

# Better than real life?

Hamburgers on McDonalds ads look so perfect that your mouth begins to water, getting one at a restaurant can be a disappointment. It just wasn't as perfect as the one in the ad. An E-bike advertisement looked so inviting. People with smiling faces riding through lush, green landscapes. But when I got one myself I wasn't smiling like the people on TV. The E-bike looked good. However, riding it was quite a mundane experience. Nevertheless, I got to my appointments quicker... Another ad reminded me that I need regular exercise though, so I decided to use my longboard to go to most of my appointments, losing about two thirds of my speed but making up for it in gained finesse... My latest tinder match also seemed better online and at a distance than in real life and up close. The conversation on Tinder was first class, witty jokes, and the perfect mix of casual and serious responses. It was as smooth as the dressing on the new McDonalds cheesecake... in the ads... It reminded me of the dialogues of carefully scripted TV-series. The ones that are not just about the action, but focus on the characters. Scripted. Perhaps that's the right word. It often turns out that the online world can look more perfect than the real world. Social media profiles, series, movies, ads are all carefully produced content. A lot of more work has gone into them than one can see at a first glance.

Series and movies, or media in general has become an integrated part of our lives. Especially now in Corona times when we are thrown into a more reclusive way of living. Real life isn't like the movies... It's less over the top. It's more random. It's less generic. That's the beauty of it. It isn't scripted. Dialogue in real life isn't like the dialogue in movies. The plot hasn't been decided and our split of the second decisions move the conversation in a certain direction. In fact real life dialogue is often very messy. Full of mistakes and filler words like "uhm". People as smooth as the characters on TV are very rare.



## TV-reality vs. Real life

Have you ever wondered exactly how different natural conversations are from the conversations projected through the television? That it's different is quite obvious but naming the minute details

that differ requires some work. In the academic world the different ways in which texts or dialogues present themselves are termed registers. The main idea of register is that it's functional (Biber & Conrad 2009). A different way of presenting information is normally functional. In other words, even the sometimes off-putting filler words "uhm" "uhh" "errrs" of real world dialogue serve a purpose. Putting a scope on these differences is done in what's called a register analysis. A register analysis is a statistical approach of looking at a text. For example, it looks at how often words like "I", "you", "he/she" (pronouns) are used in two different registers. Have you ever heard of a textbook that presents information like someone talking? Highly unlikely. No "I" involved.

## Knowledge is power

As Francis Bacon once wrote, "knowledge is power". Of course this is a highly generalized saying. However, having more background information about the media influences around you, like series or movies, from a linguistic angle, might help you to be a less ignorant spectator and recognize certain influences and hooks in their presentation. Words are essentially bricks of knowledge, and knowledge is power. In linguistics, language is approached in an objective and comparative fashion. Linguistic capability can equip you to wield your chunks of information in a better way, or to see through the patterns of others. Anyway, to circle back to the question, how different are real conversations from TV conversations?

## The devil is in the details

Here below is an excerpt from the first episode of the 2009 sitcom Community:

**Jeff:** What's the deal with the hot girl from Spanish class? I can't find a road in there.  
**Abed:** Well, I only talked to her once while she was borrowing a pencil. Her name is Britta, she's 28, birthday in October, she has two older brothers and one of them works with children who have a disorder I might wanna look up. Oh, and she thinks she's gonna flunk tomorrow's test so she really needs to focus and she's sorry if that makes her seem cold.  
**Jeff:** Holy crap. Abed, I see your value now.  
**Abed:** That's the nicest thing anyone's ever said to me.

Abed and Jeff, two of the main characters are discussing a girl. This is a somewhat common topic, likely familiar to you. However, the conversation seems a bit more perfect than a real conversation. There are some phrasings that are quite colloquial like "wanna" and "gonna". The "Oh" in Abed's response to Jeff signals that he remembers something. The conversation is written to simulate real life and feel realistic. Nevertheless, it stands out that the sentences are all quite complete and to the point.

Let's contrast this with a real-life conversation between two students:

**BRI:** it's midnight blue.  
**BRI:** I mean that's nice.  
**ADD:** uh huh.  
**BRI:** ok.  
**BRI:** but it's got like these puffy sleeves.  
**ADD:** uh huh.  
**BRI:** not (.) bad.  
**ADD:** uh huh.  
**BRI:** but I don't like puffy sleeves.  
**ADD:** no.  
**BRI:** and then (.) it's like ok.  
**BRI:** there's hardly anything (.) between the sleeves.  
**BRI:** I mean there's not like a [/] a real neckline.  
**ADD:** uh huh.  
**BRI:** so you can't really wear something with straps you know.  
**ADD:** oh yeah.

The first really obvious difference is that the responses of each person are much shorter. A simple response of “no” or “uh huh” is nothing out of the ordinary. This is called a minimal response. An analysis was performed on four Community scenes and three real conversations, what came out was that minimal responses occurred three times more often in the natural conversations. With an occurrence of 48 minimal responses per 1000 words, it seems that minimal responses are a very distinct feature of natural conversation. Why so? It's not

because there is not enough to say. In fact, minimal responses are often considered a form of active listening and back channeling (Fellegly & Anna ,1995). They let the speaker know how his or her message comes across. It's a strange feeling when you are telling something and the other person is totally quiet. So these little conversational nudges are completely relevant and actually a positive thing. However, in a TV-show it might not be that interesting to listen to these small responses.



## Nobody speaks in full

As mentioned before, the responses in the real life conversation are much shorter. When we read something on the web, in a book, or on social media, we are used to full sentences with proper grammar. But real conversations don't work like that. Real-time language production is fuzzy. People don't end each sentence with a full stop and sometimes leave out certain elements that are considered obligatory in writing. If an English teacher would grammar check a real-time produced conversation turned into unedited raw text, that text would be full of red crosses and pen marks. Well... Except for maybe Obama's speech. In real conversations a point in the middle of a sentence could signal a moment of consideration or hesitation, which in itself is already something for the listener to pick up on. Those inconsistencies or “mistakes”, as an English teacher might call them, are

actually messages in their own right. Going back to the transcripts above, it is not hard to see that the speaking turns of the Community conversation are a lot more dense. The sentences are a lot more similar to text produced in writing than the student conversation. They are mostly complete sentences with a subject, verb and object, ending in a full stop. You might wonder precisely how big this difference is. To put a nail on it, in the four Community scenes looked at, 149 of the 165 sentences were complete sentences. While, in the conversations between students only 125 out of 166 sentences were complete sentences. That's a score of 90% for community against 75% for real life. It might not seem much, but if you count incomplete sentences too, you will find that they are 2.5 times more common in real life conversations. Quite a difference. Although complete sentences might come across as more elegant, there's nothing wrong with skipping a word here or there in a real conversation. It saves effort. It saves time. It's quite economical, because time is money, after all.

## Meaningful mistakes

It's very common not to know exactly what or how to say something in a real conversation. It happens to the best of us. This usually results in a little stutter after which the speaker tries to correct him or herself. This is known as a self repair in the field of linguistics. There are several reasons why a self repair might happen. For example, this self repair, taken from a different part of the conversation between the two students, might signal frustration:

**BRI:** I mean [/] tsk [/] I hate to say that like [/] oh [/] it's a waste.

To give a little bit of context, this student talks about her plans to buy a wedding dress, how it costs a lot of money, and how she might only wear it once. The frustration signaled by the filler words in between the self repairs is quite apparent even without looking at the rest of the conversation. The self repairs go hand in hand with these filler words here, making room for them.



In TV-conversations these little glitches don't happen that much. In the four community scenes looked at, there were only 3 self repairs per 1000 words. While in the real conversations there were 20 self repairs per 1000 words. You might have noticed that these counts list the number of

occurrences per 1000 words. It's done to give a clear and comparable average, called relative frequency. A standard convention in register analyses. Anyways, the contrast is apparent.

## Plot driven ambitions

Another noteworthy observation is that the self repairs that do happen in the Community scenes seem to serve a role in the plot:

**Britta:** Yeah.

You tell me the truth, I will like you. You lie to me, I will never talk to you again. That's my deal.

**Jeff:** That's a good deal.

**Britta:** So, what's your deal?

**Jeff:** Uh, I would have to go,

I would have to say, um, honesty. Because I would say anything to get what I want, and I want you to like me so, uh...

**Britta:** Well, that's a very honest answer. All right, for now, I like you fine.

In this little extract, Jeff, one of the main characters, tries to make Britta like him. The part where the self repair happens is highlighted. Here Jeff is, for the entertainment of the audience, and quite transparently, just saying what she wants to hear. He is making it up in the moment. The conscious effort this takes results in a tumbling over words. Although a self repair like this can also happen in real life, it contributes to the plot here. You might also notice that it is a much cleaner self repair. Indeed, there were no really messy self repairs in the Community scenes while the student conversations were full of them. Furthermore, there are another two filler words accompanying the self repair.

As mentioned earlier, self repairs sometimes go hand in hand with these filler words, making room for them. In a scientific article published online by Brigham Young University, filler words were lumped together with speech disfluency and the causes of filler words were narrowed down into three categories: divided attention, infrequent words, and nervousness (Duvall et al, 2014). Quiet a negative view. Be that as it may, different research has documented filler words as markers of people's psychological states (Pennebaker et al, 2004). Another article highlights their naturalness and likens them to natural words: "We will argue that uh and um are, indeed, English words. By words, we mean linguistic units that have conventional phonological shapes and meanings and are governed by the rules of syntax and prosody." (Clark & Tree, 2002).

Examples of some frequently listed filler words are: "Uh", "um"; I think, I guess; sort of, or something; you know. These words are probably very familiar to you as a lot of people seem to use them as a sort of conversational walking stick. Of the filler words listed above, "uh" and "um" are the most nonsensical. That is to say, that they wouldn't be recognized as real words by most. They are the most typical fillers of the bunch. In our TV-show, nonsense filler words like this had an occurrence of 9/1000 while in the real life conversations they had an occurrence of 21/1000. Since filler words have a negative reputation and are often advised to be avoided it is not surprising that

they occur about twice less in a TV-show. They don't live up to the standards of eloquent speech. Albeit, an occasional filler word is nothing to be embarrassed about in real life. In real speech one has to think and talk at the same time (Blair, 2017)... and that's not even all there is to it. We use them all the time for all kinds of purposes. It's, um, perfectly normal.

## Being general is conventional

The list above included some further examples. Indeed, there are a lot of more words that don't seem to add much to the conversation. Take the following sentence:

**JAC:** I think they had **some** scientist guys, and they had **like** a banquet and they ate it. (Two students discussing a story about the discovery of a frozen mammoth.)

The words "some" and "like" don't really add much information to the conversation. A textbook version of the sentence might read: A group of scientists had a banquet and ate the mammoth. Words like this are usually labelled hedges. Hedges are words that reduce the specificity or intensity of something said. While in academic writing specificity is key, in daily on-the-go conversations it is normal to be quite general in your speech. In the sample of natural conversations these kind of words were found with an occurrence of 27/1000 words, while in the TV-show these words had an occurrence of 12/1000 words. In the community scenes, "well" was arguably over-used in comparison with real dialogue. Perhaps an indicator of how TV-shows come close, but still fall short in emulating real life.



Uhuh...  
well umm  
yeah, sure.

..... \*Blablabla-bla\*  
...I wholeheartily agree,  
however I have to admit  
that from an ethical angle it  
seems disagreeable to  
me... although... \*blablablah\*...



That TV-shows fall short in emulating real life perfectly is clearly the case when you look at the details. Simple verbal markers of agreement like “yeah”, “uhuh”, or “no” weren’t very common in the community conversations while they occurred very often in the real conversations. In the former they had a relative frequency of 3/1000 while in the latter they had a relative frequency of 18/1000. These words, arguably used like filler words, don’t do well on the screen when they are being repeated constantly. On the contrary, in real conversations whether you agree or disagree with what someone says is very relevant...

## Counting is key

Likely the most regularly looked at features in register analyses are pronouns and contractions. Pronouns are words like “I”, “you”, “he/she” and contractions are words in which two words become one “I’m”, “Isn’t”, “wasn’t”. A reason for this is that these words are highly informal and not accepted in more sophisticated writing. Contrasting our Community dialogues with the real ones, it turned out that there was no significant statistical difference between them when it came to pronouns and contractions. In the real conversations pronouns had an occurrence of 127/1000 while in Community they had a slightly higher occurrence of 139/1000. Contractions had an occurrence of 46/1000 in the real conversations and an occurrence of 41/1000 in Community. Community resembles real life pretty well here. A possible explanation is that contractions written as two words sound fairly odd anywhere else but in formal writing and that a conversation simply can’t do without pronouns.

A peculiar thing that stood out in the TV dialogues is that the characters very often called the attention of other characters by mentioning their names:

**Jeff:** I don't have a study group, **Pierce**. I made it up.

This attention calling or tagging, doesn’t happen that much in most real life settings. In the real conversations it occurred only once in total and the relative frequency was 0,5/1000. In the Community scenes it had a much higher occurrence of 10/1000. This seems to be a unique quality of Community dialogues. Name calling creates a very snappy dynamic perfectly suited for a high tempo comedy in which the characters are often directly engaging with each other.

## Behind the mirror

To come to a close, Community does a pretty good job at emulating real conversations. We examined 9 linguistic features: minimal repairs, complete and incomplete sentences, self repairs, filler words, hedges, verbal markers of agreement, pronouns, contractions, and tagging. All these typical features of real life conversations were also found in the Community conversations. Interestingly, pronouns and contractions had an almost equal occurrence in Community and real life conversations. All the other features occurred quite frequently in Community but significantly less

often than in real life. Except for the tagging, this attention calling happened much more frequently in Community. The general trend we can see here is that although a TV-show like Community does show some features that are typical of real conversations they don't occur as often as in real life. A good TV-show conversation has reduced the messiness of real conversations but keeps some of it in order to seem realistic. A good TV-show features polished versions of real dialogue. Making it seem better than real life. However those words which are normally polished away on TV all serve their purpose. We shouldn't try to emulate TV-show conversations. TV-shows are already emulating our conversations. Smoother versions of them perhaps, just for entertainment's sake.

That burger in the ad looked better than it was in real life. So maybe I should cook one up myself... After all, things are often best when you do them yourself.





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