

RUNNING HEAD: Popular TV Discourse: The Case of *Friends*

A CRITICAL LOOK AT THE DISCOURSE OF POPULAR TELEVISION:
THE CASE OF *FRIENDS*

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Abstract

The following study explored the structures and themes found in a few episodes of a popular TV sitcom (*Friends*). Drawing on James Gee's ideas about critical discourse analysis as the main analytical lens for this study, this study discussed the language found in a sitcom and analyzed the complexity of structures and vocabulary in the conversational turns in the episodes, while presenting implications of TV show selection for classroom purposes and the potential of this kind of discourse analysis. Findings indicated that most of the conversation ranged between simple present and past tenses. Many of the sentences analyzed are really short, preventing students from seeing how real-life discourse actually operates. Regarding the themes of *Friends*, there were two salient elements: (a) the lack of references to popular culture and the lack of information to create a situated identity as far as where the characters are in time and space and (b) the lack of congruence between the social situations presented in the show and the actual language people would use in said situations. In terms of proficiency level, *Friends* is a show that would lend itself suitable to students with an intermediate level. More advanced students might benefit from a kind of media that portrays more elaborate discourse and a more varied use of tenses. Nonetheless, using a more critical lens, such as Media Literacy, teachers might be able to utilize some of the themes in *Friends* to elicit rich cultural discussions stemming from the issues laid out here.

Two topics of my professional concern have been the effects of television and movies on EFL instruction and how to teach grammar more effectively while increasing awareness of the contexts under which you can use it. Recent research has shown a renewed focus in grammar instruction (Conrad, 2000). There is also an interest in discussing the use of specific grammatical structures (Frazier, 2003; Hinkel, 1995) and idioms (Liu, 2003) in empirical research, as well as political television (Fairclough, 1991).

However, the influence of media continues to be underappreciated, not only in grammar instruction, but also on EFL (Mora, 2004). In fact, recent reflections on the possible directions of grammar teaching and research (Ellis, 1998) do not seem to assess the potential of media literacy in grammar instruction. The use of video has only been exploited for “linguistic awareness” (Harmer, 2001, cited in Mora, 2004), but I was not able to find a clear case for how this might relate to grammar instruction.

This report presents my research about the structures and themes found in a few episodes of a popular TV sitcom (*Friends*). This research wants to discuss the language found in a sitcom, analyze the complexity of structures and vocabulary in the conversational turns in the episodes, describe potential themes in such conversational turns and the use of informal and (if present) formal language, and present possible implications of TV show selection for classroom purposes and the potential of this kind of discourse analysis.

James Gee’s (1996, 2004) ideas about critical discourse analysis serve as the main analytical lens for this study. This study is a “spin-off” on my evolving research on media literacy in EFL (Mora, 2004) and intends to address the issue of the role of grammar in the ultimate design of a theoretical framework to implement media literacy units in EFL curricula (Mora, 2003, 2004). The following research questions

guide this study: (a) What are the most common grammatical structures found in a popular TV sit-com? (b) How complex are both the sentences uttered and the vocabulary used in the different conversational turns in a TV sit-com? (c) What themes are developed in these conversational turns? (d) Is there a noticeable difference between formal and informal language used by speakers?

The Role of Critical Discourse Analysis

This study combines grammar analysis with a critical look at themes within a text. Therefore, Gee's (1999, 2004) work on discourse analysis was found to be a good fit for the theoretical lens informing this research. Gee (1999) argues, "It is often useful to ask quite specific questions about the grammar of a text as a way to begin to generate ideas about how meanings are built into a text" (p. 149). In addition to grammar analysis, this research also uses elements of Gee's building tasks in discourse analysis (1999, pp. 93-94). This study looks at the situated meanings of words and phrases in the situations portrayed in the TV shows, as well as relationships and identities and how they are presented in the segments. Further, I analyzed what sets of knowledge and beliefs are important in the different situations. Finally, social languages and how they might define a certain setting (e.g. workplace) are the subject of a deeper level of analysis. In terms of my grammatical analysis, I also want to look at patterns (Gee, 2004), or "How various grammatical features "hang together," not any one feature in and of itself." My argument about grammatical patterns is simple: These grammatical features (e.g. verb tenses or use of complex sentences) can help determine the complexity of the discourse the viewers (in this case, the students) are exposed to.

This research can be situated within the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework (e.g. Fairclough, 1991; Gee, 2004; Rogers, 2004; Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999). CDA, as Gee (2004) posits, combines “a model of grammatical and textual analysis with... critical theories of society and its institutions” (p. 20). Not only am I interested in the texts and their grammar, but also in anything that such texts can tell us, if at all, about the models of society they are supposed to represent. TV shows, one can argue, are a form of “social practice” (Gee, 2004, p.33): There are different people involved in it, both actors and viewers, and viewers construct and reconstruct social practices by appropriating these texts (Jenkins, 1992). Shows have an effect on people’s practices and identities, and that in turn reflects itself on what happens in the classrooms. This research expands this understanding of social practice as it also considers the consequences of television in English classrooms. After all, we have students picking up information and creating social constructs out of these shows.

One final element that informs this study is the concept of degrees of formality and informality in social language (Gee, 1999, 2004). Our discourse is supposed to vary depending on where we are and whom we are talking to. CDA proponents would argue that how one would talk to, say, his or her classmates in a classroom situation has to be different from how one would speak to the same people if we all met in a mall or a bar, even if we do not recognize such discourse differences. To illustrate this point, Gee (1999) provides the example of a young woman’s description of her boyfriend to her family and a friend. Gee points out how the language and vocabulary changes from a formal (family) setting to an informal one (her friend). This research wants to find out how that change can be seen on a TV show where formal and informal situations take place (say, interactions between boss and assistant vs. interactions between two friends or a married couple).

Technical Details: Research Methods

Some of the studies reviewed for grammar analysis (Frazier, 2003; Hinkel, 1995; Liu, 2003) actually relied on large language databases known as corpora. Although having access to such databases might give you a better sense of the language overall, there is one major limitation for the purpose of this research: Not many (if any) language teachers abroad may have access to such lists. Instead, teachers around the world rely on cable TV as their source to gather TV shows. Given the widespread nature of this research, this study (and subsequent stages) will rely on the same TV shows teachers are using. For this study in particular, I chose the TV sitcom *Friends*. I used it as a source when I was a teacher and I know colleagues in Colombia are still using it as a linguistic and cultural referent in the classrooms.

Selecting media sources. I selected three episodes from the seventh season of *Friends* for this analysis. I used the episodes recorded on the DVD, not the ones broadcast on TV¹. The selection of this season and the disc (there are about 4 DVD's available for Season 7) was completely random. However, the episodes were selected more carefully. I chose two of the episodes because of the continuity of a storyline, which would in turn provide useful insights to address one of the research questions. The last episode was chosen as part of a pilot data analysis that also informed this report.

In order to save time in the transcription process, I searched on the Internet for episode transcripts. I found a web site containing such transcripts (www.eigo-i.com/friends). In order to check for accuracy of transcripts, I first copied and pasted

¹ It is important to point out this caveat, since I know that some teachers would actually record the episodes directly from their TV sets. There might be differences in edited content between the broadcast version and the DVD version.

the transcripts on a Word document. Then I watched the episodes I selected, adding missing dialogue and making all necessary corrections. Therefore, the transcripts I finally used are completely verbatim from the DVD version.

A brief word on *Friends*. *Friends* is perhaps one of the most popular TV shows in the United States. It ran on NBC between 1995 and 2004 for ten seasons, and now can be seen in syndication in a few more channels, both in the US and abroad. The show portrayed the lives of six friends (Monica, Phoebe, Rachel, Ross, Chandler, and Joey) in New York City, and the different issues they faced while growing from their early twenties to their early thirties: life, love and relationships, work, and so on, made part of the different episodes throughout these ten seasons. The cult of *Friends* has not only extended to the airwaves, it is also found on the Internet: Although a search on google.com only found one website with episode transcripts, I found about three official sites for *Friends*, and the number of unofficial sites with facts and memorabilia range on the thousands.

Data analysis. In order to analyze this media segment, I used Gee's (1999) ideas about "grammar in communication." Before describing the data analysis procedures, I want to explain how I divided the segment for analysis: First I read the conversation turns (I define conversation turns as every character's spoken intervention during one segment, regardless of the length of intervention). Then I looked at how many *sentences* I was able to distinguish in every conversation turn. Most of them had one sentence per turn; a few had two or more. Two levels of grammar analysis were devised: The first level looked at *verb tenses*. I established six groups of verbs for this analysis: simple present, simple past, simple future, imperatives, modals (e.g. would, could, should), and other verb tenses (I grouped progressive and perfect forms as one group). I surveyed the number of times each

tense was used in the sentences of a conversation turn, and made notes of which were more present.

The second level of analysis described the *complexity of clauses*. I used Gee's definition of clause (p. 149), using two criteria for my analysis: Number of words in a sentence, and connective devices that appeared to connect clauses and conversations. For the former, I also made a physical count of words per sentence from the transcripts. I did not count words like "Oh," unless they made part of an expression, as in "Oh my God!" Onomatopoeias (e.g. "Uh-mmm" to indicate agreement) were not counted as words either. Contractions (e.g., I'm, it's) also count as one word. Then, I reviewed the sentences looking for the kinds of clauses they used to explain the ideas and the use of "conjunctions and other conjunction-like links" (Gee, 1999, p. 160). I used two copies of the transcripts for each level of analysis and wrote notes on them.

For my analysis of the themes, I reread the transcripts, and jotted down ideas of conversation themes I was able to identify, and made notes about these themes, how recurrent they were, and the use of language in these conversations, making special notes about the presence or absence of formal language (I took for granted that informal language would rule the conversations).

***Friends* and Grammar**

The first part of the analysis explored how the TV show reflected grammatical use in context. I will describe what I found in that regard in this section.

Verb tenses. I read all sentence carefully, noting the different verb tenses present in all conversation lines. The analysis found that the simple present tense was present 45% of the time, followed by the simple past tense. Simple future (will), imperatives, modals, and other more complex verb tenses were reported fewer times,

very scarce compared to the frequency of the simple tenses, and, these verb tenses appeared mostly on the longest sentences. An example of the third episode analyzed,

Phoebe: [gasps] You wouldn't! Okay look, Rachel I know you really want to do this, but **I've never been** maid of honor to anyone before! And I know **you've done** it at least twice!

Includes two examples of present perfect (in bold) on the same conversation line, one of the longest of the segment.

Complexity of sentences. After reviewing verb tenses, I proceeded to look at the sentences and clauses throughout the transcripts. I separated the conversation turns when I found more than one sentence present. I separated sentences with vertical lines. I will use slashes to separate sentences here, in an example from the third episode:

Rachel: Oh my God Phoebe! I mean I'm just – Wait a minute. / If I'm your maid of honor that means you are Monica's.

Here there are two separate ideas, which I counted as sentences. The first is a kind of transition where Rachel organizes her idea. The second one simply states her awareness of the ensuing discussion (in this segment, they were arguing over who would be the maid of honor).

Phoebe: Because this one is now! / And-and it's two of our best friends! / Who knows what you're gonna marry

Three sentences are distinguished. The exclamation sign was the key to separate the sentences, and while listening to the segment one can notice a pause between the first and second ideas. For the following sentences, I will only illustrate where I separated the sentences:

Phoebe: [gasps] You wouldn't! / Okay look, Rachel I know you really want to do this, but I've never been maid of honor to anyone before! / And I know you've done it at least twice! (3 sentences distinguished)
 Chandler: No, no I only dated two girls in college, both blonde, both not attractive... (Thinks a little while.) / Hold on one second; let me check this out.

(He gets up and grabs a photo album.) (2 sentences distinguished; pauses helped separate them in conversation lines)

Chandler: Well, let's see... (Finding the picture he wants.) / Okay uh, is that her? (Pointing to the picture.)

Chandler: (pause) No, we're still together. / Yeah we went out for two summers, and then I broke up with her.

Chandler: Well, you know what they say, elephants never forget. (Monica is not amused by that statement.) Seriously, good luck marrying me.

In this last example, what we have is a full sentence and a phrase, but you can distinguish them as two separate units. In addition, the transcript and the video segment do help you separate the sentences. Change of camera focus, dramatic pauses, and body movement are also indicators of change of sentences.

Once I separated the sentences, I counted the words in the groups described above. The majority of sentences (at this stage, phrases and one-word statements are also considered sentences) have less than 10 words: There are a few sentences with less than 5 words, and a few others between 5 and 10 words. Most of these sentences are alternated in conversation lines. The number of sentences with more than 11 words was lower than those below ten. Only two cases were found of conversation turns close to a paragraph's length, coincidentally both on the third episode analyzed:

Joey: Like when I want a job, I go to an audition and if I'm the best of the people they see, I get the part, you know. Then, they send you a script, you go to the set, you rehearse and you have wardrobe fittings, they you shoot your part. And it's great. But right after that, you're back out on the street looking for work again, right back where you started. So I gotta say, I don't think a career in acting is the right choice for you two.

Rachel: Okay! Okay! Umm, Webster's Dictionary defines marriage as... (Ross and Joey start writing.) Okay!! Forget that! That sucks!! Okay, never mind! Forget it! Umm, umm, okay, uh... I met, I-I met, I met Monica when we were just a couple of six-year-olds and I became friends with Chandler when he was 25, although he seemed like a six-year-old.

Ross and Joey: Oh! That's nice.

Rachel: Thank you. Thank you very much. Umm, I've known them separately and I've known them together and-and to know them as a couple is to know that you are truly in the presence of love. So I would like to raise my glass (Grabs a glass

and holds it up) to Monica and Chandler and the beautiful adventure they are about to embark upon together. I can think of no two people better prepared for the journey.

I also found a fair amount of phrases and one-word statements throughout the excerpt.

Further, I looked at the sentences directly, to see what kinds of clauses they used, as well as possible connecting devices. Only in those cases where they used longer sentences and multiple sentences per lines did I find use of compound sentences and connecting devices:

Phoebe: Umm, when I get married will you be my maid of honor?

Rachel: Oh my God Phoebe! I mean I'm just – Wait a minute. If I'm your maid of honor that means you are Monica's.

Rachel: Okay. Okay. It's – since you've never done it before you can be Monica's maid of honor.

Monica: You broke up with a girl because she was fat?!

The first turn shows an example of time clauses (when + simple present, future?) used in a question. The second turn illustrates the use of *if*-clauses for conditions (if I'm... you are...). The third turn uses *since* to illustrate cause and effect (you've never done it: cause; you can be maid of honor: effect). The final turn also shows cause and effect, this time using *because*.

There are also some illustrations of idea elaboration, as in the case of questions with *why*:

Phoebe: But why does it even matter?!

Rachel: Why does it matter so much to you?!

Phoebe: Because this one is now! And-and it's two of our best friends! Who knows what you're gonna marry!

Chandler: [pause] No, we're still together. Yeah we went out for two summers, and then I broke up with her.

Monica: Why?

Chandler: Well, 'cause she came back the third summer and she'd gotten really fa-aa-aw-ow...

However, these were the exceptions, not the rule. The shortest sentences were usually in the simple present and simple past, and there was very little use of connecting devices in the conversation lines. The conversation turns seldom feature descriptions, therefore the use of adjectives, adverbs, comparatives, and superlatives was very limited. There was very little use of adjectives in extended descriptions. Here is an example of the descriptions taking place on a conversation segment, the only part where there were some elaborate descriptions using adjectives:

Chandler: *Die Hard* still great!

Ross: And it'll be cool to see it again! Yeah!

Phoebe: Because this one is now! And-and it's two of our best friends! Who knows what you're gonna marry!

Rachel: I'm gonna marry someone good y'know.

Rachel: Better than Chandler. (Phoebe exhales as if to say, "Like what isn't?")

Monica: Yeah hey, a weird thing happened today when I was at brunch. This woman overheard that I was marrying you and-and then she...she wished me good luck.

Chandler: That's sweet.

Monica: She was like 30, dark hair, attractive.

Chandler: Well, is there any chance you were looking into a bright, shiny thing called a mirror?

Chandler: No, no I only dated two girls in college, both blonde, both not attractive... (Thinks a little while.) Hold on one second; let me check this out. (He gets up and grabs a photo album.)

Monica: You broke up with a girl because she was fat?!

Chandler: Yeah. Yeah, but it was a really, really long time ago! Does she still feel bad?

Common Themes in *Friends*

Once I completed the grammatical analysis, I analyzed the themes found in these conversation turns. I usually found one theme per scene. Four themes were the most recurrent. This section introduces examples for three of them. The fourth theme, however, will be discussed separately.

Relationships and dating. I found 6 references to present relationships and dating and two that made reference to past relationships. The latter belong to episode 3, whereas the others were scattered in all three episodes. Here I provide examples of conversations about relationships:

Episode 1:

Monica: (To Chandler) Hey sweetie.
 Chandler: Hi sweetie. So, what was with all the whispering?
 Monica: I can't tell you. It's a secret.
 Chandler: Secret? Married people aren't supposed to have secrets between one another. We have too much love and respect for one another.
 Monica: Awww. (Kisses him.) But still no.
 Chandler: No I'm serious, we should tell each other everything. I do not have any secrets from you.

Episode 2:

Rachel: Hey look-look, Phoebe's talking to uh, "Cute Coffeehouse Guy."
 Ross: Oh, you guys call him "Cute Coffeehouse Guy"? We call him "Hums While He Pees."
 Chandler: Yes, and we call Ross "Lingers in the Bathroom."
 Phoebe: (returning) Hey you guys, "Hums While He Pees" just asked me out!
 Rachel: Hey, I thought that guy was married.
 Phoebe: He is! But he's getting divorced – Ross! Maybe you know him.
 Ross: It's not a club.
 Rachel: Phoebe, if this guy's going through a divorce, is it such a good idea to start going out with him?
 Ross: Hey, divorced men are not bad men!

Phoebe: Hi.
 Ross: Hi.
 Phoebe: So, how are things going with crazy? Has she cooked your rabbit yet?
 Ross: Listen, you are hearing one side of the story, okay – and F.Y.I she must've shown Kyle over 30 paint samples before she painted that room! And his response to each one was, "I don't give a tiny rat's ass."
 Phoebe: Yeah well, maybe she should've spent a little less time decorating and a little more time in the bedroom.
 Ross: Well, I don't think we are gonna have that problem, but maybe that's just because I am not emotionally unavailable!
 Phoebe: You think he's emotionally unavailable?
 Ross: I think he can be.
 Phoebe: Well, maybe he wouldn't be if she didn't bring the office home with her every night!
 Ross: Well, excuse her for knowing what she wants to do with her life!
 Phoebe: Yeah well, she certainly knew what she was doing New Year's Eve 1997.

Ross: (angrily) I knew you were gonna throw that in my face!! That was three years ago! She apologized and she apologized! What more do you want?!!
 Phoebe: (gets up and starts to leave) We want the last six years back!!
 Ross: So do we!! So do we!! (Ross notices a couple has been staring at them.)
 I'm sorry you had to see that.

The examples extracted from Episode 3 deal with past relationships:

Monica: Come on, was it somebody maybe you dated in college?
 Chandler: No, no I only dated two girls in college, both blonde, both not attractive... (Thinks a little while.) Hold on one second; let me check this out. (He gets up and grabs a photo album.
 Monica: What are you doing?
 Chandler: Well, let's see... (Finding the picture he wants.) Okay uh, is that her? (Pointing to the picture.)
 Monica: Oh my God yes! Who is she?
 Chandler: Julie Grath, my camp girlfriend.
 Monica: Did you break up with her?
 Chandler: (pause) No, we're still together. Yeah we went out for two summers, and then I broke up with her.

Monica: Lewis Posin! He was my best friend in fifth grade, and-and then one day I asked him to be my boyfriend and he said no. Do you know why?
 Chandler: Because you kept talking to him while he was trying to go to the bathroom?!!
 Monica: No! But because he thought I was too faaaaa... (Chandler emerges, without flushing by the way.) And every time I think about it, it makes me feel as bad as I did in fifth grade! Y'know, I-I really think that you should apologize to Julie.
 Chandler: Honey, are you kidding? That was like 16 years ago.
 Monica: No, I know. But y'know what? It would make me feel better if Lewis apologized to me.
 Chandler: Okay, I will do it. But I have to warn you; this may make me a better person and that is not the man you fell in love with!

Sex. Three conversation turns dealt directly with comments about sex and sex life. Here is an example from Episode 2:

Monica: They can't all be bad. (To Chandler) Find the one where you make your bedroom eyes. Ohh, there it is.
 Chandler: Oh my God! Those are my bedroom eyes?! Why did you ever sleep with me?
 Monica: Do you really want to pull at that thread?

The other comments I found are examples of sexual innuendo. Seven situations in these episodes included this kind of comments (There were other episodes, however,

that had a higher amount of such comments]. I present three for illustration. Take, for instance, this conversation from Episode 1:

Phoebe: Hey – Ooh, how's Hilda? Is she working out?
Rachel: Ohh, my new assistant is working out, yes.

And how they resort to the use of multiple meanings of the expression “working out,” to create a sexual innuendo: From the meaning, “being efficient and useful to you,” they move on to a description of the assistant’s physical appearance. The second example is an illustration of a somewhat wit “pick-up line:”

Tag: Phoebe! That's a great name.
Phoebe: Oh, you like that? You should hear my phone number.

The third example is perhaps the most direct innuendo of all, this one from Episode 2:

Monica: Wow! Imagine what our kids would look like!
Joey: Y'know, we don't have to imagine.
Chandler: I'm marrying her.
Joey: We'll just see.

Everyday life. Some of the conversations actually made reference to the six friends’ past and present lives. Episode 1, for instance, described some of the “skeletons in the closet” Chandler, Ross, and Monica seem to be hiding:

Chandler: So, Ross and I are going to Disneyland and we stop at this restaurant for tacos. And when I say restaurant, I mean a guy, a hibachi, and the trunk of his car. So Ross has about 10 tacos. And anyway, we're on Space Mountain and Ross starts to feel a little iffy.
Monica: Oh my God. He threw up?
Chandler: No, he visited a little town south of throw up. [Monica laughs hysterically.]
Monica: No.
Chandler: Yeah. Some of the employees decided to rename the park, “The Crappiest Place on Earth.” So what was Phoebe's secret?

Ross: Oh really? Well I-I guess Monica should know about Atlantic City.
Chandler: Du-ude!
Monica: [running up to Ross] What happened in Atlantic City?!
Ross: Well, Chandler and I are in a bar...
Chandler: Did you not hear me say, "Du-ude?!"
Ross: And this girl is making eyes at Chandler, okay? So after awhile he-he goes over to her and uh, after a minute or two, I see them kissing. Now, I know what

you're thinking, Chandler's not the type of guy who just goes to bars and makes out with girls, and you're right, Chandler's not the type of guy who just goes to bars and makes out with...girls.

Monica: (To Chandler) You kissed a guy?!! Oh my God.

Chandler: In my defense, it was dark and he was a very pretty guy.

Ross: Oh Mon, I laughed so hard...

Chandler: Ho-ho, so hard we had to throw out your underwear again?

Ross: Whatever dude, you kissed a guy.

Chandler: You wanna tell secrets?! Okay! Okay! In college, Ross used to wear leg warmers!

Ross: All right! All right! Chandler entered a Vanilla Ice look-a-like contest and won!

Chandler: Ross came in fourth and cried!

Monica: Oh my God! (Laughing)

Ross: Oh, is that funny?! Oh, you-you find that funny?! Well maybe Chandler should know some of your secrets too!

Monica: I already told him everything! (Threateningly) You shush!!

Ross: Once Monica was sent to her room without dinner, so she ate the macaroni off a jewelry box she'd made.

Monica: Ross used to stay up every Saturday night to watch Golden Girls!

Ross: Monica couldn't tell time 'til she was 13!

Monica: It's hard for some people!

Chandler: (To Monica) Of course it is. (Mouths to Ross) Wow – whoa!

Monica: Chandler one time wore my underwear to work!

Chandler: Hey!!!

Monica: Ohh, I'm sorry I couldn't think of any more for Ross!

Ross: Ohh! Ohh! In college, Chandler got drunk and slept with the lady who cleaned our dorm!

Chandler: That was you!

Ross: Whatever dude, you kissed a guy.

Other episodes intertwine their regular lives and their work lives as part of the conversations, as is the case of this situation from Episode 2:

Joey: See? That's a great smile! Easy. Natural. Now, pretend I have a camera. (Chandler immediately does The Face.) You're changing it!

Chandler: I can't help it!

Joey: All right, all right, all right, all right, you wanna know what I do when I take resume shots?

Chandler: Borrow money from me?

Joey: Okay, first – first of all, you want to make it look spontaneous. I look down (Looks down) , look down, keep looking down; then I look up. (Looks up and smiles.) See? All right, now you try. Look down (Chandler looks down) , you're looking down, keep looking down...

Chandler: Why is there jelly on your shoe?

Joey: I had a donut. (Chandler nods.)

A few more conversations describe likes and dislikes, personally and as a group, with occasional references to popular culture:

Chandler: Die Hard still great!
 Joey: Yep. Hey, what do you say we make it a double feature?
 Chandler: What else did you rent?
 Joey: Die Hard 2.
 Chandler: [looking at the tape] Joey, this is Die Hard 1 again.
 Joey: Oh, well we watch it a second time and its Die Hard 2!
 Ross: Joey, we just saw it!
 Joey: And?
 Ross: And it would be cool to see it again! Yeah!
 Joey and Ross: Die Hard!!!!!!
 Ross: Dude, you didn't say Die Hard. Is everything okay?
 Chandler: Yeah, I just got uh, got plans.
 Ross: Well, John McClane had plans!
 Chandler: No, you see, the thing is I want to get out of here before Joey gets all worked up and starts calling everybody bitch.
 Joey: What are you talking about? Bitch.

Nevertheless, the references to popular culture or the city of New York are not present. There were no comments that would situate the viewer in that city aside from some background shots between scenes. That was a major flaw I found concerning the themes: The lack of stronger cultural references in the show. I will return to this issue during the discussion of the findings.

Social Languages: The Case of Rachel's Office

Season 7 has a major storyline that covers a good portion of the episodes: The relationship [and sexual tension] between Rachel and her assistant, Tag. The main issue in my analysis was the kind of language that Rachel used in her office when she spoke to her assistant, while looking for statements that described possible power dynamics in such a place.

One example of the employer-employee relationship takes place during Rachel's first interview to a candidate:

Rachel: (reading the resume) And you were at this job for four years?
 Hilda: That's right.
 Rachel: Okay, well this is all very impressive Hilda, um I just have one last question for you. Uh, how did I do? Was this okay?
 Hilda: What?
 Rachel: I've never interviewed anyone before. I've actually never had anyone work for me before. Although when I was a kid, we did have a maid, but this is- this isn't the same thing.
 Hilda: No dear. It's not.
 Rachel: No. Yeah, and I know that. All right, well thank you so much for coming in, it was nice to meet you.
 Hilda: Thank you! Good meeting you.

It is interesting to point out how Rachel asks for feedback on her interview (a situation that I wonder would actually happen in real life), as well as the level of informality with a total stranger that will supposedly work for you (the story of the maid). Then, when she interviewed Tag,

Rachel: (seeing him) Wow! H-umm! Hi! Yes, uh I'm sorry the models are actually down the hall.
 Man: Actually, I'm here about the assistant job.
 Rachel: Really?! (Taking his resume) Okay well then, all right, well just have a seat there. Umm, so what's - what is - what's your name?
 Man: Tag Jones.
 Rachel: Uh-huh, go on.
 Tag: That's it. That's my whole name.
 Rachel: That's your whole name, okay of course it is! Okay, well let's-let's just have a look-see here. (Looking at his resume)
 Tag: I know I haven't worked in an office before, and I really don't have a lot of experience, but uh...
 Rachel: Oh come on, what are you talking about? You've got three years painting houses. Two whole summers at T.G.I. Friday's, come on!
 Tag: It's lame, I know. But I'm a goal-oriented person, very eager to learn...
 Rachel: Okay, hold on just a second. (She grabs a camera out of the desk and takes his picture.) I'm sorry, it's for human resources, everybody has to do it. Could you just stand up please?

One can notice how this tension starts to develop (she is physically attracted to Tag from the beginning), and how she takes advantage of her power position (Posing for Polaroid shots is not really a requirement for a job interview, is it?), thus unveiling an ethical dilemma, which Phoebe sort of points out in a later conversation:

Phoebe: Come on you know what to do! You hire the first one! You don't hire an assistant because they're cute, you hire them because they're qualified.

Rachel: Uh-huh. No, I hear what you're saying and-and-and that makes a lot of sense but can I just say one more thing? (Takes out his picture.) Look how pretty!

Phoebe: Let's see. (Looking at the picture) Oh my God! Oh... But no! No! You can't-you can't hire him, because that – it's not professional. Umm, this is for me (The picture) yes? Thanks. (Puts it in her pocket.)

Rachel: Okay you're right. I'll hire Hilda tomorrow. Dumb-old-perfect-for-the-job Hilda!

Other conversational turns illustrate how Rachel exerting her power in a rather unprofessional manner. For instance,

Melissa: Hey Rachel!

Rachel: (startled) Ahh, hi! Hi! Melissa, what's up? I'm just uh, about to umm, go out to the store to get some stuff to put in my backpack. Y'know, like dried fruit and granola and stuff. What's up? (She has put on the backpack.)

Melissa: Umm, is Tag here?

Rachel: No. Why?

Melissa: Oh, I was gonna talk to him about doing something tonight.

Rachel: Really?! Got a little crush on Tag there do ya?

Melissa: Well, we've been flirting back and forth, but I was hoping that tonight it would turn into something a little more than that.

Rachel: Okay, whoa-whoa easy there Melissa! This ain't a locker room, okay? But, y'know I remember him saying that-that he had plans tonight.

Melissa: Oh no!

Rachel: Oh yeah. All right, back to work.

Melissa: Hey! Isn't that Tag's backpack.

Rachel: Yeah Melissa, I don't want to be known as the uh, office bitch, but I will call your supervisor.

The last conversational turn (... I will call your supervisor) lays out a power dynamic where Rachel takes advantage of being a manager for her own benefit.

Aside from the ethical connotations of the storyline, I was also concerned about the language Rachel (the boss) would use to address Tag (her direct employee and thus in a lower position of status). One can argue that some bosses like to have a more relaxed atmosphere at the office. But, one also has to wonder how a situation like the one below defies office and power dynamics:

Tag: Good morning.

Rachel: Hi Tag! Hey, so did you have fun with uh, with Joey last night?
 Tag: Oh yeah! We went to the Knicks game.
 Rachel: Ohh that's nice.
 Tag: Then we went to this bar and he hooked us up with all these women!
 Rachel: Wo-women? You mean like old women?
 Tag: Well kinda old, like 30.
 Rachel: (Pause) Oh.
 Tag: And I never used to be able to just talk to girls in bars, but I got like 20 phone numbers last night.
 Rachel: That's great! Wow man, so Joey must've really taught you some stuff huh?
 Tag: A little.
 Rachel: Yeah?

Then there is another example of a conversation that challenges some social conventions of employer-employee dialog:

Tag: Good morning Rachel.
 Rachel: Hi! (He hands her her mail) Thanks, hey so uh what'd you do last night?
 Tag: Went out with Joey.
 Rachel: Oh yeah? Another night of bird-dogging the *chicas*?

One has to really wonder whether one's boss asking him about his personal life is a line that should not be crossed, especially if such informal language as "bird-dogging the *chicas*" is employed in the conversation.

Discussion: Lessons Learned

As the analysis showed, most of the conversation ranged between simple present and past tenses. The absence of progressive tenses in the conversation was noticeable, especially considering that progressive tenses portray the idea of *right now*. The very little use of modals is another limitation of these segments. Since modals are a very useful way to convey different meanings in a context, it is surprising how simplistic the discourse is at times. This also relates to the sentence complexity level: There are very few references to the use of conjunctions and linking words other than

“and” or “but” and even those are not used very often. Many of the sentences and dialogs analyzed are very short, not offering enough for a student to listen to how native speakers elaborate discourse. In fact, some of the longer sentences seem to be “lost” in the sea of very short ideas of the different conversation turns. It is true that there is a good portion of real-life interaction that consists of small talk. However, in life, one sometimes needs to use more extended ideas and more words to convey a message, and perhaps more complex vocabulary and richer descriptions.

Regarding the themes of *Friends*, I also noticed the absence of references to popular culture or current events within the show. Considering this is one of the most popular US-based shows on many foreign countries, the cultural references about life in the US are questionable. There is a lack of information to create a situated identity as far as where the characters are in time and space. Other than the background shots and the coffee shop (Central Perk, as a word game in reference to Central Park), there are not enough references that really situate the story in New York City. The way the series is laid out does not allow the viewer to make sense of life in New York or any major US city.

In the case of Rachel’s office, there is supposed to be a hierarchy where she holds a position of authority. However, the kind of language she uses to address a subordinate does not differ at all from that she would use in a more informal situation. There is no formal language as the one that would follow interactions laden with power, as is the case of an office. One could argue that no boss would ask an employee about his dating life, especially using the kind of vocabulary sometimes Rachel displayed to speak to her assistant.

Implications for instruction. *Friends* might not be the most appropriate TV show if you want to help your students refine and expand the length of their discourse

and transcend monosyllabic conversations. It might actually give them a reason not to do so.

If I were to use the material for grammatical purposes, I would probably narrow it down to students with an intermediate level. The vocabulary and structures are simple enough for such classrooms, and students at that level might benefit from the way the characters engage in conversations. More advanced students might benefit from a kind of media that portrays more elaborate discourse and a more varied use of tenses. Nonetheless, using a more critical lens, such as Media Literacy (Hammett, 1999; Layzer & Sharkey, 1999; Mora, 2004; Semali, 1999), some of the themes in *Friends* might lend themselves to some rich cultural discussions stemming from the issues laid out here.

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