

INFORMATION FLOW IN TV SERIES: A TEXTUAL APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

In the past decades, linguistics has greatly profited not only from research and advances in other fields of knowledge such as sociology and anthropology, but also from other disciplines less closely related to it. This may be a good opportunity to use linguistic tools and conceptions for the analysis of not exclusively verbal products. Therefore, this article defends a model which, from a systemic functional perspective, gives account of the internal organization of TV series and advances explanations for some of their most common traits. Special attention is paid to information flow, providing a description of how the given and the new parts of any episode fit together, with much more emphasis on the former than on the latter. Also, the different segments that make up an average episode are analysed and their respective textual and informative functions established. Likewise, the process of comprehension deserves incidental commentaries mainly focused on the deceptive ease with which we receive TV series.

INTRODUCTION

There is a general consensus nowadays to address TV products as texts, as is evident in the already extensive literature on this topic. Among many oth-

ers, Buxton (1990) and Fiske (1987) propose and defend different approaches to the study of popular culture, particularly to that of TV series. Fiske's position is usually referred to as «viewer-centered» and is characterized by understanding meaning as a negotiation between viewers' expectations and programs' contents, because in order to be successful television «must both provoke its readers to the production of meanings and pleasures, and must provide the textual space for these meanings and pleasures to be articulated with the social interests of the readers» (1987: 83). On the other hand, David Buxton's book may serve as an example of how «ideology» may serve as a means of interpretation; his main tenet is that there is «an inseparable connection in the television series between an (unconscious) ideological project and a (conscious) commercial strategy» (1990:15). The ideological project is realised through the assemblage of the needed elements, whose disposition reveals the standpoint of the series.

Without deriding the value of the many articles and books written in the two trends mentioned above, and even recognising their significant contribution to a proper understanding of the inner workings of TV products, most especially in relation to their commercial success and sociological appeal, I would like to propose an approach which is not dependent, at least not in the same degree, on the personal opinions of the critic, but on the features, characters and plots of TV series. My analysis borrows its categories from linguistics, following the lines of Halliday's Functional Grammar (1994) and other systemicists such as Martin (1992) and Matthiessen (1992).

One may think that addressing TV products as texts should necessarily imply the use of average textual procedures, but linguistics is more often quoted than used (for example, in literary criticism; see Fulton, 1988: 326) and has still much to offer to other fields of studies. As an illustration of the «new intellectual point and social relevance» that systemic linguistics can give to TV studies, I would like to offer a short account of information flow in an episode of a very famous TV series: *Star Trek*. It was randomly chosen from a corpus of about 60 episodes not only of *Star Trek*, but also of *Miami Vice* and *The Avengers*. Needless to say, the model here proposed might also be applied to other similar series.

A SHORT INTRODUCTION TO THE TEXTUAL METAFUNCTION

It may prove helpful to offer a summary of some of the facts we already know concerning information flow. Every verbal text is made up of a number of units which are sometimes referred to as sentences, others as messages. In a

functional approach (Eggins, 1994; Halliday, 1994; Martin, 1992), great importance is given to the order of the elements in each of the sentences or messages, especially to the initial one, which serves as the starting point. This constituent is known as theme and it has the important mission of establishing the foundation for the rest of the sentence. As a rule, but not in all cases, the theme is also the subject of the sentence and the place where we find the old or given information. Immediately to the right of the theme, we find the rheme, usually starting in the verbal element. Generally, this is the slot for the new information. These two categories, the theme and the rheme, have been given very different labels and even different functions, as is evident in the literature (among others: Chafe, 1976, 1987; Daneš, 1974; Firbas, 1991; Givón, 1985; Schlobinski, 1992)

Competing views on this matter do not stop at terminology, but go so far as to colour its substance, as can be inferred from the two most outstanding positions. Thus, Fries (1983: 117) has referred to Halliday's as the separating approach, in contrast to the combining approach defended by the Prague linguists, most conspicuously by Daneš and Firbas. The meaning of Fries' distinction is explained by the fact that the latter do not accept that theme always takes the initial position, while systemicists, following Halliday, believe that in English, though probably not in other languages, the first constituent of a sentence has a special relevance and therefore functions as theme. So, in consequence, when analysing a sentence from the systemic perspective, we find two systems rather than two categories involved. On the one hand, we find the theme system: it divides the sentence into a starting point (the theme) and the rest (the rheme). On the other, we have the information system, according to which a segment of the sentence transports the old or given information and another segment does the same with the new information. Most commonly, given information and theme overlap and tend to be realised by the subject (the unmarked case) simply because it greatly helps the receiver in understanding the message; Glatt (1982: 96) has proved that such an overlap between given and theme in the initial sentence position, and new and rheme in the end sentence position is the preferred pattern for effective communication. Gundel also notes (1988: 286) that the unmarked term, as opposed to the marked one, «will be of primary communicative value to the listener».

However, in spite of all the advantages just quoted, sometimes the speaker or the writer prefers to alter this «natural» ordering so as to achieve a stylistic effect or simply because of other communicative or situational reasons. This is what we know as marked order, where a constituent different from the subject takes first position: it may be an adjunct and, less frequently, an object.

The interplay of the two systems just described, the theme system and the information system, gives the forceful impression that in every sentence we can find what Halliday calls two kinds of complementary prominences (1994: 336)¹, a combination of «crests» and «valleys», where the highest part of a system coincides with the lowest part of the other.

After all the previous considerations, we are now ready to ascend from the sentence level, which is technically called «lexicogrammar», to discourse, the level of texts and meanings. In this respect, Halliday (1982) has expressed his belief that text structure symbolises in important respects the structure of the clause; therefore, when this particular disposition of informational categories is expanded beyond the sentence to the whole of the text, we get a fair and exact picture of a continuous progression which leads the reader from one textual segment to the next, and from the beginning to the end through a series of peaks and troughs. That is the reason why texts are so frequently compared to trips and alluded to with the metaphor of movement (Matthiessen 1992: 60), a feeling which is powerfully brought to the surface thanks to thematic progression (Daneš, 1974). Thematic progression allows us to perceive how the successive themes and rhemes of a text overlap one onto the other and weave in this way the sense of the passage. It also gives expression to the dynamic character of textual meaning, a natural feature of all texts according to which (Matthiessen, 1992: 60) «what was new becomes given, what was rhematic often becomes thematic, what was non-identifiable becomes identifiable, and so on».

The progressive quality of texts is something very close to our personal experience and corresponds to that general impression that we all get when reading: the impression that the text flows or moves forward. The informative and textual structure that we have just attributed to sentences is also repeated in superior segments of discourse, such as the paragraph, the chapter and even the whole book. In consequence, for all the textual segments above sentence level, it is possible to describe the complementary action of two peaks which broadly correspond to the complementary ones described above: there is one thematic relevance at the beginning with the specific mission of both establishing the text's cognitive foundations and of helping the reader to quickly understand its subject matter (on the role of first sentences as topics, see Gernsbacher &

¹ Halliday describes such interplay thus (1994: 336): «The Theme is speaker-oriented prominence; it is 'what I am starting from'. The New, which culminates in the focus, is listener-oriented prominence: it is 'what I am asking you to attend to'. As the clause moves away from the first peak, it moves towards the second; and this imparts a small-scale periodic or wave-like movement to the discourse.»

Hargreaves, 1992)²; and there is one informative relevance at the end, bringing in the new information and, in some cases, confirming expectations (on the tendency to introduce new topics in final sentences, see Giora, 1983: 161)³.

J. R. Martin (1992: 443) has referred to this peculiarity of texts as solidarity across levels of theme, pointing out that it is a universal property of discourse, although much stronger in some genres than in others. In scientific and journalistic texts, this solidarity fulfils a didactic role, anticipating what is yet to come and consolidating what has already been said. It works as a leading principle that takes the reader from the beginning to the end. On the contrary, the role of this solidarity is attenuated in literature, where things are more often insinuated or suggested rather than overtly stated.

An example may help us to understand the way such solidarity across levels of theme works. First, every reader (or listener) needs a way of access to any text, a segment which Martin and Matthiessen call the macrotheme, and which very much resembles Pufahl's text topics (1992: 219) and Kintsch's macroproposition (1983; also Calfee, 1984: 167). This segment is always hierarchically superior and tends to anticipate, in a limited sense, the content of the passage. In some genres, especially those with a greater obligation for clarity, the title can be said to be the macrotheme of a book as it usually contains its subject matter in a pill. For instance, *Plants for Dry Climates* (Duffield and Jones, 1992) will probably appeal to gardeners in Southern Europe or other arid regions in the world: its way of access is sufficiently clear and predicts the general contents of the book. Then, on a lower level, many paragraphs and chapters are also opened by an anticipating segment which is usually referred to as hypertheme. It develops the macrotheme and points ahead in discourse. If we look at the first sentence of the book just quoted above (*Growing plants in a*

² Gernsbacher & Hargreaves state that a «consistent finding in these sentence-by-sentence reading time experiments is that initial sentences take longer to read than subsequent sentences... In fact, initial sentences take longer to read than later-occurring sentences, even when the initial sentences are not the topic sentences of the paragraphs.» (85) something which they attribute to the fact that «at the beginning of clauses, comprehenders are laying foundations... [they] spend more cognitive capacity processing initial words and initial sentences than later-occurring words and sentences.» (86) And later on they explain that «the speaker uses the first element in the English sentence as a starting point for the organization of the sentence as a whole. Similarly the listener uses the first element in a sentence as a starting point in comprehension.» (89)

³ Giora uses several experiments «to show that speakers select paragraph-final position for the purpose of introducing into the discourse new material which will subsequently serve as topic of discussion.» (161) The experiments let her conclude that «by locating information at paragraph-final position the speaker indicates to his hearer/reader the discourse-topic he has selected for further discussion.» (162) and also that «segment-final position is preferred for a relatively prominent information.» (165)

hot, dry, sunny environment is pioneering in a very real sense), we will find it is a synopsis for the rest of the paragraph and, in a more loose sense, even for the whole chapter.

If the hypertheme and the macrotheme usually have a cataphoric or anticipating function, the hyperrheme and the macrorheme can be said to have an anaphoric or consolidating function: they tend to summarise or encapsulate in one sentence what has been said in one or more paragraphs, sometimes in a chapter, and more rarely in a whole book. A short revision of any text will prove, to an extent determined by the genre, the anticipating function of both macrotheme and hypertheme, and the consolidating mission of hyperrheme. From the interaction of the categories above mentioned, we obtain a picture of a text as composed of two axes: one opening, anchoring and predicting; the other developing, consolidating and closing.

The previous pages have offered a very brief introduction to some of the terminology that will be used for the coming analysis, something that may be useful for those not familiar with systemic linguistics. The way is now cleared for a tentative application of the model here defended.

A TEXTUAL APPROACH TO TV SERIES

As stated previously, there is a long tradition of conceiving texts as a journey or progression from a beginning to an end. That is the reason why, Matthiessen (1992) explains, the metaphor of movement is so closely associated with textual models. If we now focus our attention on TV series and bring to mind the plots and characters of any of the popular series in the eighties or in the nineties, we will immediately realise that there is a strong similarity between our perception of both texts and series, as the latter awake in us the same impression of flowing or moving forward. Then, we may ask if it is reasonable to transfer and use on TV series the categories and concepts that we usually employ with regard to verbal texts. For instance, we may wonder how series manage their unity or, as we did before, we may try to show the way they progress from beginning to end.

Let's now tackle one *Star Trek: The Next Generation* episode in the light of the above explained model, the one titled «*The Outrageous Okona*», which seems to be made up of seven clearly defined segments equivalent to paragraphs in verbal texts. Some are longer than others, and all of them are undoubtedly composed of smaller units which could in turn be equivalent to verbal sentences. However, for clarity of exposition, it is better to remain at this segment level. Each of these segments or sequences is clearly separated from

the following one by the use of micromarkers (Chaudron and Richards, 1986:116) or «filled pauses giving listeners more time to process individual segments of a piece of discourse.» Usually, micromarkers take the form of the original soundtrack, as in *Star Trek*; sometimes, however, they are simply a chain of unconnected images shown at the rhythm of popular pop music, as in *Miami Vice*⁴. It is a well known fact that micromarkers do not simply serve a cognitive purpose but are mainly the result of a commercial strategy, as advertisements are commonly sandwiched between them.

The first segment is very similar to the blurbs we often find in the cover of books and has obviously a cataphoric function: it sends the viewer ahead for answers. This initial segment opens rather abruptly with a scene that shows the US *Enterprise*'s bridge with almost all the main characters of the series: Captain Picard, Commander William Riker, Lt. Worf, Counselor Deanna Troi, Lt. Commander Data and Wesley Crusher. Worf has just discovered a spaceship approaching the *Enterprise* and Data is already giving details: it is a very old cargo ship which seems to be suffering some unspecified disorder. When Picard opens the communication channels, it is discovered that only one person is aboard the other ship: Captain Okona, a verbose and flamboyant character very much in the line of *Star Wars*' Hans Solo. The scene is closed after he is transported to the *Enterprise*, a moment followed by Troi's psychological evaluation of Okona, whom she considers a rogue.

The blurb, which serves as a macrotheme for the episode, has a shared mixture of old and new. The given must necessarily take the greater portion of the blurb due to its anchoring function: we recognise the *Enterprise*, Captain Picard, the other members of the crew. But to be relevant and predictive, this blurb needs a small portion of new information Okona, which is presented against the familiar background of *Star Trek*. The way old and new fit together is presented as a problem-solving activity (Lötscher, 1992: 132): the viewer is faced with «areas of cognitive or communicative discrepancies that are to be resolved by informative communication». It may very well be that there is a certain similarity between the opening scene on the *Enterprise* bridge and the grammatical resource of nominalisation. Gill Francis notes that (1989: 203) «nominalisation is a *synoptic* interpretation of reality: it freezes the processes

⁴ «Miami Vice was the first series to make use of neurophysiological research on the viewing process: research carried out in the Communication Technology Laboratory of the University of Michigan has shown that (American) viewers tend to become impatient with overly elaborate stories or characterizations. In an attempt to maintain constant visual and sound excitement, the series used aesthetic devices from the clip (aggressive camera movement, «unnatural» colour schemes and mood music) to fill out the story » (Buxton, 1990: 140).

and makes them static... it also allows for flexibility of information structure by increasing the range of grammatical subjects and hence the options for unmarked theme». Equally, in every *Star Trek* episode the opening sequences show a very developed starting point, let's say theme, which involves the whole Enterprise crew as a frieze against which it is very easy to delimit and interpret the new. According to schema theory, this disposition of elements could be understood as an *advance organizer*, «a device that activates relevant background knowledge to facilitate the comprehension and retention of new material» (Omaggio, 1986: 97).

The second segment corresponds to the singular and stereotypical legend of *Star Trek*: The Enterprise is seen cruising space at a slow speed while a voice, Picard's, proclaims the following words. '*Space, the final frontier. These are the voyages of the starship Enterprise. Its continuing mission: to explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations, to boldly go where no one has gone before*'. The end of the statement is followed by a sudden acceleration of the *Enterprise* which gains speed and disappears leaving a trail of light behind. There is no need to say that this is the most familiar or «oldest» information in the whole episode, the image that we remember when talking about *Star Trek*, and that is probably the reason why it is used as the slot to insert its title.

The third segment shows Okona on board and in a hurry to prove that he is a *bon vivant*. While he is walking towards his first date, he utterly confuses Data with a succession of jokes that the android does not get. Then Okona is left in the arms of his first lover and Data begins a search to understand human sense of humour, a scene which constitutes the fourth segment. Data is shattered by his inability to enjoy Okona's witticisms, so he takes his confusion to Guinan, a character played by Whoopi Goldberg. Guinan, who is an advisor, cracks some jokes unsuccessfully, which makes Data even more unhappy. Therefore he goes for more information to the general computer, a machine that can provide vivid examples of the requested topic. This way he learns a varied collection of jokes; but when repeated by him to Guinan, they are all spoilt because of his lack of spontaneity.

The fifth segment begins when Data is summoned to the bridge. Unexpected problems have arisen. An old spaceship has approached the *Enterprise*, apparently with aggressive intentions. Its weapons are locked and its crew demands to get in touch with Captain Picard. Communication channels are opened. Aboard the old spaceship we find the king of a far away planet, who is in search of Okona and wants him immediately delivered for an alleged capital crime. After the initial surprise, Picard sends for Okona, but he cannot be found. Meanwhile, yet another old vessel appears on the radar, commanded by

yet another king with exactly the same demand as the previous one. Lieutenant Worf receives the order to arrest Okona who, when brought to the bridge, refuses to confess which crimes he may have committed, although he seems to be genuinely shocked by the sudden arrival of those two vessels. In consequence, Picard is faced with a difficult decision and, before making up his mind, he asks the petitioners to reveal the nature of their accusations, which they do: the first king's daughter is pregnant and Okona is accused of being the father. The second king sustains that the most valuable jewel in his planet has disappeared and Okona is suspected of the theft.

In the sixth segment, the two parties are brought to the *Enterprise* to find a solution. The rival kings slander the adventurer for the alleged crimes and then, in a sudden and unexpected decision, Okona agrees to marry the pregnant girl. The second king's son, also present on the bridge, protests that is not possible, confessing to be the father of the unborn child. Meanwhile Okona delivers the jewel. It was given to him by this prince as a wedding present for the princess.

The final and seventh segment is the place for the farewell and the conclusion. After solving the enigma, Okona says goodbye to everybody and leaves the *Enterprise* much to the chagrin of its ladies and the relief of Captain Picard. Data's search is also closed when he finally accepts that, concerning humour, he can never equal a human being.

Following the textual model we used above for sentences and texts, the several segments into which we have divided the chosen episode can be said to have two prominences: a thematic one, serving as a starting point, and an informative one, towards which the segment is focused (Firbas, 1991: 77)⁵ and which brings in the peak of the new. This is shown in table one:

Table one

SEGMENT	OLD / THEME	NEW / RHEME
Blurb	The Enterprise and its crew.	Flamboyant Okona
Credits	The Enterprise. Soundtrack.	Title: «The Outrageous Okona»
Okona as a don juan	Okona	His amorous abilities

⁵ Firbas gives the following explanation in his article: «In the flow of communication a sentence structure is perspectived towards one of its elements... the element completing the message contributes most to the development of the communication. It is the most dynamic element: it carries the highest degree of communicative dynamism.» Likewise, in this episode, as in the rest that form the corpus, the various characters and the different subplots are focused to give communicative relevance and informative weight to certain specific features or moments of the episode.

Table one

Human sense of humour	Data	His limitations as an android
Okona at the bridge	Okona	The two royal families
Confrontation	Okona and Picard	A secret romance
Conclusion	Okona and Data	Okona says goodbye.
		Data admits his limitations

This division is consistent with the several constraints expressed by Givón (1992: 8): every unit will have at least one but commonly only one chunk of new information, whereas it will have at least one but commonly more than one chunk of old information. It also takes into account that «at the highest level, a discourse is segmented in structural units for each of which a discourse topic is defined» (Van Kuppevelt, 1995: 140).

Information flow is also important in other respects. On the one hand, there is no need to say that a TV series' success depends to a large degree on predictability, which according to Kintsch (1984: 224) is greatly helped by «considerable world and text-structural knowledge». The subject matter of a particular episode has to be easily recognisable and decoded. The audience must be able to attach its gist to the general narrative of *Star Trek*, thus enriching and extending such narrative. Success in this particular respect depends to a large extent on the management of information. The Okona episode is not obviously different from other *Star Trek* episodes or, for that matter, from other popular TV series. Generally, someone from the *Enterprise* crew, most often Captain Picard, serves as a sort of starting point for the plot, a function that we could paraphrase as «theme»; but as the episode progresses, usually in the third or fourth segment, other characters tend to gain weight so that the interpretation of the new is more dependent on them and their actions. It seems to be a distinctive feature of all choral series that any of the usual background characters can, at a particular moment of an episode, obtain sudden importance and serve as a foundation for a subplot parallel to the main plot

Concerning the foreground position that Data achieves in this particular episode, I would venture the explanation that it satisfies two purposes. The first is of a textual nature because, since Picard is the most frequent theme, he must be consequently considered as the unmarked option. This is opposed to the marked option, which is the occasional selection of other background characters for the theme in later segments of a given episode.

The second purpose has to do with the features that make up a character. It might be interesting to suggest that bringing a background character to thematic position is always associated with his or her enrichment along the following lines: characters are usually made up of a very limited number of features, and a new feature, which had not been discovered because of the slight weight of the character, is added to the bundle to justify the thematic relevance. Most often, the characters are faced with a very simple dilemma (choosing between friendship and loyalty, between love and duty, etc.) which, surprisingly enough, they often solve without resorting to choice thanks to a solomonic vein shared by all the *Enterprise* crew.

As for the strategies to displace Picard from the thematic position and install any of the other characters instead, the amorous motive is of special significance. In three unrelated episodes, we find that Data or La Forge or Troi have suddenly fallen in love and are suffering the pains of a secret devotion to some other crew member. So, being in love is one of the easiest ways to come to the foreground. In 'The Outrageous Okona' another human emotion, sense of humour, brings Data into thematic position as a consequence of his inability to enjoy and laugh at jokes.

Against this familiar background, someone (usually the aliens, here Okona) comes into the limelight bringing forth a conflict. Most commonly, this someone represents a threat to *Enterprise* security or its current mission; other times, the alien is simply looking for information or help. At the beginning, he or she takes rhematic position and, later on, shifts to thematic relevance in several segments of the episode. But on the whole, this alien or external agent contains or involves the new information of that particular episode. There is a constant contrast between the given (*Enterprise crew*) and the new (the aliens or, here, Captain Okona), with a much greater weight on old than on new information.

On the other hand, it might be interesting to point out some of the means through which cohesion is achieved and maintained. They are simple but very efficient. Firstly, we have the same limited set of characters in all episodes, with the single exception of the alien; but even the latter, in spite of a persistent change in appearance, remains extraordinarily uniform if analysed at a deeper level. In substance, it always plays the role of the disruptive element. Secondly, the action takes place aboard the *Enterprise* and this isotopical scene of play functions as a frame or setting previously known by the audience. Besides, this selection shows a kind of iconic ordering which is receptor-oriented (Enkvist, 1981: 101; «it reflects the order in which the receptor is supposed to perceive things and to act on his perceptions»), something which could be paraphrased as «scene of action before action itself». In cinema, scene of action and action itself are often introduced simultaneously; but in *Star Trek*, as in

most TV series, the place where the action will happen is known in advance (on iconicity see: Bowers, 1988: 94; Givón, 1992: 25; Gundel, 1988: 293; Lichtenberk, 1979). Thirdly, and obviously enough, there is very little variation of plot, mainly through recombination: a member of the crew is given thematic relevance while an alien obtains the new position. This familiar character is afflicted by a personal problem or a moral consideration or a guilty secret or has come into the knowledge of embarrassing information. The alien or external character upsets the peaceful atmosphere of the *Enterprise* and disrupts its targeted mission. And finally, cohesion is also reinforced by the temporal relations inside the episode. Martin (1992: 180) has explained that conjunctive relations inside a text can be of two kinds: either external or internal. Their opposition is «probably clearest with temporal relations. External relations are used to display the activity sequences in which people engage as members of various institutions. Internal relations on the other hand attend to text-time — time in relation to what is being said, not what is being done». The former are experiential, the latter rhetorical. In an average *Star Trek* episode, the conjunctive relations between segments are mainly of a temporal nature: they tend to show the chronological progress of the plot; and, consequently, it can be said that those relations are external. Comprehension strategies for such sequential narration are considerably faster and easier than those for 'abstract topical exposition' (Calfee, 1984: 168)

If we now change our focus of attention to other notable aspects in a TV series, and particularly in the chosen episode, we will soon discover that there is also, both for characters and plots, what can be called a degree of accessibility which resembles the accessibility hierarchy determined by Keenan and Comrie (1977), the conceptual accessibility defended by Bock and Warren (1985), or the case rank proposed by Bowen (1988: 273). This hypothesis could be phrased thus: when it comes to choosing a cognitive point of departure for a *Star Trek* episode, Captain Picard is more frequently chosen than any other character for the simple reason that he is more accessible than the rest. Accessibility here means not only recoverability in the sense specified by Kuno (1978: 282), but also economy: that element which takes the least effort to identify and use as foundation for the rest. We know that «information» already activated requires the smallest amount of code (Givón, 1992: 25), and in the case of *Star Trek*, as well as in the case of other popular series, the lore or particular details of the series are always activated in the mind of the loyal viewers. The same principle works for plots: easier plots with simple conflicts are chosen rather than more complex ones just because they do not demand too much energy from the viewer. Difficult plots have an additional risk: they shift the attention from the product itself to the niceties of a moral conflict. Not in

vain, Aaron Spelling, the famous TV mogul, is said to refer to series as «mind candy» made with a very simple formula (Gitlin, 1985: 29): «heroes should be agreeable, villains clear, 'jeopardy' definite, outcomes pleasing, story lines simple, climaxes frequent, jokes flagrant.»

As for the solidarity across levels of theme that we described for texts, it is also applicable to TV series, although it cannot be sustained with the same rigour as in verbal texts. The problem with visual information is that it offers many more possibilities of interpretation, but if we do not get down to details, we could say that the initial blurb functions as the hypertheme for the episode because it both establishes a starting point and predicts the content of the episode. In the words of L. Rashidi (1992: 197), «it orients the decoder, paving the way to the core of the communication.» I would also distinguish two other prominences for the initial axis: a macrotheme and a lower hypertheme. In my view, the segment with the legend, the sound track and the credits functions as a macrotheme because it has an «anamnesic» purpose (Fiske, 1978: 169), in other words: it brings to mind what the viewer already knows about *Star Trek* and reminds him or her of its general features. Here, as we mentioned above, the only piece of new information is the title («*The Outrageous Okona*»). Finally, there is also another hypertheme for Data's subplot, which is subsidiary to the main one (the Okona's plot). These three provide the entrance to the text: they are clearly indicated, easy to understand and well anchored because they have to serve both as a foundation for the episode and as a means to obtain the informative kernel of the episode.

At the other end, the final axis, we find a hypertheme in the confrontation scene between the royal families and Okona. It functions as a summary of the episode, although it breaks expectations because Captain Okona does not turn out to be as bad as he was represented. Besides, this rupture conveys the simple message that appearances are often deceptive. TV series do not allow for deeper subtleties. I would also distinguish a lower hypertheme, closing Data's subplot, which complements the corresponding hypertheme. Both hyperthemes are the ways out of the text, the exit. In most texts, as in this one, there is greater emphasis in anchoring and predicting (initial axis) than in closing and consolidating (final axis).

Martin (1992) has mentioned that there is an evident connection between method of development and genre. And I would go so far as to say that this episode is a clear example of a method of development which could be ascribed to most TV series and which shows a careful selection of the hyperthemes for all the segments. The main consideration in choosing a hypertheme seems to be that it is well established in previous discourse and, consequently, very easily understood. There are no risky leaps in TV series since they are always in

a hurry to catch and secure the viewer's attention. The big TV channels, that engage in ferocious competition for the audience, know very well that the audience of any series must feel from the very beginning that the product on the screen is something familiar, something which can be assimilated to a previous «frame of reference» (Giora, 1983: 175). So, the first premise is to provide a context as soon as possible and to avoid risks ⁶ at all costs: the problem must be stated in simple and dramatic terms at the very beginning; and from that point on, the different segments must take the viewer ahead in a motivated and easily followed succession.

In the end, it could be said that new information is significantly smaller than given information, something which also contributes to the success of the series as it makes the individual episodes more easily comprehended. The choice of theme, taken from such a small repertory, usually brings the same characters into relevant position, a repetition which has (Haviland and Clark, 1974: 515) «a facilitating effect on comprehension».

CONCLUSION

TV series are seen under a new light when studied from a linguistic perspective. On the one hand, we can formally explain many of their most common features as if we were tackling a verbal text. On the other, we can leave aside the uncomfortable concept of ideology which, according to Minogue (1993), «has always remained a teasing but underdeveloped possibility, irresistible to graduate students looking for some all-purpose explanation of human belief.» Therefore, I randomly chose an episode from a corpus of about sixty episodes of different popular TV series, mainly *Star Trek* and *Miami Vice*. This episode, titled *The outrageous Okona*, is described as the result of textual forces operating inside it, among which information flow is specially significant. The tendency to introduce given chunks of information at the beginning of segments while reserving final position for new chunks is taken as the basis for a

⁶ For TV series, risks are often unexpected and do not end in poor ratings. The decline and fall of Lou Grant serves as an example of the many pressures that can affect and finally sink a TV series. Ed Asner, the actor who performed the leading role in the series, was at the time a conspicuous political activist whose liberal opinions awoke the animosity of some right-wing associations. A handful of inflammatory letters to CBS was enough for some very powerful advertisers to immediately cancel their television commercials, something which eventually led to the cancellation of the show in 1982 (Gitlin, 1985).

model which then proceeds to describe an initial axis, specialised in establishing the cognitive foundations of the passage, and a final axis, whose function is to expand the semantic field and push the communication ahead. This model is built on the double dichotomy theme-rheme/given-new, oppositions which work at the sentence or lexicogrammar level then the two systems are upgraded to discourse following the lines proposed by Martin (1992), and from this discursive stratum, they are exported to TV series and applied to a particular episode.

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