

“Was that a sentence?”: The WB and the Rise of Meta-Speak

Throughout the WB’s history, dialogue was a consistently remarked aspect of the network’s programming. Joss Whedon’s *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, for instance, quickly became known for the quirky syntax and diction deployed by residents of the Buffyverse – an expressive mode so recognizable, it is now referred to simply as “Joss-speak.” Meanwhile, *Gilmore Girls*, gained fame for its blisteringly paced and pop-culture-savvy screenplays, which earned series creator Amy Sherman-Palladino regular comparisons to Howard Hawks. And while the hyper-literate dialogue composed for the teenaged cast of *Dawson’s Creek* often drew more pans than praise, the characters’ preternaturally sophisticated speech was undeniably central to the show’s identity. So much so, that *The Boston Globe* titled its review of the series finale, “Dawson, pals, talk out into the sunset.”

Yet despite dialogue’s acknowledged importance to these discrete shows, its role within the WB’s programming more generally remains comparatively under-examined. This may be due in part to the relative neglect of dialogue both within film studies (as Sarah Kozloff has shown) and arguably, within television and media studies as well.¹ My impetus for participating in this panel, then, was both to add to scholarship on the subject, and more specifically, to highlight certain dialogic conventions that were endemic to some of the WB’s best known series, including the three mentioned above. My main contention is that, despite the obvious tonal and thematic differences among these shows, their teenaged characters manifest a strikingly similar expressive habit – a tendency to reference or call attention to the

¹ See Kozloff, *Overhearing Film Dialogue* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2000). What work there is on television dialogue (such as Kay Richardson’s *Television Dramatic Dialogue*) tends to take a sociolinguistic approach – which, I would suggest, falsely positions screenplays as analogous to “real” speech, and implies dialogue is a primarily mimetic rather than highly *poetic* rendering of real speech.

qualities of their own speech – which may be seen, in turn, to have exerted an influence on subsequent televisual portrayals of teen talk.

Buffy provides a good case in point. In the pilot, an awkward first encounter with Willow leads Buffy to remark, “Why don’t we start with ‘Hi, I’m Buffy...then let’s segue directly into me asking for a favor.’” The comment is paradigmatic of the kind of verbal self-awareness Buffy will regularly evince over the course of the series – as when she complains to Willow, that “for us to have a conversation about a guy there would have to be a guy for us to have a conversation about...was that a sentence?” And in fact, all of the show’s major protagonists manifest, to varying degrees, a similar sort of linguistic self-consciousness – a propensity to *talk about talk*. To cite just three examples:

WILLOW: When I’m with a boy I like, it’s hard for me to say anything cool, or witty or...at all. I can usually make a few vowel sounds, and then I have to go away.

OZ: You know that thing where you bail in the middle of a stressful conversation? I have to do that. I know it’s kind of dramatic, but it’s a necessary guy thing....

CORDELIA: Why is it that every conversation you people have has the word ‘corpse’ in it?

Suggestively, this tendency toward meta-speak is not limited to the cast of *Buffy*, but shared by their counterparts on *Gilmore Girls* and *Dawson’s Creek*. Take, for instance, the fifth episode of *Dawson’s* first season, when Dawson warns Joey that his “verbal vomit is out of control today”; later, Joey bids goodnight to Dawson after a long heart-to-heart, complaining that “all this subtext is making me tired.” In the same episode, Jen encourages Dawson to confide in her, despite the fact that, as she puts it, their previous “conversations [were] more banter than real talk – fun and sweet and everything but mostly on the surface.” Earlier in the season, Jen had similarly analyzed her conversational dynamic with her grandmother, saying, “You know, Grams, I’m really tired of this the way we talk to each other, these conversations that go round and round.”

This kind of self-consciousness also animates the mother-daughter discussions on *Gilmore Girls*, as evidenced by the show's second episode, when Lorelei, arguing about Rory's decision to attend Chilton, comments that a "grunt of acknowledgement might be nice"; later in the show, Rory interrupts her mother's repetitive questioning by saying, "New word, please." But it is Rory – who like her high-school-aged analogues in *Buffy* and *Dawson's* – more regularly makes the subject of her talk, *talk*. "I never talk this much," Rory apologizes to the new boy, Dean.

So, what are we to make of this pattern? On the one hand, this kind of intense self-consciousness about language use could be seen as a mimetic device, meant to telegraph the centrality of talk to the teenaged experience – or, alternatively, the inescapably post-modern moment in which millennials must operate. Yet it's worth remembering just how *un*-mimetic dialogue on these programs can be. Indeed, a frequent complaint about *Dawson's Creek* was that it violated one of the central tenets of realist aesthetics: that characters should "speak" in an age- and education-appropriate idiom. In this light, what might be most notable about this move toward meta-commentary is what it suggests about the shows' willingness to draw attention to the activity of talking: to showcase talking *as* an activity, and as a signifier in its own right.

In so doing, these series may reveal their bifurcated roots in melodrama and screwball comedy: two genres, Kozloff demonstrates, not only dominated by dialogue, but by their characters' desires to express themselves, and to ironize expression, respectively. And the result, these programs suggest, is this particular mode of analytical expressivity – a mode the WB, in turn, may have helped to popularize. One could argue, for instance, that the sort of *stammering* and verbal inarticulacy prevalent in CW shows like *Gossip Girl* is in some sense an outgrowth of WB-style self-consciousness: as if characters, so aware of language's rules and limits, can no longer use it. Of course, it would require far more than this slim anecdotal

evidence to assess whether these series precipitated (or merely epitomized) a “rise” in self-referential dialogue within this market. But it seems plausible, at the very least, that the WB’s many self-critical and self-correcting characters might have helped to establish meta-speak as a rhetorical norm for teens on TV.