

## CHAPTER 9

# “I don’t know what they’re saying half the time, but I’m hooked on the series”

## Incomprehensible dialogue and integrated multimodal characterisation in *The Wire*

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This paper analyses and discusses dialogue in the hugely-celebrated HBO series, *The Wire* (2002–2008). One paradox that particularly interests me is that the dialogue is “involvingly incomprehensible” or, to be more precise, that it is quite difficult to understand fully, but no less absorbing and enjoyable for that – if anything, the reverse! Looking chiefly at one short scene (the discussion of the rules of chess, in episode 3 of series 1), I comment on how the interplay of verbal and visual and aural modes means that the “degradation” of the verbal channel – of the dialogue traditionally held to be crucial to effective communication of character and theme – is not, in this TV narrative, an obstacle. Since my comments are predicated on the assumed “opacity” of the dialogue, I present a relatively simple but workable empirical method of probing some aspects of film-dialogue comprehensibility, and report on results from a pilot study. I also argue, with some quantified evidence, that comparatively extensive lexical repetition (reflecting thematic or ideational repetition) compensates or “repairs” where dialogue may be significantly less than fully understood. And I emphasise that for comprehension of dialogue in *The Wire* the viewer-listener must attend to all the integrated means of communication at play in an unfolding exchange. As Rossi (this volume) and others note (e.g., Kozloff 2000; and now Quaglio 2009 and Bednarek 2010), fictional dialogue has a noticeable scarcity of a number of almost inescapable features of natural dialogue. One overarching consideration lies behind both the relative rarity, in fictional film dialogue, of unresolved topics, incomplete exchanges, ignored or misheard turns, self-repairs and recycled utterances; and the relative prominence in that dialogue of coherence, focus, and teleological efficacy (see also Altman 1992; Chion 1994). That consideration is the overarching narrativity of the construct: the talk’s role in telling a story, in representing individuals experiencing change. This, more than the dialogue’s fictionality or artistic status, or the fact that film dialogue is

usually scripted before it is spoken and filmed (i.e., exists first as writing), seems to be responsible for the succinct focussedness of most dialogue in film narratives. The implicit priority accorded to narrativity in turn reflects the wider communicative context of (commercial) TV series generally: the need to entertain or otherwise enrich viewers and be attractive to advertisers and sponsors.

## 1. Introduction

This paper analyses and discusses one scene – at once memorable and typical – from the first series of the hugely-celebrated HBO series, *The Wire* (2002–2008). One question I particularly dwell upon relates to the experience, repeatedly confirmed anecdotally in conversations with other British and even American viewers, that a significant proportion of the characters’ dialogue is impenetrable to them, but that this seems not substantially to impair viewers’ enjoyment of the drama. I will offer some commentary on how the interplay of verbal and visual and aural modes means that the “degradation” of the verbal channel – of the dialogue traditionally held to be crucial to effective communication of character and theme – is not, in this TV narrative, an obstacle. Since my comments are predicated on the “opacity” of the dialogue, I present a relatively simple but workable empirical method of probing *some* aspects of film-dialogue comprehensibility, and report on results from a pilot study. I also argue, with some quantified evidence, that comparatively extensive lexical repetition (reflecting thematic or ideational repetition) compensates or “repairs” where dialogue may be significantly less than fully understood. And I emphasise that for comprehension of dialogue in *The Wire* the viewer-listener must attend to all the integrated means of communication at play in an unfolding exchange. I therefore discuss a number of those means, which are cotemporally integrated with the verbal “stream” in the total speech situation. The theoretical background to my approach is chiefly the argument for the situated determination of communicational meaning propounded by integrational linguistics, as set out in the work of Roy Harris (e.g., Harris 1998).

As Rossi (this volume) and others note (e.g., Kozloff 2000; and now Quaglio 2009 and Bednarek 2010), fictional dialogue has a noticeable scarcity of a number of almost inescapable features of natural dialogue (unresolved topics, incomplete exchanges, ignored or misheard turns, self-repairs and recycled utterances, and so on; by the same token it has noticeably more coherence, focus, and teleological efficacy than natural dialogue (see also Altman 1992; Chion 1994). The key reason for this is the priority accorded, by those devising this dialogue, to the overarching narrativity of the construct: the talk’s role in telling a story, in reporting individuals experiencing change. This, more than the fictionality, artistic status,

or (normally) prior existence in writing of the product seems to be responsible for the succinct focussedness of most dialogue in film narratives. And the implicit priority accorded to narrativity in turn reflects the wider communicative context of (commercial) TV series generally; it is vital that such series entertain or otherwise figuratively enrich the lives of viewers, and are deemed attractive to a large viewership and/or advertisers and sponsors.

## 2. *The Wire*: An overview

*The Wire* is an American television drama series set, comprising five seasons of twelve episodes each, first broadcast on the cable network HBO from 2002 to 2008. It rapidly developed a devoted viewership, who admired the unfashionable urban setting (Baltimore: mostly the projects, bars, beaten-up neighbourhoods, unglamorous police offices), the vivid characters and their earthy expressive language, and in particular the almost Shakespearean conflicts that drew together the disparate subcommunities depicted: police detectives, drug gangsters and their subordinates, stevedores, politicians, and lawyers (all with families, relationships, scars and blindspots). The five seasons in turn focussed on a particular subgroup, and the police’s dealings with it, within this urban mix: the drugs gangs in the first series for example, the stevedores in the dying docks in series two. But mostly the same characters continue to figure across the whole set of 60 episodes, and story lines similarly continue; in these respects *The Wire* is a serial-like, but without the more formulaic elements (such as “cliffhangers” and season finales) of some serials. Everything is narrated with a creativity of cinematography, pacing, and use of sound that won great acclaim. In this chapter I focus on a striking aspect of that creativity and originality: the dialogue of the characters which – when we can follow it – feels as arresting and suggestive as the dialogue in a good play, but sometimes seems almost casually relayed to us, constructing a naturalist or realist effect at the expense of “clarity” of the signal. In short, the dialogue is rich and important (as we know if we resort to subtitles or replaying of scenes) but it is often barely comprehensible in real-time first-time viewing, and sometimes incomprehensible. This is not just a matter of obscurity of the content (problems of Gricean cooperativeness – between the dialogue writer and the audience, rather than between characters within the drama) although it is partly that; it is also a matter of qualified Gricean cooperativeness on the part of the film-makers relative to us as audience – their calculated decisions about such factors as acceptable levels of clarity of speech, the matching of speech with its speaker in frame (or the reverse), and the inclusion of simultaneous “interfering” ambient sounds. Now all this might have prompted frustration and irritation in viewers, and been

denounced as a kind of “amateur” or ill-judged realism. A few have so reacted. But – and this is where my interest begins – the overwhelming majority of viewers have come to admire the sometimes-incomprehensible dialogue, and salute it as one of the innovative strengths of the series.

What Kozloff (2000) calls “linguistic opacity”, where the viewer struggles to understand characters’ speech in film narrative, is not a new phenomenon, particularly in feature films as distinct from the TV series. Kozloff even suggests that “some degree of linguistic opacity may define the gangster film in toto, although the extent to which an individual viewer will struggle depends upon the viewer’s own linguistic proficiencies” (Kozloff 2000: 215). Kozloff makes one of my points better than I can when she says that such films’ audibility problems are not technical flaws in production; rather, the viewer’s frustration is “part of their aesthetic” (Kozloff 2000: 215). But following while not always understanding the dialogue of *The Wire* is different again from the effect in a 100-minute film. The first series alone, extending over thirteen 50-minute episodes, which is only marginally more comprehensible in the final episodes than in the first, creates a more *entrenched* effect of persistent incomplete understanding than anything achieved by the dialectally-removed character speech encountered by the mainstream-dialect user in a consumed-at-one-sitting narrative feature film. In the latter, our comprehension problems continually demonstrate or perform our outsider status. There is some of that effect in *The Wire*: we are thereby repeatedly reminded that we are not *really* inward of this world and these protagonists are not – to use the series’ parlance – our bitches, prepared to adjust their speech or behaviour to accommodate our needs as “visitors” or “overhearers” (Bubel 2008). But that seems to be only small part of most viewers’ reaction, who, at the same time, do *not* feel excluded, but rather can be found enthusing on hundreds of weblogs and in thousands of cafes about how *involving* they find the storylines and characters, and about how they appreciate the psychological depth and sociological plausibility of characters such as McNulty, Stringer Bell, Bubbles, D’Angelo, Kima, and the rest.

Of course not *everyone* loves *The Wire*, but even those on the customers’ review area of the amazon.co.uk website who very much did not and took the trouble to say why say things that I find revealing and supportive of my topic. Nine of 179 customer-posted reviews give *The Wire*’s first season a 1-star rating (146 give it 5 stars). Here are typical comments from 3 of those 9 most sharply-negative reviews:

*Awful even if you do understand what they are saying*

*Again this is not in widescreen it’s 4:3 and even with the subtitles on I couldn’t understand the language on this. It’s very slang afro caribbean english and if you don’t understand what they are saying you will find it hard to watch (You*

*feel me!) If you watch it you will know what I mean. I wanted to buy the rest of the set but as I did not get through the whole of the first season I am very happy that I decide just to buy 1 season. Not my cup of tea and a lot of people I have spoken to also say they find the language hard to understand in this.*

***Simply awful***

*The show is so slow paced, the actors are all one dimensional and every episode is like a repeat of the last with about 10 seconds of actual action. All this is topped off with language that is unnecessarily difficult to understand.*

***Interpreter required***

*I have tried to get into this series – got as far as episode 5 with 6 and 7 still to play – can't say I actually understand the lingo – of the cops or of the crims, or what is going on most of the time – though the latter are worse than the former. The internal political ins and outs are a different planet for me. What is going on? I can understand on the surface, what is going down in the police department – but not the under surface, just enough to know that there is graft and sleaze – but what is the motive for this? I haven't a scubby doo.*

These critical reactions are thought-provoking not least since some of their substantive points are quite similar to those of the series' admirers: both constituencies agree, for example, that the pace is slow and, especially, that "the lingo" is extremely hard to understand. For the critics (a small minority, recall) this is an irredeemable failing; for the admiring majority, such difficulties are an enrichment, a paradoxically welcome obstacle, like metaphoricity in Shakespeare or atonality in modern music.

The comprehension difficulties that viewers of the series attest are interestingly different from those that we may encounter when trying to follow the medicalese in *ER* or *House*, or popular programmes using or simulating the specialist varieties of the counter-intelligence or forensic psychology communities. Those comprehension difficulties relate to register or variety rather than dialect, i.e., use, rather than user. Viewers' difficulties following the interaction in *The Wire* chiefly relate not to specialist or technical language, but to what we are given to understand are the everyday ways of speaking of the drug dealers, politicians, and police officers depicted. A closer analogy then might be with the feature film *The Full Monty* (1997), portraying the everyday lives of some unemployed Yorkshire steelworkers (who form a male striptease dance act in order to earn money and restore some self-esteem); their regional accents were so difficult that in the USA a number of American cinemas had special leaflets printed containing translations of some of the British slang left in the U.S. version of the film so that audiences would be able to follow the dialog more easily (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0119164/trivia>). The point about *The Wire* is that we follow it without

subtitles. Or at least, native speakers of the language mostly do; or at least they normally would and, I submit, the makers of the series will have expected that fluent English speakers in the United States and beyond would not, as the default means of viewing, resort to subtitles. That I believe to be the case notwithstanding the widespread anecdotal evidence of some native speakers (“even in America”) watching the series with subtitles, and the publication on various blogs, printed news outlets, and books (e.g., Busfield and Owen 2009), of “guides” to the series, often with special attention to its idioms and jargon. There would be challenging theoretical implications if it was agreed that the default and normal way of watching a given film was with subtitles, in the same language as the characters’ speech, to aid comprehension (currently only standard and expected of those with hearing impairment). A host of interesting new questions concerning the integration in viewer/listener reception of the speech and the writing (along with secondary questions about the size and choice of font in the writing, the spacing, the positioning on the screen, departures from verbatim transcription, and whether to mark pauses and pitch and volume changes in the transcript), to say nothing of the alienation effects of subtitling, would come to the fore. It is therefore quite important to this essay that viewing *The Wire* with English subtitles is *not* regarded as the default or standard means of consuming it, with the subtitles as intrinsic to the artefact and its effect (analogous to the “final authorial copy-text”, as most authoritative version of a literary classic), any more than the surtitles at a performance of Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* can be regarded as integral to the opera – even if it were the case (which I very much doubt but cannot prove or disprove) that more native speakers than not view *The Wire* with subtitles on.<sup>1</sup>

The series’ many fans who are not first-language speakers of English evidently, by contrast, do have recourse to subtitles, as is evident from the numerous impassioned contributions on the topic of Subtitles and Languages in the “Customer Discussions” forum within the Amazon.co.uk web pages. But evidently those fans

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1. Many months after completing this essay I found an article in the archive of *The Independent* newspaper online edition, for Mon. 17 Aug. 2009, reporting the denunciation, by one of *The Wire*’s writers, of those who resort to subtitles to watch the series (Akbar 2009). The article reads, in part:

The seasoned detective fiction writer George Pelecanos, who has worked extensively on *The Wire* [...] said those who watched with subtitles in order to comprehend every sentence spoken were missing the point entirely.

“We wrote it so audiences would have to work at it!” he said in an interview with *The Independent*. “We were not going to compromise in making it immediately accessible for everyone. It [subtitling] kind of reminds me of scenes from that [1980 disaster film spoof] comedy, *Airplane!*, when two black guys speak, and subtitles appear on the screen”.

are mostly using subtitles in their respective native languages, rather than English. (A particular bugbear for some discussants is that while users of a dozen major languages are afforded subtitles, there are none for Spanish readers. This allegedly relates to the fact that Spanish distributors have exclusive rights over Spanish dubbing/subtitles.)

Fascinated absorption in a discourse that we “don’t quite understand” is not a new puzzle but as ancient as riddles, code-breaking, and linguistics. But in *The Wire* the attraction is chiefly of a particular kind summarisable, I propose, in terms of realism: the barely comprehensible ways that its characters speak feels “more real” than the fluent, “transparent” speech encountered in most previous comparable shows (Kozloff 2000; Bednarek 2010; see also, on the issue of realism in fictional language, the chapters by Rossi and Alvarez this volume). Even – as I will argue – if the sound quality has been deliberately degraded, from the high standards that can routinely be achieved in film-recording today, on location as well as in the studio. But story-telling and characterisation in *The Wire* are not done by speech alone, or even chiefly, this being multimodal narration. The realism of the incomprehensibility is more than compensated for by the other modes of communication (especially the non-speech ambient sounds, diegetic or non-diegetic, and the visual semiotics).

There are some ironies in the reported “incomprehensibility” of the dialogue, in that much of the plot in the first series hinges upon a police team’s efforts to enhance their monitoring of the incriminating conversations of a network of drug-dealers who are under surveillance: an undercover police officer joins the gang and functions as an insider, but wearing a “wire” for the covert recording and transmission of their talk. Hence the title of the five-series whole, *The Wire*, and the strapline in capitals on the cover sleeve of the first series in DVD format: “LISTEN CAREFULLY”. The wire enables the police to record and follow – not without difficulty and the need for interpretation of the messages by officers adept at their slang and code – the gangsters’ incriminating conversations at a level of clarity and comprehensibility otherwise unachievable. Indeed there are a number of scenes in which the grizzled experienced officer Lester sits in front of sophisticated digital recording equipment – much like a linguist in a phonetics lab – monitoring and interpreting the gangsters’ payphone conversations. Lester is their overhearer, struggling to understand their partially coded messages. As we are too; but we are also overhearers of Lester and his exchanges with his colleagues, so that he acts doubly as interpreter – for his colleagues within the story and for us, observing from without.

Everything hangs on the wire, on enjoying exceptional access as intimate overhearers and voyeurs of the gangsters’ inside stories; the police frequently use cameras in the story too, “shooting” the gangsters on the street, or in their cars,

or transferring “product”. (A caveat to add is that as each series unfolds, we grasp there are “gangsters” in every sub-community: among the police, the lawyers, the politicians, the stevedores and their union, and so on). This desire to get in on the *secrets* behind appearances, revealing what is really going on or down, is an ancient basis of interest in narrative. We viewers, in turn, crave and depend on exceptional “wired” access – to private interactions between Bunk and McNulty, *and* between Kimba and her partner, and Avon and Stringer, and D’Angelo and Wallace – that none of these pairs, lacking a wire on all other parties, enjoys. And yet as noted the language, especially, of some of these interactions is deliberately and mainly realistically hard to “decode”. We struggle to follow these exchanges rather as the officers Lester and Prez struggle to decode the Barksdale gang’s code.

### 3. Measuring comprehensibility

The claim that one dialogue sequence (actual or fictional) is less comprehensible than another, while easily attested informally and intuitively, draws us into deep theoretical and methodological issues when a more objective demonstration is attempted. Comprehensibility will always be partly contingent upon the “priming” of the situated viewer or addressee, including their familiarity with or cultural proximity to the target discourse and its conventions. A typical contemporary British twenty-year-old might well find a Pinter play more comprehensible than a Shakespeare one, on first encounter; but if they have studied the latter intensively the perceived difference might drastically reduce. Attempting to *measure* different “levels” of comprehension is highly controversial, and no single methodology is accepted as best and most robust. Any claims I will make must necessarily be comparative, with uncertain validity beyond the given group of situated viewers whom I tested.

The comprehension measure I decided to use involved showing to subjects a brief scene from *The Wire* involving a small number of distinguishable conversing characters, mostly in shot. The subjects were given in advance my transcription of the scene,<sup>2</sup> from which, at five distinct points, segments of one-speaker talk averaging 10 words in length had been excised and replaced by a continuous

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2. Transcription conventions were kept minimal (e.g., no marking of overlapping or latched speech, no marking of pauses or pause-length other than by ellipses), so that the text presented to Subjects looked similar to a standard playscript: each new turn begins on a new line, prefaced by the speaker’s name, sometimes with paralinguistic glossing given in square brackets; standard orthography was used except where non-standard speech was quite marked (e.g., *dat* for *that*).

underline. While I am confident that my transcription is inaccurate in places, any errors do not extend I believe into the "blacked-out" segments, the basis of the test. Those segments were also sufficiently spaced out that the procedure did not become a test of fast writing. The subjects' task was then in effect a comprehension/transcription one: the scene was played to them twice, and they were asked immediately to record the characters' missing words at the appropriate points in the transcript as accurately as possible. My own transcript of the scene's entire dialogue, whose accuracy had been accepted by 2 judges, functioned as the "target transcript". A numerical rating (maximum score of 5) was given for those items in the subjects' transcriptions that matched with the *lexical* items in the target transcript by being full repetitions or synonyms of those items, together with a count of those items that bore no evident paraphrase relation with the lexical items in the target text (or absence of transcription altogether). Similar procedures were applied to derive "comprehension scores" for what I submit are approximately equivalent segments of dialogue in another roughly comparable recent TV series, the UK six-part series interweaving crime, the police, politics, and journalism called *State of Play* (2003).

The mechanism is undoubtedly crude, but I would argue it remains within its obvious limitations potentially revealing, as a means of getting beyond the anecdotal and the unworkably subjective, in measuring one kind of comprehension. Because this is such a segregationist manoeuvre, focusing on ability to reproduce (in writing) just the speech line of the chosen scene, I would not at all want to claim that a high score in recall/transcription necessarily manifested high comprehension, or that a low score was sure proof of low comprehension. Comprehension of film narrative is too complex for one to be able to make such claims other than tentatively and with multiple qualifications. Even if one could be more confident in the measuring of comprehension, one would surely hesitate to correlate this with enjoyment, which many might feel was the main purpose of watching *The Wire*. One might – who knows? – find high comprehension accompanying low levels of enjoyment, and vice versa. But adequate comprehension, including dialogue comprehension, seems to be a core criterion invoked in film appreciation, wherever there is a soundtrack carrying the speech of characters continually in shot and, from the visual information, evidently speaking. Arguably, and perhaps surprisingly, someone who attends a showing of *Citizen Kane* with the visual mode narration removed (as a blind person does) can "get" a fuller understanding of the film than someone who does so with all the sound narration removed (as a deaf person does). This reduces to saying, not uncontroversially, that a blind person will tend more fully to understand a typical feature film than a deaf person. And this might generalise to saying that the totally deaf are more removed from the audiovisual mainstream than blind people are. Drawing in his

recent novel *Deaf Sentence* on his own experience, David Lodge has said as much. If these generalisations have any validity, they also point to the aural mode actually being more essential in film and TV narratives than the visual mode; and while the aural mode may comprise various kinds of sound, by far the most discursively rich and critical, usually, is the representation of understandable human speech. (The above *are* only generalisations and will not fit all cases; they do not fit foreign language films where the speech may be wonderfully clear to the listener, but the latter can make limited sense of it and relies heavily on the visual mode for the subtitled translations as well as for the story-world representation.)

#### 4. Test materials

Here below are the printed materials which I gave to subjects, except that in the versions below, underlined, are the actual wordings I treated as the targets: those 10 segments (5 per film clip) were removed, and just the underlining remained at those points, on the sheets distributed to the subjects. The clips I played (twice) to subjects can be found on the internet at (for *The Wire* clip) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S1HUITKvDUI&feature=related> (12 seconds in) and (for the *State of Play* clip) at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OFMwIMJjuQs&feature=related>.<sup>3</sup> As will be evident below, I re-named D'Angelo's two co-conversationalists for ease of identification by transcribers. Instructions to subjects are provided in Appendix.

- (1) D'Angelo comes up to a table on a lot in the projects where his two friends are sitting in the morning sun, playing checkers with a chess set.

D'Angelo: *Yo! What's up with the Shop?*

Cornrow: *No re-up.*

D'Angelo: *Why not?*

Hoodie: *Becuz, we had a rare cast. Stringer say we have a new package tomorrow.*

D'Angelo: *New package?*

Hoodie: *Yeah. Yeah man unless we stepped on shit we get our head beat ... things agitated.*

Cornrow: *Well look at 'em... they're still buying it though.*

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3. Some comparative figures relating to the two brief episodes: *The Wire* clip comprises 141 words in 50 seconds, hence runs at nearly 3 words per second. There are 5 gaps, 45 words in total, with a 9-word average: 6, 11, 13, 6, and 9 words. *The State of Play* clip contains 184 words in 90 seconds, thus only 2 words per second. The 5 gaps total 43 words, with an 8-word average length (14; 8; 12; 7; and 5 words).

Hoodie: *Yeah they buying twice as much and only getting half as high.*  
Cornrow: *Hmh..*  
D’Angelo: *Yo what was that?*  
Cornrow: *Mmh?*  
D’Angelo: *Castle can’t move like dat, yo, castle move up and down and sideways, like..*  
Hoodie: *Nah, we ain’t playing dat.*  
Cornrow: *Yuh, look at de board, we playing checkers...*  
D’Angelo: *[sniggering laugh] Checkers?*  
Cornrow: *Yeah, checkers.*  
D’Angelo: *[laugh] Yo, why y’all playing checkers on a chess set?*  
Cornrow: *Why you give a shit? Ain’t we got no checkers...*  
D’Angelo: *[sitting down] Yeah but, yo, chess is a better game, yo.*  
Hoodie: *so?*  
D’Angelo: *[now seated, snickering] Nah, hold up, hold up. Y’all don’t know how to play chess, do you?*

#### 4.1 State of Play

This TV drama is a thriller set in London, in which a politician’s life becomes increasingly complex after his research assistant is found dead, probably murdered. The politician’s name is Stephen Collins, and that of his dead research assistant is Sonia Baker. In this clip, a number of young newspaper journalists are sharing information in the Editor’s office, trying to piece together the facts and motives. The dialogue I want you to pay attention to starts within ten seconds of the opening of this clip...

(2) [voice-over, while young man walks through open office]

Editor: *For god’s sake ... he looks like he’s trying to catch a bus!*  
[door opens, Dan enters conference room]  
Dan Foster: *Sorry, are you..waiting for me? I just had to double-check some stuff.. the chronology of Sonia Baker’s employment records ... right. The interview with Stephen Collins happened on the 10th of April, alright. The letter confirming she got the job was posted on the 25th of April, but ... [wheezy laugh] a whole month before any of that on the 25th of March, she told Sheena Gough she was going to work for Stephen Collins.*  
Cal: *Could Sheena Gough have got the dates mixed up?*  
Dan Foster: *That was my first thought, but this was discussed at Sonia’s birthday party.*  
Helen: *25th March.*

- Dan Foster: *Exactly what I asked, specifically, the job with Stephen Collins? Yes!*  
 Editor: *And Stephen Collins told you that he never met her, until she came to work in his office.*  
 Cal: *Yeah.*  
 Helen: *I just spoke to his previous researcher Judy Mitchell. She was unexpectedly offered a better job at the COI.*  
 Cal: *Fine ... If Collins shoe-horned her into that job ... No hang on ... If Stephen Collins lied to me, ever ... No ... you ... I know what you're thinking. What if she blackmailed him? Don't yuh? Don't yuh?*

Twenty-four subjects were tested, all educated young adults, almost all unfamiliar with both series; four were non-native speakers of English. As indicated earlier, each subject's transcription for each of the 10 segments was rated, with regard to the *lexical* content of the target, for accuracy of sense; i.e., reasonable paraphrase lost the subject no marks. A mark out of 5 was given for each segment (on the grounds that there were roughly five lexical items in each blanked-out segment). Often, even the non-native speakers scored 5 out of 5 per segment, so that total scores, per clip were often not far from the maximum score of 25. The latter, of course, may not equate with total comprehension, but suggests that if these "spot checks" of verbal understanding are reliable, any difficulties did not stem from the linguistic code alone. A typical output for the test is the following in Table 1.

Scores of 5 out of 5, to reiterate, do not mean that Subject 11 produced a "perfect" transcription for 9 of 10 segments. To take segment 4 of *The Wire* as an example, the subject wrote *playing checkers on a chess board* whereas as can be seen above D'Angelo actually says *playing checkers on a chess set*; but such close paraphrase was judged as signalling comprehension (the Subject's wording actually makes more sense than D'Angelo's). Subject 11, by my rating system, only had significant difficulties with the first *Wire* segment, where they wrote: *have a new [undecipherable: bag?] the wall*. This was judged sufficiently far from the target (*we have a new package tomorrow*) to be scored at 2 out of 5.

As might have been expected, anything markedly slang or vernacular or idiomatic caused most difficulty, even in the slower-delivered *State of Play* dialogue. Thus when at the end of the latter scene Cal speculates *If Collins shoe-horned her into that job*, this caused aberrant transcripts even in otherwise good transcribers:

**Table 1.** A typical output for the test

Subject	11					
total	/25					
<i>The Wire</i>	2	5	5	5	5	22
<i>State of Play</i>	5	5	5	5	5	25

*If Collins hold onto that job; so if Collins, she want the job ...* But some transcriptions I decided to treat as reflecting "full" comprehension, thus marked at 5, even if a strange nonce-word was used; e.g., one native speaker among the second set of subjects who transcribed this sentence as *if Collin's shoe-holed her into that job* was still scored at 5.

Total scores, across the 24 subjects--where a perfect score per clip would be 600 (25 marks  $\times$  24 subjects) -- were 548 for *State of Play* (91% accuracy) and 494 for *The Wire* (82% accuracy). There were only small deviations, in individual subjects' scores, from these averages -- with the exception of the four non-native subjects, who had lower scores on both clips (one of them being the only informant to have a lower score for *State of Play* than for *The Wire*: 9 out of 25 vs. 10 out of 25). And we must note that all these scores are based on a test condition that in at least one respect is profoundly unlike the normal situation: each clip was shown to the Subjects *twice* over, in rapid succession. On a once-only presentation, scores for both clips might have been significantly lower, and there might have been a larger gap between the scores on the two clips.

My prediction was that the paraphrase score for passages from *The Wire* would be significantly lower than for *The State of Play*, and to that extent would reflect lower levels of comprehension of the dialogue, even though one might easily argue that comprehension of the entire communicational *event* is effected by the integration of several modes and numerous factors, with "transparency" of the dialogue being only one of these. After completing the tests, Subjects routinely remarked on the "difficulty" of *The Wire's* dialogue, while saying they found that in *The State of Play* clip quite easy to follow. Some such checking procedure is useful to discount the possibility that, for instance, *The Wire* is *perceived* as easy even if transcription scores are depressed, which would have been an interesting but counter-intuitive finding.

In practice I have been able to do no more here than arrive at what could be a step on the way to identifying a notional figure reflecting incomplete dialogue-comprehension: where viewers score higher than 90% on tests such as the one described, reasonably full dialogue-understanding might be assumed; where they score below 85%, something less than full understanding may be indicated.

## 5. Scripted repetition as aid to comprehension

If the incomprehensibility of a significant amount of the characters' speech is partly confirmed, I believe it is also partly mitigated by a higher level of duplication of speech moves than would ordinarily be found in TV series of this kind. Even with multiple story lines, 600+ minutes of film per series allowed plenty of

scope for such repetition, as did the slowness of pace, the “piece by piece” building of the plot itself and the case being made by the police in the story, who are working to “checkmate” Avon Barksdale. The duplications, in simple terms, often enable a viewer to grasp the sense on the second encounter despite missing it the first time. And yet the duplications feel quite naturalistic or life-like; and indeed they may be, even though we know they are scripted and designed to meet genre-related narratological goals: the craftedness of everything in the script and filming need not preclude the dialogue also being life-like.

Many kinds of repetition are a core characteristic of workplace discourse and everyday conversation (see, e.g., Holmes’s and Stubbe’s 2003 study of workplace discourse) but normally is minimised in theatre dialogue and film dialogue (so that their presence – e.g. in the plays of Pinter, Beckett and Mamet – is noticed as exceptional). My claim rests on there being more repetition of phrases and sentences in *The Wire* (to aid comprehension) than in comparable TV crime series. Now counting repetition of moves or phrases, particularly where partial reformulations may well be involved, is not easy to do, even with text-analysis software (which is best at counting identical forms). Still, single-word repetitions may be a pointer, and I lack the space for a more thorough corpus stylistic analysis here (but see Bednarek 2010: Chapter 4, for an interesting corpus-analytic examination of the language of a TV series). If one takes all the dialogue in a single 50-minute episode of *The Wire* (such as “The Cost”, from series 1, retrievable from <http://www.siliconvalleyfrogs.com/thewire/ep10.html>) and produces a frequency list of its 5,000 words, it is apparent that there is a high rate of repetition both of the main character’s names and of key lexical items. Wmatrix analysis (Rayson 2009) identifies the following as the 13 most repeated lexical items in the transcript, listed here with their number of occurrences and percentage of the entire episode’s word-count after each item:

*got* 39 .63, *know* 35 .56, *right* 29 .47, *shit* 28 .45, *get* 26 .42, *man* 26 .42, *yeah* 23 .37, *like* 20 .32, *see* 19 .31, *go* 19 .31, *male* 19 .31, *want* 18 .29, and *fuck* 18 .29.

As a group – and of course the cut-off after 13 items is fairly arbitrary – these 319 instances comprise 6.38% of the 5,000 words of dialogue in this episode. This may in part reflect a deliberately limited vocabulary size (and re-use of relatively core vocabulary; on some aspects of this topic, see Webb and Rodgers 2009a and 2009b). By comparison, in a 50-minute episode of *House* or *State of Play*, or of 5,000 words of dialogue in realist-naturalist theatre, how repetitively used are the 13 most frequently-used lexical words, and what percentage of the whole episode’s word-count do they comprise? To effect a quick comparison, I downloaded from the internet (<http://www.tvtdb.com/house/transcripts/2x05.php>) the no-doubt

imperfect transcript of a randomly selected one-hour episode of the *House* series, called "Daddy's Boy" (originally aired 8 Nov 2005: episode 5, from series 2). After stripping away all the non-spoken material, including character-identifications and scene directions (approx 1800 words), the remaining transcript comprises approximately 6,000 words and is reasonably comparable in extent of words to a *Wire* episode. Using Wmatrix to analyse the text, the following emerged as the top 13 lexical items, with frequencies indicated:

*just* 42 .55; *know* 28 .37; *need* 20 .26; *yeah* 19 .25; *well* 19 .25; *all* 19 .25; *got* 18 .24; *get* 17 .22; *dinner* 16 .21; *one* 16 .21; *son* 16 .21; *right* 15 .20; and *kid* 15 .20.

These 260 tokens amount to just 4.33% of the 6,000 words. Thus, for these two comparable episodes at least, *The Wire's* most repeated lexical items are noticeably more repeated than *House's* are: despite being one-sixth shorter, its commonest lexis is more repeated in absolute terms (319 items to *House's* 260 tokens) and is a larger proportion of the relevant whole (6.38% compared to *House's* 4.33%).<sup>4</sup>

A look at any sequence of dialogue also shows how the repetitions are not evenly distributed across the episode, but cluster in handfuls of adjacent turns, where they facilitate the viewer-listener's comprehension. Consider the following brief exchange, from *The Wire* episode mentioned above, "The Cost", episode 10, where I have highlighted the local repetitions of lexical items and names by bolding. Here, a detective named Troy "Wig" Wiggins visits the surveillance team in their underground offices, to tell them he has arrested a man called Blocker who is offering information about Avon Barksdale in hopes of escaping prosecution. Wig is immediately recognised by Kima Greggs, a former colleague:

(3)

Wig: *Been hell looking for you people. What the hell's the name of this unit anyway?*

Greggs: *What up, Wig?*

Wig: *Aw, shit, Kima in the house. What up?*

Greggs: *State Police, C.I.D., out of Pikesville. Name of Troy Wiggins, but pay no attention to the man, 'cause he about 90–95% pure bullshit.*

Wig: *Kima, she just talk like that 'cause I had her when she was good.*

4. The transcripts have similar type-token ratios (approximately 5 tokens per type), but my interest here is not in whether an episode from *The Wire* is more or less lexically repetitive in general than episodes from other TV series. Rather, I am interested in whether the *most repeated* lexical words or phrases in *The Wire* are more repeated than is the case in a reference episode and by extension, typical TV dramas.

- Greggs: [who is openly lesbian] *Shit, you motherfucker turned me the other way.*
- Wig: *Shit, a-ight. Here's the thing, boys and girls. I'm doin' a reverse buy down in Arundel, right? And I get this Westside asshole nibbling on four ounces?*
- McNulty: *A whole four ounces?*
- Wig: *I know, he ain't much, but... I get him in the boat and he starts floppin' around, sayin' he can buy weight from some motherfucker name of Barksdale. I never heard of no Barksdale. And the computer has Avon Barksdale as an active Baltimore city target. So, I go down to city narcotics and Dawson, he sends me down here to see y'all.*
- McNulty: *So, what's the name of your fish?*
- Wig: *Wendell O. as in, oh-shit-I-tried-to-buy-from-a-state-police Blocker.*
- McNulty: *That wouldn't be Orlando Blocker would it?*
- Wig: *Yeah. U on it?*
- McNulty: *Orlando.*

This extract demonstrates the verbal flair of the characterisation, in the way that (the audience having actually seen Wig entrap Blocker earlier in the episode) Wig here describes the business of luring “this Westside asshole” into “nibbling” on four ounces of drugs, and goes on to talk of getting him in the boat where he flops around, thus using an extended metaphor of catching a fish without actually using the word *fish*. That core term of the vehicle is only supplied, subsequently, by McNulty. So room is made, in the diegesis, for entertainingly creative language use in the course of informing dialogue, which extends to a disambiguation of Blocker’s middle initial (not as Oscar, as in orthodox police radio communications, but the more amusing “O. as in, *oh-shit-I-tried-to-buy-from-a-state-police*”). And that playful “decoding” of the O. cleverly summarises and repeats in literal terms the core of the story Wig has just narrated using an extended figure.

In this section I have suggested that in *The Wire*’s dialogue there is a relatively extensive resort to repetition (especially of most frequent lexis and to some extent of the speech moves within which that repeated lexis appears) which compensates for or mitigates the otherwise threateningly high level of difficulty, if not incomprehensibility, that viewers may encounter as they process the characters’ speech. The following section turns to some of the non-verbal features which are carefully deployed in the dialogue scenes, and explores how these, too, help viewers to understand what is going on.

## 6. The multimodal integration of the dialogue

In this section I want to turn at least briefly to some of the important *non-verbal* semiotics that are profoundly integrated with the verbal signs and participate with them in creating the interactions and events that the viewer observes. I do not pretend that what follows is either full or adequate as a multimodal analysis (see recent work by McIntyre 2009 and Piazza 2010 for good examples of this, supplementing authoritative overviews such as Kress 2009; Kress and van Leeuwen 2001; and Bordwell and Thompson 2001; also notable is the comprehensive volume edited by Harper, Eisentraut and Doughty 2009; even though, despite its title, it does not explore speech or dialogue in film). Rather this section is an attempt to identify some of the non-verbal cotemporal phenomena which most directly combines with the verbal material, to signify. Here I look again at the "chess lesson" episode, the opening of which was used earlier in the comprehension-transcription test, continuing my transcription (see Note 1 for conventions) where the earlier passage left off. The non-verbal accompaniments to the talk exchange are critical to the viewers' understanding of its import.

(4)

D'Angelo: [now seated, snickering] *Nah, hold up, hold up. Y'all don't know how to play chess, do you?*

Bodie: *So?*

D'Angelo: *So? So nothing man. Look I'll teach y'all, if y'all wanna learn* [starts moving the pieces back to the starting-positions in chess]

Bodie: [waving his right hand horizontally over the table, as if to stop D'Angelo interfering] *Come on, man, Nah, come on ... We right in the middle of a game*

Wallace: [moving both his hands forward over the chess board as if to remonstrate with Bodie's hand, and looking straight at Bodie] *Calm down, chill out I wanna see this!*

Bodie: [making 'street' gestures now with both his hands, including a 'diving' motion with his left forearm, before slouching back on his chair, signalling acquiescence] *No!*

D'Angelo: [firmly, but not confrontationally] *Y'all can't be playing no checkers on no chess board, yo*

Bodie: [now alone in shot, Close Up] *A' yite! A' yite! Alright, man!*

D'Angelo: *Now look. Check it. It's simple ... It's simple.* [D'A alone in shot here for the next 10 seconds] *See dis?* [he picks up and kisses the king; camera remains CU on D'Angelo, while his head turns to address now Bodie, now Wallace, while camera pans slowly to the left]. *Dis de king pim, ayite? Now*

*he da man! You get the other dude's king, you got the game. But he trying to get your king too, so you gotta protect it. [change to shot with Wallace and D'Angelo in MCU] Now the king, [cut to CU of D'Angelo's hand on the King on the board] he move one space, any direction he damn choose cuz, [cut to same Wallace and D'A shot in MCU as before, D'Angelo facing towards Bodie] he's the king. Like dis, dis, dis. Alright? But he aint got no hustle. The rest of these motherfuckers on the team, they got his back and they run so deep, he really ain't gotta do shit. [over the last 10 words here, we hear the sound of a helicopter overhead, possibly involved in surveillance, which may prompt viewers to think of how police helicopters involved in surveillance and tracking have a different kind of 'hustle', designed to protect officers on the streets]*

Bodie: *[alone in shot, MCU] Kinda like your uncle.*

D'Angelo: *[now alone in shot, MCU] "Yeah, like my uncle."*

Wallace: *[alone in shot, MCU, broad smile and nod of understanding/appreciation]*

D'Angelo: *[MCU, in shot, but with Wallace, leaning in, partly visible on left side of frame] Now you see this? [He picks up the Queen, moves her freely around the board]. This the Queen. She smart, she fierce. She move any way she want as far as she want. And she, is the go-get-shit-done piece [he uses the Queen to knock over one of the opponent pieces, with audible 'clink', thus showing what 'getting shit done' entails...]*

Wallace: *Remind me of Stringer. [laughter]*

D'Angelo: *And this over here is the castle, it's like the stash, it move like this and like this.*

Bodie: *Dogs, stash don't move, man!*

D'Angelo: *Come on, you think, how many times we move the stash house this week? A right? And every time we move the stash, we gotta move a little muscle with it to protect it.*

Bodie: *True, true. You right. All right, what about them little bald-headed bitches right there? All right.*

D'Angelo: *These right here? These are the pawns. They like the soldiers. They move like this. One space forward only. Except when they fight, and then it's like, like this [demonstrates sideways movement]. And they like the front lines. They be out in the field."*

Wallace: *"So how do you get to be the king?"*

D'Angelo: *"It ain't like that. See, the king stay the king. A 'ight? Everything stay who he is, 'cept for the pawns. Now if a pawn make it all the way down to the other dude's side, he get to be queen. And like I said, the queen ain't no bitch. She got all the moves."*

Bodie: *A 'ight. So, if I make it to de udder end, I win.*

- D’Angelo: *If you catch the other dude’s king, and trap it, then you win.*  
Bodie: *Alright, but if I make it to the end, ... I’m top dog.*  
D’Angelo: *Nah, yo, it ain’t like that look. The pawns, man? In the game? They get capped quick. They be out the game early.”*  
Bodie: *“Unless they some smart-ass pawns.”*

In my transcription above, by including comments on shot composition and characters’ movements, I have tried to indicate how important the latter are to the conveying of the content ostensibly carried in their verbal contributions alone. Facial expressions are usually singled out at this point, and they are certainly important in the dialogue above. But here I would particularly emphasise the importance of *hands*, especially D’Angelo’s hands, touching the chess pieces, holding them up, moving them around, knocking them over, as a vehicle of communication. I invite the reader to watch the chess scene (e.g. on *youtube*), and imagine the whole being performed with D’Angelo’s hands invariably out of shot. A hugely different, and diegetically-impoverished, effect would be achieved.

As the immensely catchy theme-music concludes, with the blues singer repeating “Way down in the hole”, the scene opens on the “hole” that is the by now familiar to us low-rise housing projects of the Baltimore west side: ugly rows of town-houses, separated by untended grassy areas, around which a scattering of young men is sitting out in the sun, apparently idling away the time. A music track is playing (quite different from the theme music): a simple insistent rhythm and an indeterminate melody which plays over a panning shot. Then the camera fixes on D’Angelo, who is walking towards and calling out (*Yo! What’s up with the shop?*) to his two subordinates, whose names are Wallace and Bodie. By the time that the sixth turn of talk has been reached (*Yeah. Yeah man unless we stepped on shit*) the music track has ceased – it has run for less than 20 seconds – and only the “natural” ambient sounds of the projects can be heard around the dialogue. As shifts in the non-speech sound accompaniment suggest, sounds and changes in accompanying sound can serve many purposes. They help narrate the mood and mood-changes that are also being conveyed in the dialogue, such as a shift in event focus, or an adjustment in the dialogue from the routine to the crucial, or from the public to the intimate, or from one predominant character emotion to another.

Similarly indirectly contributory to grasp of the characters’ speech will be whether or not a speaker’s turn of talk is delivered and heard when the speaker is in frame or not, and whether, in frame, they are shown in medium close up or not, with some at least of their face (and lips) visible. The simplest or default option, arguably, is for the speaker to be in frame, in MCU, full face shot from the front; that applies when Bodie says *they buying twice as much and only getting half as*

*high*. But when D'Angelo challenges his two assistants, saying *Yo what was that?* and adding *Castle can't move like dat, yo, castle move up and down and sideways*, all three men are in shot, together with the chess board, the latter set up on a broken (backless) chair. This greatly assists the audience's interpreting of D'Angelo's *that* and *dat*. But the shift in shot possibly also helps the audience recognise the topic shift (from talking about the drugs business to talking about chess).

From the camera's perspective, now medium long-shot, Wallace (on a low stool) and Bodie (hunched over, on a kitchen chair) are facing each other to the left and right, respectively, of the chess/checkers board, with D'Angelo standing and looking down from the other side of the board. This reflects and meets specific diegetic considerations: the viewer needs to see D'Angelo noticing that the men are moving these chess pieces in incorrect (for chess) ways. So a framing in which Wallace's movement of the castle is notionally visible, along with D'Angelo's bodily protest reaction – his right hand moves to reinforce his remonstrance that *Castle can't move like dat* – is desirable. These things could be done with rapid cuts between shots more tightly focussed now on Wallace, now on D'Angelo, and so on, but that treatment arguably would make the engagement too personal or intimate, and as if the camera, unlike D'Angelo, knew in advance that Wallace was going to move the castle incorrectly. Less “knowing” camera movements ensure that we do not notice the “deviant” chess-playing before D'Angelo does. In addition, D'Angelo's point is in part that if you play with chess pieces on a chess-board in the public arena of the housing estate then you should do the right thing and play the much better game, chess. The more inclusive, wider-angle shot is thus part of the dialogue along with D'Angelo's words and Bodie's. Aligned with D'Angelo, the camera sites this exchange in the context of the housing, the bright glare of the sun, the barren unloved setting, and all this motivates D'Angelo's implicit argument that there is more to be learned, more to be got out of using chess pieces to play chess than merely to play checkers. The particular ways that the camera frames D'Angelo, integrated with the content of his words, indicate his character – and present him as someone not content with “what is given” in West Baltimore project life.

The “parable” that follows, in which D'Angelo explains to Bodie and Wallace how most of the pieces can move and what they can do, is already celebrated in *Wire* lore. Bodie and Wallace, in particular, repeatedly see telling analogies between how the chess pieces function and how elements in Barksdale's drug-trafficking “kingdom” function: Barksdale as the king who may get trapped but “stays the king”; Stringer as the Queen with “all the moves”, the castle as the stash, the pawns as the foot-soldiers who “be out the game early” unless, as Bodie remarks, “they some smart-ass pawns”. It is a classic opportunity for character-reflexivity, bringing texture and depth to the entire exchange. Checkers, by contrast, takes

little time to explain, has no hierarchical complexity or division of functions as in chess, so that it *could not* be used in or be the vehicle for an insightful reflection on the drug-dealing hierarchy. And that is why, taking everything into consideration and allowing the needs of special clienteles as exceptions (the very young, the mentally-impaired, those in some form of recovery) D’Angelo is right to affirm that chess “is a better game”. Even while Wallace asks the otherwise reasonable question *Why you give a shit?* There is a richness and a “fit”, between language, gesture, attitude and character, and the developing trajectories of these characters lives (some of which, of course, is only confirmed many episodes later) which is anything but accidental. All this amounts to saying there is a *design* in every interacting mode or strand of semiosis, from the variably comprehensible dialogue to the framing and focussing and length of shots within which that dialogue is embedded; and because the design here does not *feel* contrived or calculated or formulaic to the viewer, the whole is treated in some quarters as art.

## 7. Conclusions

TV film dialogue in *The Wire*, no less than in previous and other contemporary serials, is an artfully-constructed selective simulation of natural realistic speech. It is “unnaturally” coherent and focussed, although I suggest this is at first less apparent to us, as we struggle to catch the meaning of turns of talk that are “thrown away” or indistinctly delivered, rather than theatrically pointed up and demonstrably spoken *to* and *for* the viewer (Chion 1994). The artful design and coherence link back to a very simple fundamental goal (which by definition cannot precede and govern genuinely casual natural conversation between different parties each with their own agenda): the telling of a narrative, one which might absorb, entertain, inspire, and move the viewer. Those who have devised this dialogue have treated its function in the overarching narrativity as primary: the talk’s role in telling a story, in reporting individuals experiencing change. That, more than the fictionality, artistic status, or (normally) prior existence in writing of the product seems to be responsible for the succinct focussedness of most dialogue in film narratives. I make this claim, about plot-and-character considerations as primary cause for the partial reconfiguring of filmic speech away from natural speech, because it is easy to find or imagine examples of dialogue that are fictional, or artistic, or written, or all three, but are still prolix, rambling, repetitive, or directionless. And it is also easy to find examples of dialogue with claims to being nonfictional which have the kind of coherence and focus we find in film narratives (e.g. direct speech recall in autobiographies). At the core of any story or narrative (the terms are interchangeable for me) are situated individuals undergoing change, conditions we

summarise as “characters + plotted events”. Consider again the “checkers to chess” scene examined earlier; at first glance this appears to be a free-standing “set piece”, a little bravura section that might have appeared anywhere in the first half-dozen or more episodes of the series. But on further reflection, almost every speaker turn contributes, in the course of describing the pieces’ functions, summary indications of the present and future experiences of a variety of people in the Barksdale gang: it is radically proleptic as well as characterising. It is characterising, too, of the three men speaking: D’Angelo, a maverick “good person” among the drugs gang at least as much as McNulty is among the police, whose words may suggest that he yearns for unrealistic levels of change (*do* his lieutenants switch to playing chess, the better game, at his enjoining?) and harbours doomed aspirations; Bodie, thoughtful also but self-protective, a good listener and learner, a likely survivor; and Wallace, the quick but frustrated learner (more hostile than Bodie to D’Angelo’s interference at first, but rapidly more interested in learning the chess moves than Bodie is). These characterisations have to come early in the series, so as not to be redundant, besides helping to establish characters whom the audience can begin to understand and care about, and even feel some empathy for. And why are the men playing checkers? Because the drug supply has run low, itself a motivation for action, and they are idling. In multiple respects, the scene and its dialogue fit very fully and richly the narrative demands for event- and character-development (see further the chapters in this volume by Bednarek and Mandala on character development and by Bubel on character relations).

As a result of its crafted coherence, TV/film dialogue is usually exceptionally Griceanly cooperative (relevant, brief, orderly, informative, truthful) – it is more Gricean than ordinary conversation, made to be such as is required in the known direction of the narration being undertaken. Piazza’s chapter (this volume) shows how horror films regularly and strategically violate those pragmatic maxims. *The Wire*, too, creatively resists our pragmatic conversational norms. Its dialogue is frequently less than fully cooperative, but in ways that are neither perverse nor alienating nor frustrating (for a significantly large – not all! – viewers), but curiously engaging and enjoyable. Where decoding the bare speech stream on its own frequently fails, the integration of richly-exploited signifying in multiple modalities takes over the task, together with a discreet use of forms of repetition and recapitulation, dispersed through the narrative discourse.

## Appendix

Instructions to subjects:

Please listen carefully to the first few turns of talk in this scene from *The Wire*.

The talk begins at about 12 seconds into the clip, right after a couple of sweeping camera pan shots of low-rise houses and grass.

You will see that 3 characters are involved: D’Angelo, a man who walks up to two of his gang members and remains standing while they are seated, either side of a chess board. The two seated males are easily distinguished by appearance: one (who speaks most) is wearing a hoodie, the other is bareheaded, with his hair trimmed in what is often called a “cornrow” style. For convenience they are named accordingly below. D’Angelo speaks first, then Hoodie (Bodie) speaks, then Cornrow (Wallace) says something, and then Hoodie replies. I will play the clip twice only, and immediately after the second playing, I would like you to write down as fully as you can, in the incomplete transcripts below, exactly what the characters said at those points where I have put blank underlining.

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