

CUTTING REALITY: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC
APPROACH TO TV EDITING

by

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Language is at the core of human understanding and thereby, misunderstanding. To that end, a comprehensive knowledge of language, not simply in terms of denotation, but also connotation, implication, and nuance, is essential to the expression of ideas. Without this, mutual understanding would be compromised. Language fuels our desires and informs our decisions. Not only that, but it has the ability to *change* those desires and decisions through skilled usage. It is one of the most important tools we have in our arsenal, and we must therefore be ever conscious of its power. Incidentally, video editing functions largely in the same way. While language in its literal sense is of course employed in video, the editing itself is a form of communication not unlike a language. Language and editing are fundamentally the same: an assemblage of parts into a whole with the intention of communicating an idea. The notion of editing as language is particularly prevalent in reality television editing, a type of editing in which the communicated idea, the story, is developed in the postproduction process. As editing is itself a form of language, the same socio-linguistic forces that govern language manipulate and shed light upon heuristics that can be effectively employed to better communicate story and character identity in reality television.

In order to understand this premise, it is first necessary to recognize the building blocks of language theory: semiotics and structuralism. Ferdinand De Saussure established the basis of semiotics and structuralism with his *Course in General Linguistics*.¹ He looks at how language shapes our perceptions of the world and of ourselves. Everything in the world can be broken down into “the sign,” a unit of

¹ Ferdinand De Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (Peru, IL: Open Court, 1972).

meaning.² Everything is a sign, whether it is a letter of the alphabet, a photograph, a stiletto, or a mullet.³ This is equally applicable to both language and editing. In language, a sign is a word, while in editing, a sign is a shot. Every sign has two components: the signifier and the signified.⁴ The signifier is a sound, image, or object, while the signified is the concept or mental image that one associates with it.⁵ The relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary, and changes depending on the person interpreting the sign.⁶ It can also change on a larger, societal level.⁷ For example, O.J. Simpson used to signify athletic achievement. Following his murder trials, he signifies the flaws in our justice system.

Semiotics, the science of signs, focuses on the way in which signs are constructed and deconstructed.⁸ In order to function in society, it is necessary that everyone share a common sign system or code. This is only possible to a certain extent, and of course, there is always room for opposing interpretations. De Saussure argues that nothing has meaning on its own, but only in relation to other signs.⁹ For example, the sign “table” is neutral on its own. In combination with the sign “casserole,” it begins to take on a meaning of comfort and familial ties. In combination with the sign “textbook,” however, it may indicate stress and hard work.

² Ibid., 7.

³ Amber Watts, "Semiotics and Structuralism" (lecture, Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, TX, September 21, 2011).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ De Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 10.

⁷ Watts, "Semiotics and Structuralism."

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

When looking at signs in terms of language systems, there are two things to consider: the morphology and the syntax.¹⁰ Morphology is the word (or sign) choice, and syntax is the way those words (signs) are linked together.¹¹ Both the word choice and the order can place totally different meanings or values on a statement, depending on the execution. Film techniques closely mimic De Saussure's system of signs and signifiers. In terms of film, morphology would be the shot choice, and the syntax would be the order in which they are arranged in postproduction. To break it down even further, let's take a close-up of a man's face as an example of a filmic sign. The signifier would be the close-up itself, while the signified would be a sense of intimacy. By contrast, if the signifier were an extreme long shot, the signified would be a sense of distance, or maybe privacy. Viewers understand this without having to be taught. Viewers and creators share a common vocabulary, whether consciously or not. This is the reason that creators can communicate certain emotions or meanings effectively. There are several variables in this equation, since not only do the type of shot and the order of shots affect the meaning of the scene, but the signifier that each viewer associates with the signified affects it as well.

Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* builds on the thoughts of Ferdinand de Saussure. Barthes' writings concern structuralism, which is a theory that stresses that elements of culture must be looked at in terms of their association to a larger system or structure.¹² Barthes embraced Saussure's ideas, but took a more nuanced approach. Semiotics, as defined by de Saussure, is the relationship between the signifier and the signified, which

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (n.p.: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1972), 110.

together form a sign.¹³ For example, if the signifier is makeup, a red nose, and over-sized shoes and the signified is fear, the sign may be a clown. Barthes argued that no signifier generates meaning on its own, but rather, the signified always points back to a previous signifier for its meaning.¹⁴ In this example, the sign (clown) now becomes a signifier.¹⁵ The signified may be childhood, and the sign that unites them may be “my 4th birthday party.” This resulting sign then becomes a signifier, and the process continues forever, with each sign referencing a series of subsequent signifiers. This process, by which “every content of an expression is interpreted by another expression endowed with its own content, and so on potentially ad infinitum” is referred to by Umberto Eco as unlimited semiosis.¹⁶

Structuralism, then, asserts that nothing can be truly understood except in terms of its relationship to a larger system.¹⁷ Semiotics and structuralism are both equally applicable to language theory and editing theory. The efficacy of editing is largely dependent on the way audiences interpret various signs and relate them to a structure. For example, within different genres, the same sign can take on completely different meanings. In this case, genre conventions serve as the structure within which we understand signs. In a superhero movie, a cape and tights signifies true heroism, but outside of this genre and its understood codes, one might assume a man in a cape and tights to be either a children’s entertainer or mentally ill. Reality television has also developed a set widely recognized of codes and conventions, such as the use of

¹³ Watts, "Semiotics and Structuralism."

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990), 32.

¹⁷ Watts, "Semiotics and Structuralism."

“confessional” interviews as narration and the heavy use of soundtrack. Competition shows regularly remove one or more cast members per episode, in some cases allowing the viewers to choose which member is eliminated. These conventions are unique to reality television, with the exception of some documentaries, so these signs would be understood completely differently outside of the genre. An understanding of the basics of semiotics is therefore an essential tool for an editor.

Russian filmmaker and theorist Lev Kuleshov took the ideas of de Saussure and Barthes and related them to video editing in the context of montage. Kuleshov is generally considered the first major film theorist because of his work on montage in the early 20th century. Montage, translated from the original French, literally means “assembly.” In terms of film, it simply refers to the juxtaposition of different shots. There is no more specific definition, so it is a term that encompasses many types of editing. One of Kuleshov’s most progressive assertions is that montage makes the expressions of the actors “irrelevant.”¹⁸ He argues that it is the images with which their expressions are juxtaposed, rather than the performances, which illicit emotional response.¹⁹ To prove this, Kuleshov performed an experiment in which he took one shot of an actor’s blank expression and intercut it with various shots with different connotations.²⁰ He demonstrated that the actor’s expression took on different meanings depending on the shot with which it was juxtaposed within the editing process.²¹

¹⁸ Lev Kuleshov, "The Principles of Montage," in *Critical Visions in Film Theory*, ed. Timothy Corrigan, Patricia White, and Meta Mazaj, 11th ed. (New York: Bedford Press, 2010), 142.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

This notion is, however, slightly complicated by his idea of internal montage. He explains that montage does not only exist in the relationship between shots (the pacing/placement of the cuts), but also within the shots themselves (the rhythm of the performance).²² The overarching conclusion of his work is that “no art exists independently, by virtue of itself alone,” but rather, “in relation to other things...The cinema is much more complicated than other forms of art, because the method of organization of its material and the material itself are especially ‘interdependent.’”²³ This sentiment echoes that of Barthes and De Saussure. All three theorists concluded that it is the relationship between parts, whether in language or in film, that create meaning.

Before delving into specific applications of these theories in reality television editing, it is necessary to define reality television. Mark Orbe defines reality television as “the edited footage of unscripted interactions, broadcast as a television series about participants’ naturally occurring social life.”²⁴ This definition assumes the falsity of reality shows. The subtext indicates that what is seen is highly manipulated in the postproduction process.

There are several categories of reality shows: competition shows, crime/court shows, docusoaps, “celebrity,” hidden camera shows, and the sub-genre of transformative improvements (weight, identity, appearance, family empowerment, living spaces, or automobiles).²⁵ Each of these types of shows demands different things from editors and story editors, and each come with their own set of restraints and freedoms.

²² Ibid., 142-3.

²³ Ibid., 140.

²⁴ Mark P. Orbe, "Representations of Race in Reality TV: Watch and Discuss," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 25, no. 4 (2008): 346.

²⁵ Ibid., 347-8.

For instance, with docusoaps, which are documentary-style, voyeuristic shows, there is a significant amount of freedom in postproduction. The cameras generally run 24 hours a day, and several days' worth of footage must be condensed into a 44-minute episode.²⁶ With that amount of footage, it is possible to shape the story in a slightly different way than it may have occurred. Chris Pelphrey, editor on *Glass House*, a "Big Brother" style docusoap, said, "They shot so much footage that it's impossible for it to all make it in the show."²⁷ And when you're forced to leave out the majority of the action and condense the rest, what you're left with will inevitably be a somewhat skewed version of reality.

However, with competition shows, there is no room for distortion. Because of the Quiz Show scandals of the 1950's (when it was discovered that several contestants on popular television quiz shows were being given secret and unfair assistance by the producers), competition shows must be completely and totally fair.²⁸ Kate Simonides Wilke, who worked on TLC's competition show *Craft Wars*, said a representative from Standards and Practices supervised the production of every episode, making sure that no contestant was put at a disadvantage.²⁹ On non-competition shows, it is common for producers to pull contestants aside for "on the fly" interviews.³⁰ On *Craft Wars*, however, they were forced to shoot that content in formal interviews after the fact, lest risk taking up too much of a contestant's time.³¹ On *Craft Wars* and many similar shows, the contestants have a fixed amount of time to complete each challenge. If the producers

²⁶ Chris Pelphrey, telephone interview by the author, October 26, 2012.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Thomas Doherty, "Quiz Show Scandals," The Museum of Broadcast Communications, last modified 2013, <http://www.museum.tv>.

²⁹ Kate S. Wilke, telephone interview by the author, October 24, 2012.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

spend more time doing “on the fly” interviews with a certain contestant, that takes away from their crafting time and therefore disadvantages that contestant. As a result, the producers have to make a conscious effort to allot equal amounts of interview time to each contestant or play it safe and conduct formal interviews after the fact.

Editors, who assemble the footage, obviously play a large part in the postproduction process, but it is also prudent to consider the role of story editor. Wilke, 2011 story editor for *Cupcake Wars*, described the responsibilities of a professional story editor. Based on logs of the footage, a story editor will block out the episode by act and create what is called a stringout.³² The stringout is essentially a collection of select footage that is broad enough to include coverage of all entertaining and relevant dialogue and action, but narrow enough to give a strong sense of story.³³ Kate explains, “I put all the best stuff in there, and then the editor can kind of pick and choose.”³⁴ Generally, the stringout is about twice as long as the finished episode will be.³⁵ Todd Sharp, a story editor on *The Bachelor*, adds, “I do everything a writer does...I structure the story; I set up the beginning, middle, and end; and I put [an outline for the editors] on paper. The only thing I don’t do is dialogue, and even that’s debatable.”³⁶ Up until the last 5 or 10 years, stringouts would have been done on paper, but now they are done on a non-linear editing system using the actual footage.³⁷ Ultimately, story editors are responsible for pulling a story out of the footage and communicating that story to the editors, who then

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Orbe, "Representations of Race in Reality," 347.

³⁷ Wilke, telephone interview by the author.

communicate it to the audience. The specific responsibilities of a story editor, however, vary slightly from show to show.

Beyond understanding reality television from the perspective of a story editor, we must also look at the editor's role. We will do this by looking at two interviews with documentary film editors, who experience a postproduction process very similar to that of reality television editors. Geof Bartz, documentary film editor, discusses his experiences editing documentary films, comparing documentary to features. He claims that in features, an editor's job is to take something that is very unnatural and constructed and make it appear natural.³⁸ A documentary editor faces the opposite challenge: giving structure and character to real people and events.³⁹ In terms of methods for editing his documentaries, he tends to shy away from the *cinéma vérité*, or "cinema truth" style (a style common to documentaries), which discourages voiceover, music, and interviews, in favor of objective observation.⁴⁰ Bartz prefers to approach real material in much the same way that he would a feature, giving it what he calls a "dramatic treatment."⁴¹ One of the ways in which editors can do this is restructuring certain events or dialogues. He defends his practice, saying, "I'm not saying that you should deliberately falsify something, but shots have a literal meaning and an emotive meaning. You've got to be very aware of the emotive content of the shot."⁴²

Documentary and reality borrow a lot from each other, particularly when you're looking at the type of anti-*cinéma vérité* documentary Bartz describes. At the root of his

³⁸ Geof Bartz, "The Essential Film," interview, in *First Cut: Conversations with Film Editors*, ed. Gabriella Oldham (London: University of California Press, 1995), 105.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 105-6.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 110.

ideas is the basic relationship between sign and signifier that Ferdinand de Saussure first wrote about. The “emotive content” that he discusses is essentially the signified, where the shot is the sign. Those principles are as applicable to reality as they are to documentary.

Documentary editor Tom Haneke warns of the futility of *cinéma vérité* and the utility of manipulation in editing.⁴³ Haneke does not believe in *cinéma vérité*—he simply finds the idea impossible. When you’re dealing with an hour of film that covers a particular event and you have to cut it down to a 2-minute sequence, you have to make choices.⁴⁴ You have to distill it; you must decide what truth you want the audience to find in it. As such, it is impossible in this process not to manipulate the audience in one way or another. As Haneke says, “by putting Scene A next to Scene B, you’re manipulating, you’re leading them on a journey.”⁴⁵ Editing *is*, at its core, manipulation. In fact, the French word for “editor” (*monteur/monteuse*) is a homophone of the French word for “liar” (*menteur/menteuse*). Haneke mentions that he only faces this problem because he does not work in scripted film, but rather documentary, where the story is developed in postproduction.⁴⁶ However, he is more than happy to deal with this problem because he, as a documentary editor, has significantly more creative freedom than an editor who works in scripted television or film.⁴⁷ He explains, “...you can take material from almost

⁴³ Tom Haneke, "The Essential Film," interview, in *First Cut: Conversations with Film Editors*, ed. Gabriella Oldham (London: University of California Press, 1995), 45.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 45-6.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

anywhere in the dailies—a smile, a look, a shrug, two lines from somebody...If you can design a tree upon which to hang that material, you can put almost anything in.”⁴⁸

While methods of editing documentaries and reality television are similar in basic structure, there are several editing practices that have evolved most prevalently in reality television. James Poniewozik, in his article, “How Reality TV Fakes It,” discusses several of the techniques used in reality television, not only by editors, but also by those involved in production, to construct story and character.⁴⁹ The most controversial of these techniques is called Frankenbiting, aptly named for the “cut and paste” method it employs.⁵⁰ Editors pull words from different sentences to form one cohesive thought.⁵¹

Editors are also guilty of using shots out of order to create a falsified or exaggerated story line. Jeff Bartsch, who worked on *Blind Date*, admitted to the practice.⁵² To jazz up a dull date, he might cut from the woman talking to a shot of the man staring out into space, even though that shot was taken while she was in the bathroom and he was bored by himself.⁵³ Chris Pelphrey, assistant editor on *Dancing With the Stars*, described a package he edited for the show in which contestants Bristol Palin and her partner Mark Ballas went to the shooting range.⁵⁴ “The whole idea of the package was to bring out her intensity, so we made it look like she was really good at shooting guns, even though she wasn’t all that great and Mark actually shot better than

⁴⁸ Ibid., 51-2.

⁴⁹ James Poniewozik, "How Reality TV Fakes It," *Time*, January 29, 2006, accessed September 24, 2012, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1154194,00.html>.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Pelphrey, telephone interview by the author.

her.”⁵⁵ Simply through selective choice of footage and creative ordering of footage, he changed the outcome of their day at the shooting range.

Richard Hatch, winner of *Survivor*, season 1, spoke with me about a “factually inaccurate edit” he noticed on the show.⁵⁶ It was his birthday and he was the only one who had caught any fish for the tribe so far.⁵⁷ He had been spear fishing all his life and had tried to teach people how to do it, but it was difficult, and no one had really caught on.⁵⁸ The tribe had a backup trap set up in the ocean, however, and when contestants Kelly and Sue went out to check it, there was a small fish in it.⁵⁹ He was thrilled that somebody else had gotten a fish!⁶⁰ It’s a lot of work to catch enough fish for the whole tribe, and it was a lot of pressure being the only one who could provide.⁶¹ “But they edited it with a scene at another time when I must have been looking kind of down about something else that had nothing to do with the fish, and it made it look as if I were really upset with them because they’d gotten the fish and ‘Oh no, I was supposed to be the only one.’”⁶² He had already been slated as the villain by this point in the season because of his aggressive game-play.⁶³ Richard added, “I *was* manipulative, doing what was needed for the show to the extent that I needed to, so I didn’t think they needed to do something like that little twist to make it even worse.”⁶⁴ By using those shots out of context, the

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Richard Hatch, videoconference interview by the author, October 28, 2012.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

editors were able to change the meaning of the shots and contribute to Hatch's villainous persona.

In the spring semester of 2010, Texas Christian University's Film, Television, and Digital Media department did a one-of-a-kind project: a student-run reality television show. *Top Grad* was a competition show in which students performed challenges that tested their abilities in different areas of study at TCU. Each episode saw a different university-related challenge (i.e. Biology, Theater, Nutrition). Contestants put their education to the test, attempting to come out on top as the most well rounded student at TCU. Episodes adhered to a standard 3-act, 22-minute format, complete with commercial breaks backed by our sponsors: Schlotzsky's Deli, Smoothie King, and Hammerhead Sushi. The season consisted of 8 episodes, over the course of which a group of 11 contestants was narrowed down to one "Top Grad." The episodes were distributed via TCU's internal television channel and a video hosting website.

I served as *Top Grad*'s Executive Story Producer, which essentially means I was in charge of postproduction. While on a larger-scale production these would be three separate jobs, for our purposes, I fulfilled the duties of a story producer, a story editor, and an editor.⁶⁵ My main responsibility as Executive Story Producer was to look at all the footage for each episode and write the story arc of the show based on what I'd seen. Generally, the story as it had happened on set was not interesting enough to make good television, so I had to embellish or alter the story. Sometimes, I even added minor plot points that didn't really happen in order to make the story "work." For example, in Episode 4: "If You Can't Stand the Heat..." we fabricated a sub-plot in which one of the

⁶⁵ Wilke, telephone interview by the author.

contestants was chastised for hogging group resources through a combination of “frankenbiting” and using shots out of chronological order. The story line that I wrote for each episode was generally not completely consistent with the story as it happened on set. This required that my team and I do a significant amount of editing to make the footage tell the story that I wanted it to tell. It was often very difficult to manipulate the footage to follow the story arc I’d written, but an understanding of how language reflects identity helped me edit the show, and better create identity in the characters. Since we were the first college to ever produce its own reality television show, we had no example to follow. Rather, we were setting the precedent, and linguistic theory helped us achieve strong character identity and story. Reality editors have to understand how to build character identities by manipulating video and audio, and linguistic theory provides the tools editors need to be able to do that effectively.

Being the Executive Story Producer for *Top Grad* turned out to be an extremely lucrative opportunity for linguistic study. I spent more time than anyone else with the footage, and therefore with the contestants. I got to watch what they said over and over again, and it was impossible not to see linguistic patterns emerge. Once I identified these patterns, it became clear that I could use them to my advantage in crafting story and character.

The most basic example is Kuleshov’s montage theory. Montage theory is particularly helpful to a reality television editor because so much of the story is created after the fact. This means that more often than not, certain feelings or relationships have to be created out of thin air. Montage is an excellent way to accomplish this. To put it in terms of *Top Grad*, let’s say I wanted to make it look like one of the contestants, Kelsey,

hated another contestant, Dave. All I need is a shot of Kelsey looking over her shoulder, a close-up of Dave, and a snarky remark from Kelsey. Kelsey's remark doesn't even have to be about Dave. It could be as simple as a sarcastic "yeah" or an exasperated sigh. As long as it comes immediately after something Dave says, it looks like an insult. Just like the actor in Kuleshov's experiment, I found that the contestants' performances were largely irrelevant. The way they were combined was what created the meaning. Context was neither here nor there.

Montage theory really helped me perfect this technique and ultimately helped me flesh out the story lines I wanted to create throughout the season. At the beginning of each episode before we began editing, I would always go through the formal interviews and organize the clips based on what the contestants were talking about. I grouped them into categories like "Reactions to Challenge," "Who's Going Home," etc. After reading Kuleshov's work, I created a new category called "Things to use out of context." It was mostly comprised of one-liners like "yeah, right," sentences that used non-specific pronouns, and anything else that could be easily paired with something else to build conflict. I used these liberally to create or maintain drama between characters throughout the season.

In the summer of 2011, I worked for a post-production house in Nashville, TN, where I was also able to apply montage theory to reality television editing. I was tasked with editing the first several cuts of Ep. 8 of MTV2's *Burnout: The Ultimate Drag Race Challenge*. I spent the entire first week that I worked on that show creating an extensive, highly detailed, 34-page log (see Fig. 1). For each thing that happened in the dailies, I noted the camera, time code, location, and a description or quote. When I finally started

editing, I had a giant database of different emotions and actions for each of the characters. I could very easily use this information to sculpt characters in the way that made the most narrative sense. If I wanted to make John look lazy, I had a note that at 12:33:32 in the Red Team's bay, I had a shot of "John doing nothing." If I want him to look supportive, then I know that at 13:41:29 at the Red Team's dyno session, "John nods approval." I could use these images of John in different scenes to make him look like a lazy bum or a team player, depending on which image of John best served the story.

Compliments, which stem from face needs, can also be a powerful force in building characters. Face needs are the opposing intrinsic needs that people have, and the linguistic strategies that appeal to both.⁶⁶ Positive face needs deal with our desire for solidarity, while negative face needs deal with our natural desire for independence and power.⁶⁷ Compliments can appeal to positive face needs because they show closeness and affection and they make the person giving the compliment more vulnerable.⁶⁸ However, compliments do not work if the two people involved are not socially close, if it seems sarcastic, if it doesn't fit the context of the situation, or if it singles out the person being complimented.⁶⁹ Compliments can be negative when directed towards strangers because they can be hard to receive.⁷⁰ This is because the recipient feels the need to reciprocate and to downplay the compliment in order to remain modest.⁷¹ Compliments can instantly create a hierarchy, as the person giving the compliment usually assumes a position of

⁶⁶ Tracy Rundstrom Williams (lecture, Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, TX, March 1, 2011).

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Janet Holmes, "Complimenting: A Positive Politeness Strategy," in *Language and Gender: A Reader*, ed. Jennifer Coates (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1998), 102.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 103-4.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 103.

⁷¹ Ibid.

knowledge or power.⁷² For example, it would be normal for a boss to compliment an employee on their performance. It would be insulting and strange, however, for an employee to do the same. For compliments to work, both people need to agree on the “value” of the thing being complimented, and the relationship needs to be appropriate.⁷³

For an editor, who has the power to take things out of context and put them elsewhere, this knowledge grants you the ability to strengthen or weaken a relationship between two characters through appropriate/inappropriate use of compliments. The other two editors on *Top Grad* and I employed this knowledge on several occasions in order to build character and create conflict. One excellent example of this was in *Top Grad*'s fifth episode: “Survival of the Fittest.” The contestants were split into two tribes and competed in a series of challenges, each more taxing than the next. One part of this challenge had each contestant speed-eat a bag of potato chips. Marilyn, a contestant on the black tribe, excelled at this portion of the challenge. Josh, her tribe-mate, complimented her performance in his formal interview, saying, “She really stepped up there.”⁷⁴ I believe he was sincere in his compliment, but in editing, we juxtaposed it with a slow-motion clip of Marilyn scarfing down a handful of chips. Marilyn is obese, so this contrast made Josh seem insincere, sarcastic, and even hurtful. The result of this interaction was that Josh's character became more cutthroat, while Marilyn, who had little real identity as a character until this point, became more sympathetic.

Perhaps the most important tool I employed in editing *Top Grad* was what Robin

⁷² Ibid., 114-17.

⁷³ Williams.

⁷⁴ Julie Harrison, "Survival of the Fittest," *Top Grad*, podcast video, April 9, 2011, accessed 2012, <http://www.topgradtv.com/>.

Lakoff calls “women’s language.”⁷⁵ There are three theories that attempt to explain the status difference between men and women: Deficit Model, Dominance Model, and Difference Model.⁷⁶ The Deficit Model asserts that women’s language is deficient, and that is why women lack men’s power.⁷⁷ The Dominance Model claims that men actively dominate women with their language and women allow them to do so.⁷⁸ According to the Difference Model, the only explanation is that men and women are simply different.⁷⁹

Robin Lakoff defines the attributes and implications of this deficient language, which she calls “women’s language.”⁸⁰ It is characterized by hedges, tag questions, empty adjectives, meaningless particles, and rising intonations.⁸¹ “Men’s language” is essentially the opposite, featuring a more direct, economical style.⁸² Again, we see the idea of a dichotomy between the genders when, in fact, gender is a continuum.

Lakoff argues that women have the upper hand in gender flexibility.⁸³ This “lexical disparity reflects a social inequity” in that women are freer to cross gender lines in terms of language styles.⁸⁴ Men’s language styles have been adopted by many women, but men have not reciprocated because it is not as socially acceptable. O’Barr and Atkins expand on Robin Lakoff’s ideas about women’s language. They define the following attributes of women’s language: hedges (mitigating words or clauses such as “It seems

⁷⁵ Robin Lakoff, "Language and a Woman's Place," *Language in Society* 2 (April 1973): 8.

⁷⁶ Tracy Rundstrom Williams (lecture, Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, TX, February 8, 2011).

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Lakoff, "Language and a Woman's," 8.

⁸¹ Ibid., 8-19.

⁸² Ibid., 10.

⁸³ Ibid., 9.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

like” and “sort of”), (super)polite forms (“If it’s not too much to ask...”), tag questions (“You don’t mind, *do you?*”), speaking in italics (“He’s *very* helpful” or “This is *so* fun!”), empty adjectives (“What a *divine* home you have”), hypercorrect grammar and pronunciation, lack of a sense of humor, direct quotations, indirect requests (saying “I’m so thirsty” instead of asking for a drink), and question intonation in declarative sentences.⁸⁵ They question whether women’s language would be more appropriately called “powerless language” because they found those language patterns to be associated more with social position than gender.⁸⁶

Their findings are based on a study that O’Barr and Atkins performed themselves in which they recorded and transcribed 150 hours of trials in a criminal court room.⁸⁷ After listening to all of the trials, they selected a handful of people to examine in greater depth.⁸⁸ Subjects were chosen because they either used powerless language very often or very infrequently.⁸⁹ O’Barr and Atkins added powerless language to the court transcriptions that did not have it, and cut the powerless language from those that did.⁹⁰ They then made audio recordings of actors performing both versions of the testimonies.⁹¹ Students from UNC Chapel Hill listened to the recordings of these testimonies and answered questions about their perceptions of them.⁹² This study was conducted a second

⁸⁵ William M. O’Barr and Bowman K. Atkins, “‘Women’s Language’ or ‘Powerless Language’?”, in *Women and Language in Literature and Society*, ed. Sally McConnell-Ginet, Ruth Borker, and Nelly Furman (New York: Praeger, 1980), 96.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 104-9.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Ibid.*

time with the students reading the testimonies instead of listening to them.⁹³ The results were the same in both instances.⁹⁴ By and large, the witnesses who used powerless language were seen as less convincing and less trustworthy.⁹⁵ Those who used powerful language were perceived as more competent, more intelligent, and more believable.⁹⁶ In general, the powerless language produced less favorable reactions.

In editing *Top Grad*, I was often faced with the task of making people look like they performed better or worse than they actually did. Cutting out or adding in powerless language to a person's speech was an easy and effective way to accomplish this. For example, in the finale episode, Josh and Kelsey were the final two contestants in the running to win *Top Grad*. When I was on set watching them perform the challenge, it was clear that Kelsey would win. This was a problem, considering that if it were obvious to audiences that Kelsey was the winner, our finale episode would be completely boring. In editing the episode, my entire focus was on making it look like Josh had a fighting chance. It had to be a close race if I was to maintain the drama between those two characters that I'd spent the whole season building. Therefore, I had to make Josh look better, and Kelsey look worse. Manipulating the contestants' use of "powerless language" helped a lot with this, particularly during the contestants' presentations to the judges.

In order to improve Josh's presentation, I literally went through and cut out almost all of the powerless language. It was hard to make Kelsey look bad because she used so little powerless language. In the end, I went back into past episodes and copied her saying words like "actually" and tag questions like "you know?" and pasted them into

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

her presentation. It worked beautifully, and the episode made it look like either of them could easily have won.

In *Top Grad*, Episode 6: “The Talk,” contestants were asked to give a “science fair” presentation on sexually transmitted infections. They had 30 minutes to prepare both their tri-fold boards and their verbal presentations. Each contestant was graded on the creativity of their presentation, the visual quality of their board, their poise as a public speaker, and the overall efficacy of their presentation. The judges gave each of the five contestants a different letter grade ranging from an A to an F. The results of the challenge were fairly consistent with the findings of O’Barr and Atkins’s study. All of the contestants displayed some elements of powerless language, but the judges were most impressed with the contestant who used the least amount of powerless language. The contestant who received an A on her presentation was Kelsey. Compared to the other contestants, she used very powerful language. I only observed one instance of hedging, and she brought a great sense of humor to her presentation, with quips like “It is caused by the bacteria *treponema pallidum*—try saying that five times fast.”⁹⁷ Arrington, the contestant who received a B for his presentation used a substantial amount of hedges, specifically “um” and “actually.” At one point in his presentation, he said “um, yes, I actually was very surprised, um, with the fact that, um it is more common in, um, men—excuse me, in women than in men.”⁹⁸ During the judges’ deliberation, one of the judges even commented on how often he used the word “actually” and said it was distracting. However, he was very comfortable and entertaining and his information was accurate, so

⁹⁷ Julie Harrison, "The Talk," *Top Grad*, podcast video, April 15, 2011, accessed 2012, <http://www.topgradtv.com/>.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

he got second place. Corinne, our C student, had a very informative presentation, but she came off to the judges as less competent because of her lack of humor and her hypercorrect grammar and pronunciation. She is a very articulate woman, but her hypercorrect grammar and pronunciation made the judges think she sounded too rehearsed and uncomfortable. As a result, they assumed her incapable of giving an extemporaneous presentation. Josh received a D for his presentation. His speech was littered with empty adjectives, particularly the words “quite” and “what not.” His hedging was also off-putting and made him appear unintelligent to the judges. When one of the judges asked him a question following his presentation, he responded, “Uh as far as—I could not statistically tell you what the, uh, I don’t know, stats are, you know.”⁹⁹ Marilyn had the worst presentation according to the judges. Her speech was full of, and even dominated by, empty words and hedges. She relied very heavily on words like “basically,” “actually,” “necessarily,” “overall,” “honestly,” and “per se.” It was pretty heartbreaking to watch her struggle so much with her language. One of the more tragic excerpts from her presentation was: “Acute is...acute is basically like your first stage and you don’t—and you can’t necessarily actually—well, not necessarily [incomprehensible], but you don’t necessarily have to worry about it as much as chronic...”¹⁰⁰ There’s barely even a sentence buried under all that fluff.

In reality, none of the contestants used as much or as little powerless language as the final episode would have the audience think. My team and I either enhanced or impaired their presentations by excluding or including instances of powerless language. For instance, though Arrington did use hedges like “actually” often, it was not often

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

enough to justify the judges having commented on it. Hence, to emphasize that hedging even more, I purposefully edited in the segments when he said “actually” often, and left out segments when he was better spoken.

In the end, the contestant who used the most powerful language (Kelsey) won the challenge and the one with the most powerless language (Marilyn) was eliminated. While it is interesting that language seems to have played such a big role in the judges’ perceptions of the contestants, it is also important to consider that there were several other criteria that the judges were asked to consider, such as the quality of their tri-fold boards, which I have not described. We must also realize that language both constructs and reflects identity; therefore, use of powerless language not only constructs an “F student” identity, but it is simultaneously reflecting the “F student identity” that the contestant has already created by being unfamiliar with the material. Use of powerless language here both makes the contestant seem uninformed and reflects their actual knowledge. I do think it is remarkable that the judges talked at length about the language of Arrington, Marilyn, and Corinne in their presentations. Clearly, language holds a lot of weight when it comes to people’s perceptions of one another.

The previously discussed Deficit, Dominance, and Difference Models have been fluid throughout the last several decades, and opinions have changed with the times. In the 1980’s, the Dominance Model was the most prevalent, and many researchers believed that men interrupting women was a plight for power.¹⁰¹ Deborah Tannen disagreed, seeing interruption as a two-sided beast. She asserts that interruption is not always an

¹⁰¹ Deborah Tannen, "Interpreting Interruption in Conversation," in *Gender and Discourse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 56-57.

aggressive move, and that sometimes silence can be the dominant stance.¹⁰² There are two general types of interruptions. First, and most typical of men, are those that *disrupt* a turn (i.e. A is talking, B interrupts, B talks).¹⁰³ Interruptions that *facilitate* a turn are more characteristic of women (i.e. A is talking, B interjects, A continues).¹⁰⁴ This second type of interruption shows support and helps develop a rapport.¹⁰⁵ In looking at these two types, the defining moment of an interruption is who continues talking afterwards.¹⁰⁶ Additionally, there are six sub-categories of interruptions: disruptive (takes the floor at an unnatural turn-taking point), clarification (questions in the middle), confirmation (agreement or reassurance), personalization (rapport, jokes), facilitation (minimal responses, “yeah,” “uh-huh”), and latching (finishes speaker’s sentence and starts own turn).¹⁰⁷

West and Zimmerman take Tannen’s work one step further. Their study outlines a model for turn taking in conversation with rules for how to transition from one speaker to the next, and any violation of these rules is deemed an interruption.¹⁰⁸ Turn taking is a learned skill with strict rules. The end of a turn is marked by either the end of a thought, a pause, or certain inflections.¹⁰⁹ One of three things follows: either the next speaker self-

¹⁰² Ibid., 59-60.

¹⁰³ Tracy Rundstrom Williams (lecture, Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, TX, February 24, 2011).

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman, "Small Insults: A Study of Interruptions in Cross-Sex Conversations between Unacquainted Persons," in *Language, Gender, and Society*, ed. Barrie Thorne, Cheris Kramarae, and Nancy Henley (Rowley, MA: Newbury, 1985), 103-4.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 104.

selects, the speaker selects the next speaker, or the speaker extends their own turn.¹¹⁰

Interruptions are not to be confused with overlap. Overlaps can be supportive, and facilitate the speaker's thoughts.¹¹¹ By contrast, an interruption is an explicit violation of turn-taking rules.¹¹²

Understanding the subtleties of interruptions and turn taking is a very useful skill for a reality editor, as they often have to create or enhance animosity or friendships that may or may not pre-exist. Editors often have the power to start person B's sentence either at an appropriate turn-taking point (after person A is finished) or at an inappropriate turn-taking point (during person A's sentence). Depending on how the audio was recorded, editors can even have the power to turn disruptive interruptions into facilitative interruptions and vice-versa. This can be very helpful in shaping the nature of a relationship between two characters.

When I first started work on *Top Grad*, I learned very quickly that reality television has little plot, but rather is very character-driven. My biggest challenge in editing the show was to build tension between characters, whether it was there or not. Insults, interruptions, and manipulation of turn-taking rules are excellent ways to create instant drama between two characters. That drama helps build both character and plot. If I wanted two characters to be at odds, all I had to do was make one of them violate the rules of turn-taking. For instance, in Episode 2: "Hardball," the contestants competed in a whiffle ball homerun derby. Josh and Arrington were on opposing teams, and I needed to build tension between the two teams. When the contestants were told it was a whiffle ball

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.

challenge, Arrington said, “I did play tee-ball when I was six—“ but I made Josh interrupt him to say, “Tee-ball? Okay, guy. What do you think this is, man? This ain’t tee-ball. This is whiffle ball.”¹¹³ Instantly, Josh and Arrington are in opposition. Of course, the content of Josh’s comment was inflammatory on its own, but the fact that he interrupted Arrington makes it even worse.

Some criticize these editing practices, accusing editors of manipulating stories and characters for the sake of entertainment and diluting the “reality” of reality television. Manipulation is admittedly a huge part of any reality editor’s skill set, but that doesn’t have to be a bad thing. It is not only used for entertainment, but also for clarity and brevity. The true potential for consequences comes in the editors’ treatment of character identity. This is because after the series has ended, contestants have to return to their real lives with the reputations that they have gained on the show. From a moral standpoint editors must therefore be careful not to over-condense the character so as to avoid making them too one-sided and un-relatable. According to Chris Pelphrey, assistant editor for *Glass House* and *Dancing With the Stars*, there is an ethical line, and editors and producers know not to cross it, not just for morality’s sake, but because they usually can’t get away with it.¹¹⁴ “If people are trying to distort reality like that or just kind of pull things out of left field, it’s gonna be apparent.”¹¹⁵ And most importantly, it’s not going to be believable. It will pull viewers out of the moment, and that’s not what anyone on the production side of it wants. Pelphrey referenced an incident on *Glass House*, where a producer was trying to force a romance between two characters that just wasn’t true by

¹¹³ Julie Harrison, "Hardball," *Top Grad*, podcast video, March 4, 2011, accessed 2012, <http://www.topgradtv.com/>.

¹¹⁴ Pelphrey, telephone interview by the author.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

cutting a few lines together from several episodes that made it seem like something was going on.¹¹⁶ The woman in question was a married woman with three children, which presented an ethical dilemma.¹¹⁷ The main story producer and editor had a problem with it, so that story line was squashed right away.¹¹⁸ However, with something like the Bristol Palin package, where no one's reputation or family life was at stake, Pelphrey had no problem fudging reality.¹¹⁹ He and other editors know where to draw the line, but also acknowledge that depending on the situation, there may be some wiggle room. However, as Pelphrey said, "There's not a whole lot that ends up on screen that's not *mostly* true."¹²⁰

It's a fine line, and a line that has a tendency to become blurred in the excitement of finding a new story to pull out of the footage. It is imperative, however, that editors and story editors keep a clear head and a clear conscience in the construction of these plots and characters. A negative portrayal on a nation-wide television show can truly ruin a contestant's life. Richard Hatch complains that life has been very difficult after winning *Survivor*. Most people in his conservative Rhode Island town see him as little more than a villain, and he believes that "the misperception of who I was on the show is what caused my indictment, and never mind my imprisonment for more than four years for a tax evasion that I never did."¹²¹ He has continued in the reality television industry, rather than returning to his previous career as a corporate trainer, because reality television is

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid

¹²¹ Hatch, videoconference interview by the author.

the only place where his negative persona works to his advantage.¹²² His case may be extreme, but it is an excellent example of how a highly mediated, constructed persona can truly affect perceptions of a person. Editors, and reality television in general, have a lot of power that can affect people in very real ways, and must use that power responsibly.

Editing reality television can present major challenges, but also significant freedoms, that other genres do not have. I found in my experience with *Top Grad* that both the plots of each episode and the characters themselves often needed to be enhanced for the sake of entertainment. Because there was no casting process for *Top Grad*, some of the contestants we ended up with were not very interesting, and their personalities needed to be heightened. This also happens on professional productions, according to Kate Simonides Wilke. “If someone’s very well-rounded on a show, they’d be kind of boring. Everybody has to have their own little niche. Someone has to be a leader, someone has to be a follower, someone has to be the bitch, somebody has to be, you know, the flirt.”¹²³ If people don’t naturally fall into these roles, editors can bring out those aspects of their personalities in postproduction.

Brooke Ward discussed how the producers and editors on *Farmer Wants a Wife* slated her as a “bible-thumping, preaching, good girl” who didn’t drink or have sex, even though she never said anything to that effect.¹²⁴ They also made her out to be the “Dallas girl,” even though she was from East Texas and had never lived in Dallas.¹²⁵ Brooke described one incident where the editors used shots out of context in order to build her character’s identity as a Christian. The editors took a clip of Brooke and fellow contestant

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Wilke, telephone interview by the author.

¹²⁴ Brooke Ward, telephone interview by the author, November 5, 2012.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

Lisa reading their bibles and juxtaposed it with a clip of the other girls downstairs talking a having fun.¹²⁶ These are two clips are from separate days, but putting them together made it look like Brooke and Lisa were ignoring the others to read their bibles, and made them seem “holier than thou.”¹²⁷ Brooke feels like they neglected every aspect of her personality except her Christianity: “They just wanted these stereotypical Christian girls.”¹²⁸ Wilke, who served as the talent producer on *Farmer Wants a Wife*, countered: “Footage was probably edited out of order to create a scene, but we mainly just heightened her personality that she demonstrated on set. We didn't create someone that she wasn't, which is probably how she feels.”¹²⁹ Clearly, both parties are partially responsible for the resulting character.

Beyond the characters' identities, editors also have the ability to mold the story. The lack of scripted plots and characters meant spending a considerable amount of time essentially writing the episode in post. Writing after the production phase is obviously more difficult than writing in pre-production, since you are confined to the material you have. However, with that added difficulty comes an added freedom that editors for scripted programming are not afforded. Simply put, editors are able to write the story and the characters' identities. This is a thrilling privilege and responsibility, since editors, who are by nature storytellers, are usually bound to the confines of a script.

While this “writing” is sometimes criticized, it is important to realize that every part of the human experience, reality television included, is constructed, with language being the most utilized tool. Space, time, identity, and language are all racialized,

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Wilke, telephone interview by the author.

genderized, and ritualized. More often than not, this is either caused by or reflected by language. These things are constructed, often unconsciously, to reflect the separation between self and other: what you are versus what you're not. We see this principle enacted over and over throughout history: civil rights era segregation, gender-specific restrooms, and even at lunchroom tables. Humans are incredibly inventive, and will devise ways to create and enforce these exclusionary tactics, even when they don't mean to. Humanity lives and breathes through construction, much of which is done through language. Language constantly changes and as a result, so too do our constructions of identity.

All media production, not just reality television, is a construction, simply by nature. Everyone knows that Hollywood fictions are constructed, but even "the most earnest and intimate of documentaries" cannot remain objective, and therefore cannot achieve truth.¹³⁰ Where to place the actors, what angle to use, how to light a scene: these are all inherently subjective choices designed to make viewers feel a specific way, whether consciously or not.¹³¹ When one is tasked with condensing a large amount of footage into a neat, 22 or 44-minute story, it is impossible not to manipulate, not to distill.

The editing room is not the only place that character is constructed, however. In pre-production, an overall story arc is established, and it is only modified if something significant happens.¹³² Therefore, the producers in the field during production already

¹³⁰ Mike Jones, "Your TV Is Lying to You: The Principles of Visual 'Truth' in Media Production," lecture presented at Get Real and All That Spiel: English Teachers Association Conference, Darling Harbour, Sydney, Australia, July 2004, Research, accessed September 23, 2012, <http://research.uvu.edu/albrecht-crane/Comm2010/Jones.pdf>. 106.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² Wilke, telephone interview by the author.

have an idea of the general story they're aiming to create, particularly with docusoap-style shows. Their questions to the contestants in interviews are generally phrased in such a way that they are trying to illicit a certain response.¹³³ Richard Hatch said of the producers on *Survivor*, "Often they [the producers] were probing, and many...contestants would be influenced."¹³⁴ Brooke Ward, who won the CW's *Farmer Wants a Wife*, had a very negative experience with producers trying to influence her speech. The producers of the show were often frustrated with her because she didn't want to speak poorly of her fellow contestants.¹³⁵ Brooke adds, "They were getting mad at me in the interviews, throwing chairs, saying 'Come on, get mad! Say mean things.'"¹³⁶ Because of the frequency with which interviews were conducted, often the girls would be in interviews over something that had happened two days before.¹³⁷ It is difficult enough to remember everything you did two days ago, but having to speak about it in present tense made it even more challenging. The producers would often try to "remind" the girls how they felt about certain events, and many girls fell prey to this tactic.¹³⁸ "At the end of the day, they want to sell a show...the crazier you are, the meaner, the more dramatic—I mean, they love that stuff."¹³⁹ The more the producers can get the contestants to create drama in production, the less the editors have to do in post.

It's more than that, however. A lot of the story is going to be determined by the situations in which the producers put the contestants. According to Kate Simonides Wilke,

¹³³ Ward, telephone interview by the author.

¹³⁴ Hatch, videoconference interview by the author.

¹³⁵ Ward, telephone interview by the author.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

producers talk with the cast about their personal goals, problems, etc., and determine what aspects of their personalities they want to highlight.¹⁴⁰ They get an idea of who they're dealing with, and from there, it almost becomes a formula. If you have certain personalities put into a certain situation, there are only a handful of possible outcomes, and producers can usually predict which it will be.¹⁴¹ Of course, all this planning and guessing is done with the postproduction process in mind. Wilke, who has produced docusoap-style reality shows such as *Chicagolicious*, says, "As a reality producer, you don't feed words into people's mouths per se, but you [put contestants in] certain situations and in post, you just kind of heighten their personality."¹⁴² Often reality television is accused of cheating reality, or presenting a skewed version of the truth, and to a certain extent that is true, but also unavoidable. Wilke explains, "Just because of production logistics, a lot of things do need to be prepped ahead of time, which sometimes helps the story. And that's not to say reality's not real, but you've gotta produce the show somehow. You can't just follow them around with cameras and just expect something to happen. You kind of have to control the environment. That's the key thing."¹⁴³

It is also true that the reality contestants themselves contribute to their own portrayals before the editors even touch the footage. Reality television stars are a breed of their own. Daniel Boortsin's famous ordinary/extraordinary paradox that explains film stardom cannot be applied to reality stars, since the *point* is that they are ordinary

¹⁴⁰ Wilke, telephone interview by the author.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

people.¹⁴⁴ Reality stardom, however, is based on an entirely different contradiction: “a public self based on a highly mediated, constructed, and/or performed “real” selfhood.”¹⁴⁵ Though the reality star is consciously performing a version of themselves, their on-screen persona is taken by the audience as a true depiction of their essential selves.¹⁴⁶

Dr. Amber Watts discusses the reality television star persona, specifically focusing on reality TV’s greatest villain, Omarosa Manigault-Stallworth. Reality television producers and editors have divined a formula to manufacture celebrity, and this has worked beautifully in Omarosa’s favor. She has made a career out of being a reality television show contestant, having appeared on over 20 reality shows after *The Apprentice*, where she got her start.¹⁴⁷ We, as the audience, are aware on a certain level that she is a constructed image, but we still want to believe that her on-screen persona *is* her true self.¹⁴⁸ We want to believe that stars are worthy of our attention. It is important to note that her fame is only possible because of *us*, the viewers who consume her as a text through multiple media platforms.¹⁴⁹

Reality stars are quick to point to frankenbiting and other postproduction practices as the source of their unfavorable portrayals.¹⁵⁰ Richard Hatch, when asked about his villainous persona on *Survivor*, said, “I don’t know that that’s how I would have

¹⁴⁴ Amber Watts, “‘You Can Blame the Editing, but You’re Still a Bitch’: The Search for the Authentic Self in Reality-TV Celebrity,” in *Film and Television Stardom*, ed. Kylo-Patrick R. Hart (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars, 2008), 236.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 239.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 237.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 237-8.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 238-9.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 242.

represented myself...I may have improved it.”¹⁵¹ Hatch is not alone in his frustration. Amber Watts writes, “At this point in time, it is rare for an unpopular reality participant *not* to blame the editing to some degree for his or her negative portrayal, although it rarely does anything to repair his or her image.”¹⁵² However, it is important to realize that when one chooses to appear on a television show, it is highly likely that one is performing, in one way or another.¹⁵³ It would be rare to find someone on a reality program just being themselves. So while editing certainly plays a part in the construction of a reality participant’s persona, the participant must share some of the responsibility. Hatch acknowledges this fact, admitting that *Survivor* provided an “accurate portrayal of who I was, albeit condensed, and that’s what people don’t get: that this is *you*, but boy, when [they] condense an aspect of you, you really can be misportrayed or misperceived by the viewers who don’t understand that this condensing is powerful.”¹⁵⁴

Hatch is right: editors occupy an extremely powerful position. They are tasked with representing events and people, always trying to reach a compromise between truth and entertainment. In my opinion, an understanding of linguistics can be an invaluable tool for an editor in this situation, because of the fact that in reality, so much of the story can be crafted in post. That said, familiarity with linguistic patterns and the gendered, racial, and social implications that accompany them can be extremely helpful in constructing character, story, and identity in reality television.

¹⁵¹ Hatch, videoconference interview by the author.

¹⁵² Watts, “You Can Blame the Editing,” in *Film and Television Stardom*, 242.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 243.

¹⁵⁴ Hatch, videoconference interview by the author.

FIGURES

Fig. 1: Excerpt from *Burnout: The Ultimate Drag Race Challenge* log

Timecode	Location	Description
13:15:21	Red Bay	Car leaving garage
13:17:21	Parking lot	Car backing into Dyno
13:20:14	Red Dyno	Checking under car
13:21:07	Red Dyno	Checking under car cont.
13:22:07	Red Dyno	Checking under car cont.
13:24:43	Red Dyno	Car starting up
13:25:20	Red Dyno	CU tire spinning
13:27:34	Red Dyno	Standing around looking at car
13:28:03	Red Dyno	MS Red talking to driver, Inspecting car, CU James with headphones, Checking underneath car
13:29:33	Red Dyno	Inspecting car
13:30:30	Red Dyno	Inspecting car cont.
13:38:37	Red Dyno	Inspecting car, CU John headphones
13:40:01	Red Dyno	Still shot of car, CU serious John, MS James through window, MS Driver, CU car stats
13:41:29	Red Dyno	Still shot of car, CU car stats as engine revs up, James through window, MS motor, Driver, wheels spinning, John nods approval , etc.
13:46:00	Red Dyno	Debriefing
13:46:25	Red Dyno	Standing around car
13:52:16	Red Dyno	Standing around car cont.
13:54:07	Red Dyno	Computer screen car stats
13:54:20	Red Dyno	Driver, CU speedometer, CU person using a screwdriver on motor
13:55:18	Red Dyno	Person feeling and adjusting motor
13:56:47	Red Dyno	Fan blowing on car

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the role of sociolinguistics in reality television editing. An overview of editing theory and editing practices common to reality television is presented. Various linguistic patterns are identified along with the gendered/racial/social implications of each. Then, the ways in which reality television editors may manipulate these linguistic patterns in order to construct identity and story—whether true or false—in reality television are examined. As there is little existing academic research on the subject, much of the information and insight in this study stems from primary research (e.g. the author’s experience in reality television editing and personal interviews with working professionals in the reality television industry). Many scenes from the reality television show *Top Grad*, produced by students at Texas Christian University, are broken down and studied for their sociolinguistic content and editing techniques in order to illustrate the explored concepts. Finally, editors are cautioned to practice restraint, realizing that they hold the power to shape real people’s post-show identities. The discussed sociolinguistic editing techniques must be used in moderation, as the ultimate goal in editing reality television is to find an appropriate compromise between truth and entertainment.