laura Hawkins, who is a lawyer working long hours, Joe Hawkins, the father of the Hawkins family the series focuses on, decides to go and buy a synth to help the family with the housework. On being switched on for the first time, the synth bought by Joe signifies her bondage to him: "I'm now securely bonded to you" (S01E01), and mentions that she is now part of the family whose name she adopts: "My name is Anita Hawkins". A close examination of the language of synths similar to Anita in the first two seasons of the series brings about the following observations. The synths' language is marked by emotionless expressions and absolute

certitude. Their language is devoid of epistemic markers of uncertainty like “I guess”, “I thought” or “I don’t know”, or epistemic adverbs that would indicate degrees of commitment towards what one is saying (“possibly”, “maybe”). In the compiled corpus of synths’ cues in *Humans*, I could not spot the use of epistemic modals that would indicate doubt. Their utterances are generally in the passive voice as in “I’m prohibited physical contact with the humans without a clear recorded request to do so” (S01E01). The use of passive forms mirrors their lack of subjective agency and the inability to express personal opinions or anything that would not be pre-programmed. Preference is given to extraposed sentences with dummy “it’s” as grammatical subjects: “it will be advisable to sell within the year” (S02E01). These reflect the synths’ inability to use the first-person pronoun as an expression of their free will. Verbs such as “want” and “wish” cannot and do not appear in their lexicon.

- 8 As expected, synths all speak in the same standard English textbook mode. The series thus makes synths typically adopt linguistic and prosodic features that we traditionally associate with robotic language, which makes them, linguistically speaking, recognizably distinct from humans. They can phonologically switch between different dialectal accents however or more “soothing tones” by modulating their voice on demand. In other words, as encoded in the synths, language is perceived by their designers as a mere mechanism of communication, a universal device that is unaffected by time, location and participants. What also characteristically distinguishes them from humans is their typical machine-like rigid moves and rarely moving eyes. The scene in extract (1) makes us perceive how fidgety the human body is in comparison to synths. A character named Karen has adopted a child synth called Sam but as protests are on the rise against the production of synths that humans are increasingly in competition with for jobs, she decides to teach him to adopt humans’ bodily demeanour so that he fits in the new Synth-free technophobic village of Waltringham where she wants to keep him safe.

(1) (Sam tapping his legs).

KAREN. Faster. Okay now swing your legs. (*Sam swings his legs*) Too even. Your body is given to symmetry, precision, regular rhythms. The human body is wasteful, chaotic, expressive. Stick your finger up your nose. (*Sam looking at her in an interrogating manner*). Humans can’t sit still. Their emotional and mental states are displaced involuntarily into their bodies. You have to keep moving.

SAM. And put my finger up my nose?

KAREN. It’s popular with young boys (*Sam slowly puts his finger up his nose*)

SAM. Am I going to be ready?

KAREN. Yes. Just remember inefficiency is everything. Fidget, stumble, start over. Get things wrong, okay?

SAM. Be perfectly imperfect. (S03E01 – 28:46 – 29:38)

- 9 That imperfection – in the eyes of synths who are built according to maxims of efficiency, appropriate effort and total symmetrical order – has us perceive through the cognitive estrangement effect typical of Science Fiction<sup>11</sup> our fidgety nature. I will come back to the importance of the body in section 3.
- 10 But this contrastive representation may also serve to highlight recent evolutions in human-to-human interactions, robots only embodying the paroxysmal versions of what is already taking seed in our times. Let’s take the example of synths endowed with the function of carer for old people. Synths’ interactions with patients are limited to

objective utterances based on the data their computer-like brain gives them, enabling them to make the best decisions possible for the cared. In extract (2), the machine-human interaction reveals how care can become coercive when acted on quantitative data only, not taking into account/caring about the desires and feelings of the person that is cared for, turning the carer into someone that is programmed to make the patient happy against his will. In (2), Dr George Millican, who helped another scientist called David Elster design the first generation of synths, is in interaction with a synth, Vera, who has been assigned to him in replacement of a previous generation's synth named Odi whom he cared about a lot but who started to malfunction. Dr Millican observes with dread the evolution from Odi to this newly-sent synth:

(2)

VERA. Please stick out your tongue

DR MILLICAN. You're kidding

VERA. Any non-compliance or variation in your medication intake must be reported to your GP

*He takes the pill, appalled.*

DR MILLICAN. You're not a carer (pause: 2s) you're a jailer. Elster would be sick to his stomach if he'd seen what you've become.

*She takes his pulse*

DR MILLICAN. I'm fine. Ok now get lost. Tug-boat. It's good (*laugh*). Store that. That's your new name.

VERA. Any new designation or diminutive not on the pre-approved list must be cleared with your local health authority in their capacity as this unit's primary user. You should sleep now Dr Millican. Your pulse is slightly elevated.

DR MILLICAN. Slightly?

VERA. Your GP will be notified if any refusal to follow recommendations made in your best interest. (S02E02: 00:28:05 – 00:29:13)

- 11 Care means compliance with medical charts and stats and is dissociated from caring language. Vera's remarks may embody a caricatural description of today's doctor-patient interactions where doctors and nurses are compelled by neoliberal management to pay more attention to charts than to their patients' well-being. What is troubling in (2) however is that the language of the patient has no longer the power to affect the other. Synths are totally impervious to insults, as diminutives (such as "tug-boat") have to be pre-chosen and cannot be invented in a middle of a conversation.

## 2. Doing pragmatics with *Humans*

- 12 Pragmatic studies have focused on TV series (human) characters with odd social conventions – as in *The Big Bang Theory* (CBS 2007-2019) for instance with the character of Sheldon Cooper often approached as "robotic" in nature – the violation of cooperative maxims and norms of relevance, when expected, often being the source of humour in the series<sup>12</sup>. These pragmatic studies (based on Gricean pragmatics, relevance theory or impoliteness theory) bring to the fore the nature of the linguistic deviance that brings viewers to perceive such characters as "abnormal" or almost "non-human", thus emphasizing the norms of human communication.
- 13 In *Humans*, pragmatics can similarly be exploited to pinpoint the abnormality of synths. Synths seem to be abiders-in-chief of Grice's cooperation principle<sup>13</sup> and in particular of the maxim of quality according to which speakers expect their co-speakers to tell the



truth or say only that for which they have sufficient proof if conversation is to be successful. Moreover, synths' remarks are always entirely relevant to the conversation (maxim of relation<sup>14</sup>), otherwise they remain silent and when a question does not fall within their perimeter or is not deemed pertinent, their answer is either "I'm afraid I don't understand the question" (Anita S02E02) or "I don't deem your remark pertinent" (Anita S02E01). Synths are programmed to be pragmatically cooperative in all instances, as they cannot produce ambiguous statements that could lead to misunderstandings. They embody a literal version of Grice's maxim of manner<sup>15</sup>. They need sufficient information in order to process a situation, in accordance with the maxim of quantity<sup>16</sup>: "I'm unable to comply with your request due to inadequate information" (Anita, S02E05). This is the maxim however that shows a pragmatic difference with humans. To a human ear, the amount of medical information provided by Vera for instance about George's health in (2) is precisely what renders interaction asymmetrical because the knowledge of the machine is superior and determines the power that can be exerted on the cared for.

- 14 Furthermore, the synths are pragmatically incompetent in that they yet lack an essential pragmatic skill which is that of drawing "implicature", that is the ability to go beyond the literalness of what is said, as when George says to Odi "I'd kill for an ice-cream right now" (S01E03). Seeing Odi puzzled for a moment, George has to tell him what he really means by this hyperbole flouting the maxim of quality: "it means I want one". Synths are also unable to understand expletives that would imply understanding the metaphorical use of words or phrases. When Karen's partner comes back home to Sam, their adopted child synth, and is reassured to see him, he exclaims "Thank Christ". Sam answers, leaning on the verb-object prototype encoded in his brain, "what do I need to thank him for?" (S02E07), which is bound to make the viewer smile. This humorous exchange – as well as the "tugboat" insult to Vera in (2) – are meant for (neurotypical<sup>17</sup>) adult viewers to perceive what human interactions are and that language makes possible, creating a form of human connivance.
- 15 What a series like *Humans* more specifically makes the viewer realise is that the maxim of truth can in fact only be the prerogative of rational machines entirely determined by their code: they have no choice but to tell the truth, preventing them from using lying for caring purposes for instance. Anita, who at some point decides to leave the Hawkins family with their accord and live her own life by trying to get into contact with humans she wants to learn from, meets a male character named Ed for whom she starts to have feelings in a way that synths can't. Anita discovers the power of protective lies when Ed, whose mother's health is getting worse, lies to a friend who has come to ask for news about his sick mother. He explains his lie later to Anita: "If you tell people that, they go all weird. They don't know what to say" (S02E02), to which Anita answers: "You're a good person". Ed's lie is here pro-social generous face-saving. But synths are not equipped with the capacity to flout maxims for "polite" reasons<sup>18</sup>. In showing what truth-condemned machines can't do, the series evinces that lies are part and parcel of communication for purposes that can be positive, thus questioning traditional philosophy of language that has placed truth at the centre of successful cooperative communication.
- 16 The only form of politeness synths have been endowed with takes the form of discourse markers softening their programmed assertiveness and certitude: "I'm afraid the young man is mistaken" (S02E05). These introductory discourse markers ("I believe", "I'm



afraid”) are merely meant to perform mitigating effects as a way – it can be hypothesized – not to make synths’ assured knowledge sound too bossy to their human owners. “I believe this to be an unfriendly environment” (S01E03) is another instance where “I believe” is a discourse marker preparing for what follows rather than a marker of subjective opinion. Synths use “I think” or “I believe” in the way humans do sometimes, that is, as Kärkkäinen puts it, as a “discourse marker that simply frames an upcoming stance or marks boundaries within a speaker’s speech<sup>19</sup>.”

- 17 Interestingly it is on pragmatic grounds that the mother of the Hawkins family, Laura Hawkins, discovers that Anita is not a regular synth – Anita was originally a sentient synth called Mia made by Elster who implanted consciousness in the base code of a small number of selected synths. Mia was captured and repaired/recycled as Anita, yet the Mia inside her sometimes springs up and identities become blurred. She is tormented by a dream from her previous life in which she is trying to save someone. Laura grows suspicious of Anita who she thinks takes her younger daughter, Sophie, out at night. When she confronts Anita with this, Anita’s answer is suspiciously ambiguous which brings her to draw an implicature – that is to infer meaning that is not literally said in the words pronounced. Indeed Anita says “I will always keep Sophie safe” with a high pitch on “I” that brings Laura to infer contrastive meaning. In (3), she confronts her again, taking Joe, her husband, as witness:

(3)

LAURA. What about what you said to me this morning, YOU’ll always look after Sophie, what did you mean?

ANITA. I didn’t say that, Laura.

LAURA. Are you saying I’m lying?

ANITA. Of course not, Laura. It seems you are referring to our conversation during which I said “I will always keep Sophie safe” (*pronounced in the usual standard textbook English*)

*Joe looks sceptically at Laura.*

LAURA. It was the way she said it like SHE would and I wouldn’t. (pause: 1s) I’m sure (.) I’m sure she did.

(S01E03 00:20:48 – 00:21:15)

- 18 The same utterance “I will always keep Sophie safe” is repeated by Anita in the slow and distinctive default intonation pattern synths follow. Taken out of its embodied context and without the intense breathy tone used earlier by Anita, it is now devoid of any implicature.
- 19 The cognitive and linguistic estrangement generated by the SF series offers by contrast a vivid illustration of what defines us as humans. It shows what language becomes when it is disconnected from the body and emotions, as emotions in the show are shown to be failures and vulnerabilities that run in the way of efficient and profitable ways of living. Synths are productive and efficient precisely because they don’t display emotions and keep to rational explanations at all times. Through the contrast it sets up, the series highlights the embodiedness of human language and its inherently intersubjective nature, evincing how interactive meaning is. As the last section will further illustrate, the defamiliarizing lab-field of this TV series is likely to have an influence on disciplines such as pragmatics in return. It indeed foregrounds an aspect that is not always taken into account, that is human beings’ embodied and emotional relationships to one another, which is bound to have an impact on how we conceive

communication and the way we study it. In this, the series paves the way for what social robotics in Artificial Intelligence has started to bring to the fore: the necessity to put affect at the center of human-machine interactions if communication is to be effective and the fear inspired by robots reduced.

### 3. Towards a pragma-enactive perspective

- 20 Beyond the scary oddness of these human-resembling service synths, the series proposes another path for human-machine relationships that would be more interactive and caring. What Laura's husband, Joe, has underestimated about Anita when he decides to bring her back to the shop is how attached his kids have become to her, as Toby, his son, points out: "we care about her. How did you not get that?" (S01E06). The Hawkins children have found ways to anthropomorphically relate to her and ended up caring for her dearly. As recent studies have shown anthropomorphism is a fundamental dimension of the human mind<sup>20</sup>. It's not something we do only as kids when we animate our teddy-bear. Experimental research has shown that anthropomorphism is the result of our innate propensity to dialogue as a primordial form of interaction<sup>21</sup>. These structures can be activated in front of animals or artifacts even if they do not develop a great amount of interactional content and even though the interlocutor does not have the same proprieties or capacities of interaction as us. As long as the artefact can act as an interlocutor, our natural tendency to anthropomorphize can be activated and empathetic relationships developed.
- 21 Dr Millican's relationship to his previous synth, Odi, is an illustration of a personal emotional attachment to the machine. Although Odi is not perfectly functioning (or maybe because of it), Dr Millican sees in him something valuable. Odi reflects back all the memories he had with his wife before she died and before he started losing memories after a stroke: "I look at Odi I don't see a synthetic. I see all the years of care he gave us. All the memories he carried for me when I couldn't. He can't love me but (.) I see all those years of love looking back at me." (S01E06). Odi embodies what Hellstrand et al call "care as companionship"<sup>22</sup>.
- 22 A series like *Humans* enables us to focus our attention on the pragmatic workings of language as something that goes beyond cooperation between human subjects – which is something that can be reproduced in synths. What cannot be programmed (yet) is the inherently embodied nature of communication. Humans achieve intersubjective understanding through and beyond words, involving their whole body. Language cannot be perceived, as traditional cognitive sciences do, as a code that can be programmed into a mind-machine, thus endowed with a universal computational capacity. The metaphor of the brain as a computer is one of a disembodied, naked spirit that can be reduced to a pure intellectual object. What SF series depicting interactions between robots and humans have revealed to me – and that the COVID19-related pandemic confirmed – is the importance of our bodies in our interaction with others and the world.
- 23 Pragmatics has gone beyond mere descriptive studies of linguistic units in context-free data; it does postulate "various contextually implied meanings"<sup>23</sup>. But for Popova calling for an enactive approach which is predicated on a radical embodiment of the mind, pragmatics still "suffers from the flawed assumption of a transfer model of communication between individual minds and the accompanying assumptions of fixed

predetermined meanings that require decoding”<sup>24</sup>. In other words, if it takes into account the couple “meaning and understanding” as it emerges in cooperative exchanges, participation is still viewed as “unpacking” of intentions<sup>25</sup>. In the enactive approach, “cognition is embodied action”<sup>26</sup>. The mental states that help us make sense of the other’s meaning “are not fully independent or fully established prior to the interaction, but are instead affected, negotiated, and even created as a result of interactional dynamics”<sup>27</sup>. What is taken as central to enactivism is “the situatedness and embodiment of the social subject”<sup>28</sup>. It states that our human world is not contained in our brain but in “the common shared activity that is life” as it highlights the inextricable links between our “cognitive processes” and our organisms’ “embedded activity”<sup>29</sup>.

- 24 To say it differently, in our perception of the world we do not make use of complex computation but interact with our environment in a “hands on” way: “we see and experience the world because we ‘enact’ it and it ‘shows up’ for us in the process of our interactive engagement with it”<sup>30</sup>. Human thought is not something that takes place inside autonomous and isolated minds but “is intrinsically tied to the world, be it in the form of physical objects or other living beings”<sup>31</sup>. Although I see human communication as an ostensive-inferential process, I think that it needs to be completed with enactive, bodily considerations that studies of pragmatics have not focused on so much. What the series under study can help us emphasize is how much human agency is “bodily-based” and see that “In most of what we do we are not guided by beliefs and propositional attitudes but by an embodied and intersubjectively constituted experience of agency”<sup>32</sup>.
- 25 In *Humans*, regular synths communicate through data-sharing. The small set of conscious synths that Elster has created occupy a middle-ground position between these overperforming rational machines and sentient humans. Niska is one of the synths who was endowed with consciousness like Mia. In (4) she is given a lesson in pragmatics by Dr Millican whom she has come to in order to find answers about her origins:

**(4) Niska trying to scare Dr George Millican, threatening him.**

GEORGE. You’re not gonna kill me

NISKA. Why not?

GEORGE. Because (.) you like me [Niska

NISKA. [How did you come to that conclusion

GEORGE. You told me

NISKA. No, I didn’t

GEORGE. Sure you did. That’s how come I know there’s something really going on in there (*he is tapping on her brain*) Human communication. Language is just the top level. Then there’s all the stuff you try to say with your body. Then you get into the deep shit. Everything you’re trying *not* to say in the space (.) between (.) words and looks. You’ve already been talking to me

NISKA. So what am I saying?

GEORGE. That you’re sorry (pause: 2s) for what you did.

(S01E06 00:06:44 – 00:07:23)

- 26 Extract (4) shows how our mental processes are conveyed in a language that goes through and beyond words, sense-making being grounded in our sensorimotor interaction with the world and with others. The series thus makes visible what we humans take for granted without totally perceiving it – the embodied nature of

communication that Niska is being made aware by Dr Millican. It gives a powerful illustration to the idea that language is “only the top level”.

- 27 No wonder in these circumstances that the field of robotics called “social robotics” that designs social substitutes to help vulnerable human beings is working on a way to put affect at the center of robot-human interactions as the best way to have robots relate meaningfully to humans. Indeed, artificial intelligence in social robotics is working on the development of what is called “artificial empathy” to create a kind of “affective loop” that is currently missing in human-machine interactions<sup>33</sup>. Pragmatically this would mean that robots might become attentive interlocutors in a caring relationship. Just as social robotics learns what makes us social beings from their work on robots and our relation to them, SF TV series prompt us to think of a new way to look at human communication. This in turns provides new avenues within the field of pragmatics heading towards enactivism.

## Conclusion

- 28 TV series are more than a wealth of examples that serve to illustrate pragmatic theories. As “lab-fields” they can contribute to opening new paths of research with cross-disciplinary perspectives, bringing pragmaticians to take a new look at their own discipline from their “armchair”. By tackling ethical issues and debating posthuman knowledge, such a TV series as *Humans* provides new ways of looking at human sociality, past, present and future. It reflects how language is conceived by political and economic powers along the line of commodification and consumption, intent as such powers are on building perfect time-saving machines that would improve efficiency in a neoliberal world abiding by a “profit axiom”<sup>34</sup>.
- 29 Traditional philosophy of language theory and pragmatics have placed the success of communication at their centre. Now is the time for a pragma-enactive perspective that would take into account the necessity for “an embodied science of intersubjectivity”<sup>35</sup> in which language would be construed as part of a larger, broader, “semiotic ecosystem”<sup>36</sup>. A speculative series like *Humans* creates a potent space for challenging established disciplines and calls for a renewed pragma-enactive approach accounting for our embodied and emotional relationship to the world and one another.

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## NOTES

1. Herbert H. Clark and Adrian Bangerter, "Changing Ideas about Reference", in *Experimental Pragmatics*, ed. Ira A. Noveck and Dan Sperber, Palgrave Studies in Pragmatics, Language and Cognition, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. p. 25-49.
2. See Miriam Locher and Andreas Jucker's edited book, *The Pragmatics of Fiction*, Berlin/Boston, De Gruyter Mouton, 2017, p. 4. Locher and Jucker recall in the introduction that the "ambivalent feelings" linguists have had towards fiction was a new phenomenon that emerged in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when a variety of non-literary genres became available – up until then acclaimed authors were perceived as the only reliable source for linguistics and dictionary writing. A shift occurred again with the publication of Biber *et al*'s grammar, acknowledging fiction as one generic possibility alongside conversation, news and academic writing (see Douglas Biber, Stig Johansson, Geoffrey Leech, Susan Conrad & Edward Finegan. *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English*, Harlow, Pearson Education Limited, 1999).
3. Paulo Quaglio, *Television Dialogue. The Sitcom Friends vs. Natural Conversation*, Amsterdam, John Benjamins, 2009.
4. More specifically, the authors prove their point by focusing on the notion of reference.
5. Monika Bednarek, "The role of dialogue in fiction", in *Pragmatics of fiction*, ed. Miriam A. Locher and Andreas H. Jucker, Berlin & Boston, Mouton de Gruyter, 2017, p. 142 [p. 129-158].
6. Michael Haugh, *Im/politeness implicatures*, Berlin & Boston, Mouton de Gruyter, Mouton Series in Pragmatics 11, 2015, p. 219.
7. Sandrine Sorlin, *Language and Manipulation in House of Cards. A Pragma-Stylistic Distinction*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. Sandrine Sorlin, "The Pragmatics of Manipulation: Exploiting Im/politeness Theories", *Journal of Pragmatics*, n° 121, 2017, p. 132-146, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2017.10.002>, last consulted December 10, 2023. And on hypocrisy in the political TV series *Veep* (HBO 2012-2019), Sandrine Sorlin, "A plea for hypocrisy: Towards a pragmatic model", in *Hypocrisy: Towards a Pragmatic Model*, eds S. Sorlin & Tuija Virtanen, forthcoming.
8. We can quote Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker* (1980), Will Self's *The Book of Dave* (2006) or some stories within David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004). See Sandrine Sorlin, *La Défamiliarisation linguistique dans le roman anglais contemporain*, Montpellier, Presses Universitaires de la Méditerranée, coll. Present Perfect, 2010.
9. Lang Belta is meant to be an extrapolation of language as it would be 300-400 years from now. Nick Farmer, a professional linguist speaking two dozen languages, was called for to adapt the novels on which the series is built to television to help create the accent of the Belters. He used

Haitian Creole as a template for this language. The result is a language that is half English, half issued from the colonized and working-class (German, Spanish, Chinese, Hindi, Persian, Portuguese, Zulu, Hebrew, Yiddish). Instead of bullshit, farmer invented “kaka felota”, or literally “floating shit” as there are no bulls in space. Besides it changes from one community to the other, avoiding the uniformising effect of *Dark Matter*.

10. See Jean-Jacques Lecercle, “Bledhbe’chugh vaj BlHegh! From an ethics of alterity to a politics of style”, in *The Ethics and Poetics of Alterity*, ed. Maylis Rospide and Sandrine Sorlin, Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015, p. 15-16 [p. 14-32].

11. Darko Suvin, “On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre”, *College English*, n° 34, vol. 3, 1972, p. 374 [p. 373-382].

12. See among many others, Monika Bednarek, “Constructing ‘nerdiness’: Characterisation in *The Big Bang Theory*”, *Multilingua* 31, 2012, p. 199-229.

13. Herbert Paul Grice, *Study in the Way of Words*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1991.

14. The maxim of relation is followed when one tries to be relevant, and says things that are pertinent to the discussion.

15. The maxim of manner is followed when one tries to be as clear, as brief, and as orderly as one can in what one says, and where one avoids obscurity and ambiguity.

16. The maxim of quantity is followed where one tries to be as informative as one possibly can, and gives as much information as is needed, and no more.

17. I had first used the term “human viewer” in a generic way. But one of the reviewers that I wish to thank pointed out that this needed to be nuanced to acknowledge other viewers such as children or atypical population who have difficulty with the acquisition of figurative language (see Colston Herbert, “Figurative language development/acquisition research: Status and ways forward”, *Journal of Pragmatics*, 2020, p. 176-190, for instance).

18. I’m of course here referring to politeness theories in the wake of Brown and Levinson’s seminal work that is based on Goffman’s theory of face (Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson, *Politeness. Some Universals in Language Usage*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987).

19. Elise Kärkkäinen, “Stance taking in conversation: From subjectivity to intersubjectivity”, *Text & Talk*, n° 26, vol. 6, 2006, p. 700 [p. 699-731].

20. Paul Dumouchel Paul and Luisa Damiano, *Vivre avec les robots. Essai sur l’empathie artificielle*, Paris, Seuil, 2016, p. 123.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 126.

22. Ingvil Hellstrand, Aino-Kaisa Koistinen and Sara Orning, “REAL HUMANS? Affective Imaginaries of the Human and its Others in the Swedish TV series *Äkta människor*”, *Nordic Journal of Migration Research Special Issue Article*, p. 522 [p. 515-532] DOI: 10.2478/njmr-2019-0028. As the authors rightfully point out, the idea of ‘good care’ is rarely neutral as all depends on who decides what constitutes good care (p. 525).

23. Yanna B. Popova, *Stories, Meaning and Experience: Narrativity and Enaction*, London & New York, Routledge, 2015, p. 75.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 75.

25. Not all pragmatic works are predicated on this postulate. Pragmatic studies of the co-construction of meaning in interactions do account for the dynamic and interactive processes of meaning construal (see Robert B. Arundale, “Face as Relational and Interactional: A Communication Framework for Research on Face, Facework, and Politeness”, *Journal of Politeness Research*, n° 2, vol. 2, 2006, p. 193-217; or Michael Haugh, who in “The Co-constitution of Politeness implicature in Conversation” (*Journal of Pragmatics*, n° 39, vol. 1, 2007, p. 84-110) emphasises the interactional aspects of politeness. The emphasis is rarely on the body though. Emotions are understudied elements of conversation.



26. Hanne De Jaegher and Ezequiel Di Paolo, "Participatory Sense-Making. An Enactive Approach to Social Cognition. *Phenom Cogn Sci*, n° 6, 2007, p. 487 [p. 485-507].
27. Ezquiel Di Paolo and Hanne De Jaegher, "The interactive brain hypothesis", *Front. Hum. Neurosci.*, vol. 6, art. 163, 2012, p. 4 [1-16] <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2012.00163>, last consulted December 10, 2023.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 486.
29. Popova, *op. cit.*, p. 54.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 54.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 53.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
33. Dumouchel & Damiano, *op. cit.*, p. 104.
34. Rosi Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge*, Cambridge, UK, Polity Press, 2019.
35. Ezquiel Di Paolo and Hanne De Jaegher, eds, *Towards an Embodied Science of Intersubjectivity: Widening the Scope of Social Understanding Research*, Lausanne, Frontiers Media, 2015.
36. Alastair Pennycook, *Posthumanist Applied Linguistics*, London, New York, Routledge, 2017, p. 134.

## ABSTRACTS

Research in linguistics/pragmatics can be carried out using different methodologies. Clark and Bangerter (2004) for instance mention three ways that they refer to as "armchair", "field" and "laboratory" research. These designations refer to the location where the linguist/pragmatician undertakes her research; the researcher can remain seated in her *armchair* and rely on her own intuitions, or move to the very location where data can be collected in natural settings, that is in a particular *field*, or else in the *laboratory* where empirical studies are carried out and data retrieved from suitable informants. This paper is an attempt at demonstrating that TV series could be perceived as rich enough to combine these three types of research: they can serve as a *laboratory* of their own kind that enables the observer to investigate how people's interactions are represented in a *field* or and all this while developing in-depth theoretical *armchair* research. For the pragmatician, TV series are ideal objects on which pragmatic theories can be applied and tested. But the objective of this article is to show how TV series can also contribute to new epistemological avenues of research within the field of pragmatics. The Science Fiction series *Humans* (Channel 4 2015-2018) is used as case study. This article first shows how *Humans* can be interesting in its pragmatic staging of humanoid language which by contrast foregrounds the specificities of human language. Second, it demonstrates to what extent pragmatic knowledge can help us make sense of the series before evincing how *Humans* incites us to consider a renewed pragma-enactive approach to human communication.

La recherche en linguistique/pragmatique peut adopter diverses méthodologies. Clark and Bangerter (2004) par exemple mentionnent trois façons qu'ils nomment la recherche de « fauteuil », de « laboratoire » ou de « terrain ». Ces désignations sont en référence au lieu où les linguistes font leurs recherches. Ils/elles peuvent resté.es assis.e.s dans leur *fauteuil* et se fier à leurs propres intuitions, ou se rendre là où les données sont à l'état naturel, dans un *terrain* particulier, ou encore au *laboratoire* où se mènent des études empiriques pour recueillir des données fournis par des informateurs/trices sélectionné.e.s. Cet article tente de montrer que les

séries télé peuvent être vues comme des objets suffisamment riches pour combiner les trois types de recherche : elles peuvent se concevoir comme un laboratoire d'un certain type qui permet à l'observateur/l'observatrice d'étudier comment les interactions entre personnages sont représentées dans un *terrain* d'étude spécifique tout en envisageant de nouvelles possibilités théoriques depuis son *fauteuil*.

Plus spécifiquement, les séries sont des objets idéaux pour l'application de théories pragmatiques ou pour leur mise à l'épreuve. Mais l'objectif de cet article est aussi de montrer, en retour, que les séries peuvent contribuer à ouvrir de nouvelles avenues épistémologiques à l'intérieur même du champ. La série *Humans* (Channel 4 2015-2018) est choisie comme étude de cas. L'article s'intéresse dans un premier temps à la façon dont elle représente le langage humanoïde, mettant en lumière, par contraste, les spécificités du langage humain. L'auteure expose ensuite dans quelle mesure la pragmatique peut aider à comprendre la série avant de montrer comment *Humans* permet de penser une approche « pragma-énactive » de la communication humaine.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** pragmatique, énonciation, émotion, cognition, corps, intersubjectivité, *Humans*, interaction homme-machine, intelligence artificielle, soin

**Keywords:** pragmatics, enactivism, emotion, cognition, body, intersubjectivity, *Humans*, human-machine interaction, artificial intelligence, care

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