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THE VERBAL LANGUAGE OF PUBLIC TELEVISION

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Television is a phenomenon that touches the life of almost every American child. Indeed, the average eighteen year old in the United States has watched 18,000 hours of television (Lieberman, 1983). The effects of such a concentrated block of time on the child's development have to be considerable. These effects influence many areas of the child's life - psychological, sociological, perhaps even physiological. It is the area of television's language modeling that is of interest in this article.

A recent article in the Journal of Reading examined the language used in eight of the most popular commercial television shows (Lieberman, 1983). Lieberman analyzed the language of eight scripts for the total number of words used, average sentence length, variety of sentence structure, and the use of figurative language. He found that the shows he analyzed "are by and large not good models of syntactic or semantic complexity." For instance, the average sentence length ranged from 5.64 ("Happy Days") to 8.46 ("Dukes of Hazzard"). Percent of sentences with under ten words ranged from 75.3% ("White Shadow") to 90.5% ("Happy Days").

Appalled by Lieberman's figures, I was curious if any television shows offered a good language model for children. In cooperation with several units of the Public Broadcasting System, I gathered sample scripts of what the Washington office of P.B.S. told me were among the most popular shows on Public Broadcasting. For analysis, I chose to consider the following sample scripts (sent randomly as to specific show by the producing units):

1. Sesame Street
2. Mister Rogers' Neighborhood
3. 3-2-1 Contact
4. The National Geographic Special: Save the Panda
5. Nova: Fat Chance in a Thin World

These programs range from those aimed at a preschool audience (Sesame Street, and Mister Rogers' Neighborhood), through those suitable for elementary school children (3-2-1 Contact and the National Geographic Special), to those aimed at teenagers and adults (Nova). These particular scripts of the National Geographic Special and Nova were sent because they were among the most popular ever aired by P.B.S., with the "National Geographic Special: Save the Panda" being one of the most widely viewed P.B.S. shows of

Table 1
 Analysis of Language Counts of
 Five Selected Public Television Programs

	Length of Show	Total number: Words	Total number: Sentences	Average Sentence Length	Words per Minute	Number Sentences Under 10 Words	Percent Sentences Under 10 Words
Sesame Street	58 min.	5814	947	6.14	98.5	861	90.9
Mister Rogers	21 min	2512	305	8.24	119.6	195	63.9
3-2-1 Contact	21 min	3261	273	11.95	155.3	141	51.6
National Geographic Special	55 min	4507	313	14.4	81.9	95	30.3
Nova: Fat Chance in a Thin World	58 min	6903	410	16.8	119.02	76	18.5

all time. The Nova broadcast (which was about dieting) was also very popular, marshalling a larger-than-usual teenage audience, according to the P.B.S. office.

Script Analysis

Lacking computer assistance for this project, manual counts were made of some of the same elements analyzed by Liberman. Table 1 lists these elements.

Thus, the average sentence length ranged from 6.14 (Sesame Street) to 16.84 (Nova). Percent of sentences under ten words ranged from 18.5% (Nova) to 90.9% (Sesame Street). It is interesting to compare the figures from "3-2-1 Contact" (a show aimed at nine and ten year olds) with those from "Happy Days" (a show aimed at teenagers). Both shows fill a thirty minute time segment.

The script of "3-2-1 Contact" which was sent to me has 3261 words, with 273 sentences, and an average sentence length of 11.95 words. Fifty-one point six percent of the sentences have ten words or less. The script of "Happy Days" analyzed by Liberman has 2918 words, with 517 sentences, and an average sentence length of 5.64

words, with 90.5% of the sentences being fewer than ten words long (Lieberman, 1983). While such mechanical counts do not tell all about language complexity, they do provide a proxy measure of such. Clearly, "3-2-1 Contact" presents a better language model than "Happy Days". (There is no reason to suspect that the two scripts analyzed are not representative of the shows as a whole.)

Television's Potential for Language Modeling

Successful encounters with reading and/or writing depend upon the learner having a solid oral language base (Halliday, 1975). To process written words, children must be familiar with oral language patterns, word meanings, and syntactic structures. Traditionally, interaction with the language of adults has provided a language model for children. Since so many of their hours are now spent watching television, children may be receiving a large part of their language model from the television shows that they view. While interaction with the TV set is impossible, can children at least be exposed to good language elements? This exposure is particularly important as children are asked to deal with more complicated language patterns in the upper grade years. Lieberman's data indicate that commercial television does not provide a language model suitable for the demands placed on children's language abilities. My data indicate that public television shows offer more hope.

An examination of one of the analyzed shows, "National Geographic Special: Save the Panda", illustrates the language model presented. Because of the full and immediate context offered by the films of China, the show can start with the following complicated sentence and difficult vocabulary, without being incomprehensible to a younger viewer:

In the remote wilderness of central China, an
American scientist tracks an elusive animal in
its last refuge - the icy mountain ramparts
near the border of Tibet.

(Birch, 1983, p. 1; with
permission of WQED/Pittsburgh)

As the viewer sees the scientist searching for panda tracks, with the Himalayas in the background, s/he receives visual context for such words as "remote," "elusive," "refuge" and "ramparts." This learning experience is repeated innumerable times throughout the show, as viewers are exposed to words (all in meaningful context) such as "intrepid," "marauding," and "primitive" (as well as many scientific terms) embedded in complicated sentence patterns.

The language modeling offered by the five public television shows chosen for analysis is comparable to that of "National Geographic Special: Save the Panda". In "3-2-1 Contact", children learn words from the space program; in "Sesame Street", words such as "bizarre" and "composing" are in its lexicon; "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood" focuses on a trip to a watchmaker's, and

"Nova: Fat Chance in a Thin World" offers an exposure to semantic terms, coupled with an explanation, which must surely expand the vocabulary of any viewer. This vocabulary expansion is coupled with an attention to conceptual development—certainly television at its most powerful educational level. The average sentence length in "National Geographic Special: Save the Panda" and "Nova: Fat Chance in a Thin World" approach the average sentence length of 19.27 words for adult written material, and exceed the average sentence length for detective fiction of 12.76 (Kucera & Francis, 1967). Even the show aimed primarily at elementary school children, "3-2-1 Contact", approaches the verbal complexity of written language. Children must be exposed to this complex language before they are expected to read and process this language from print alone. Thus, these shows offer a language model comparable to the language required for processing print.

Implications

Since children spend more hours in front of the television than in school, television appears to be a powerful influence in their lives. Much educational research tends to ignore the effects of television; educators often seem to be wishing that television would just "go away". Unfortunately, television will not "go away", and educators must plan for its most efficacious use.

This article does not suggest that the best language model can be provided by television. The interactive component of language learning is totally missing from the television experience, for instance. Liberman's data indicate that commercial television shows offer a poor language model. If public television shows offer a better language model (as my data indicate), then hours spent watching "3-2-1 Contact", for example, may be more beneficial to a child's language growth than hours spent watching "Happy Days". Of course, hours spent engaged in language activities with an adult model would be most beneficial; however, this is often not the choice. Thus, if children are to spend considerable amounts of time watching television, adults should entice, cajole and urge them to spend time watching the television that provides the most in terms of language modeling. My data suggest that the five public television shows analyzed provide a superior language model than that provided by commercial television.

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