Applied Linguistics, 2024, XX, 1–16
https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amae081
Advance access publication 3 December 2024
Article

'We can fix this. Let's get you out of trouble, son': an analysis of the transitivity and appraisal patterns in the Netflix TV show *When They See Us*

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The fascination with crime, as evident from its extensive coverage in novels and on television, remains a topic of interest for the general public. This fascination often elicits responses rooted in deeply held values and can significantly impact individuals. Consequently, people's attitudes toward interrogations, trials, and punishments may be strongly influenced by the discourse surrounding crime as portrayed in fictional texts. The primary objective of this article is to contribute to the body of research that has delved into the influential role of ideology in shaping narratives centred on crime stories. Specifically, through a linguistic analysis of TRANSITIVITY and APPRAISAL patterns in the first episode of the TV series *When They See Us*, this study addresses two fundamental research questions: 1) What does a TRANSITIVITY analysis of process and participant types reveal about the construction of 'a criminal character' and how may this contribute to a presupposition of guilt? 2) What can an APPRAISAL analysis tell us about the evaluative portrayal of 'a criminal character' and how may this contribute to a presupposition of guilt? The aim is to provide insights into how the discursive representation of specific social groups, exemplified here by black Hispanic teenagers, simultaneously reflects and influences public perceptions, particularly when the discourse emanates from authoritative figures.

Introduction

As the huge amount of coverage devoted to crime fiction in novels and on television well testifies, crime holds an enduring fascination for the general public: on the one hand, it appears to incite responses influenced by deeply rooted values; on the other hand, individuals' ongoing exposure to indirect encounters with a crime can profoundly influence their lives (Douthwaite and Ulrike 2022: 1). A primary consequence of this is that people's attitudes towards phenomena such as interrogations, trials, and punishments, are likely to be strongly determined by the discourses surrounding crime as they appear in fictional texts.

Texts, however, are far from being neutral and, thus, rarely offer a neutral representation of the world: instead, they are often guided by ideologies and serve to reproduce and reinforce worldviews, inequalities, and struggles that we usually encounter in our everyday lives in the 'real world' (Fairclough 1989; Wodak and Michael 2009; Jeffries 2010). More specifically, the purported criminals within the narrative of crime stories may be represented through strategies that serve the interests of some groups at the expense of others. For example, certain groups may be negatively portrayed by the discourses construed by those more powerful, including those who control the press (see Fowler et al. 1979; Fowler 1991; Fairclough 1995; Machin and Sarah 2006; Mayr 2008). This is likely to be even more critical when the narratives under investigation are fictionalized retellings of true stories, given that the general public may have preconceived ideas about those cases.

Since language plays a pivotal role in this process, it is crucial to investigate how particular linguistic patterns may contribute to the construction and reinforcement of distinct ideologies, including for example how some groups (e.g. alleged criminals) are portrayed by other groups (e.g. the police) through specific language strategies. Here, ideologies are defined as 'a coherent and relatively stable set of beliefs and values' (Wodak and Michael 2009: 8) attached to the text worlds (Jeffries 2010: 384, as cited in; Douthwaite and Ulrike 2022: 3).

Parting from these assumptions, the present paper aims to investigate how language is used to construe a narrative of guilt in a specific case study, namely the TV show *When They See Us* (2019). It is crucial to take into account that like all television discourse, this show is regulated by a 'double plane' of communication (Piazza, Bednarek and Rossi 2011: 1), involving, on the one hand, the subjects in the story and, on the other hand, the external viewers. Communication, in other words, takes place at two levels: one of them, the diegetic one, is formed by the fictional interactions among the characters on the screen, while the other one, the extradiegetic, involves the viewers as receivers of the interactions on the screen (Bednarek 2023: 8). Viewers are thus to be considered as 'overhearers' (Bubel 2011) or 'eavesdroppers' (Richardson 2010) for whom the fictional dialogue in *When They See Us* is designed: more specifically, the interactions occurring at the diegetic level are there to show the viewers (at the extradiegetic level) how a specific group, the police, uses language to construct a narrative of guilt that would ultimately frame a group of teenagers as criminals. Additionally, since the show is a true crime documentary, the audience is likely to have prior familiarity with the events depicted, despite their awareness that this is a TV production involving writers, producers, actors, and other telecinematic parameters.

The show 'When They See Us' is a miniseries created by the American filmmaker Ava DuVernay, which premiered on 31 May 2019, on Netflix. The series depicts the events of the 'Central Park Jogger Case', an incident that took place in Central Park, New York, in April 1989 and which led to the wrongful conviction of five Black and Latino male teenagers: Kevin Richardson, Antron McCray, Raymond Santana, Yusef Salaam, and Korey Wise. The four episodes span a quarter of a century, with each episode exploring a different moment in the protagonists' experience. In the initial episode, a Caucasian woman, Patricia Meili, is assaulted and raped in Central Park. The main characters of the series, who had been present in the park that night, are taken into police custody for questioning. The intentions of the police to construct a false narrative against the teenagers, despite a lack of evidence, become clear very early on during this episode. Furthermore, as viewers, we witness how the characters are coerced into confessing to a crime that they did not commit as well as encouraged to frame each other for the crimes that took place on that fateful evening.

We employ two theoretical frameworks here to investigate how language is used by the authorities to construe this narrative of guilt, namely the *Transitivity model* (Halliday and Christian 2004, 2014) and the subdomains of Affect and Judgement of the *Appraisal model* (Martin and Peter 2005; Bednarek 2008). Both of these pertain to the realm of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL henceforth) (see section entitled "Background to the Central Park Jogger case" below). As evidenced above, we address two research questions in this article, which are as follows:

1. What does a TRANSITIVITY analysis of process and participant types reveal about the construction of 'a criminal character' and how may this contribute to a presupposition of guilt?
2. What can an APPRAISAL analysis tell us about the evaluative portrayal of 'a criminal character' and how may this contribute to a presupposition of guilt?

Due to space constraints, the study draws on the analysis and findings of episode 1 specifically, in view of the fact that this episode proves somewhat significant; that is, it encompasses the vast majority of interactions between the main characters (i.e. the five boys mentioned above) and the authorities during their initial interrogations, right up until the point when each of the teens are charged.

Research into televisual discourse and the representation of crime

Over the past 15–20 years, an increasing number of academic disciplines have engaged with the realm of TV series, approaching it from diverse perspectives. For instance, Montemurro (2008) has explored the sociological implications of these cultural products, examining their impact on individuals' behaviours and ways of interpreting the world. On the other hand, Orosz et al. (2016) have investigated the psychological aspects related to screen-based behaviour, aiming to understand the obsessive or positive reactions associated with series consumption. Narratologists like Pfister (1991) have outlined the various communicative functions of language within dramatic situations, while stylistically-oriented linguists such as Toolan (2011) have compared TV shows to traditional narratives, scrutinizing their selective and recurring stylistic features.

In terms of linguistics-oriented perspectives, researchers have primarily focussed on studying the functions of specific phenomena in TV series. For example, Queen (2015) and Lippi-Green (2012) have examined the role of linguistic variation employed for the construal of ideology and characterization; Bruti and Vignozzi (2021) have focussed on audiovisual translation; Minutella (2020) has studied the influence of English on dubbed Anglo-American TV series across time; Kozloff (2000) has looked at the function of film dialogue. Lastly, Bednarek has made significant contributions to the field using corpus techniques to investigate important elements such as ideology (2010), characterization (2012), and the multifunctionality of taboo words (2019), to quote but a few.

The aim of the present paper is to make a contribution to the study of television discourse by focussing on a genre that, to the best of our knowledge, is still under-researched in linguistic studies and, more specifically, forensic linguistics and/or crime fiction. Notable exceptions to this include Shubert (2018), who adopts a cognitive linguistic approach to analyse verbal humour, as well as Ibrahim (2019), who uses a combination of corpus-based and qualitative approaches to investigate the 'framing' of criminals in fiction on serial killers. In the latter study, Ibrahim (2019) notes that these approaches combined serve to identify particular linguistic patterns and strategies, such as *naming* and *describing*, and comment on how modality or metaphor are also used with specific purposes in mind. In a similar vein to our own study, they also examine the TRANSITIVITY patterns within their dataset and explain that material processes were often employed to cite instances of violence when used in relation to the actions of the 'fictional killer'. Another piece of research was carried out by Machin and Mayr (2013), who applied Critical Discourse Analysis to the study of crime misrepresentation in the show *Crimewatch* and, as we do here, they also examined the TRANSITIVITY patterns in their corpus. Among their findings, they report that relational processes were a common occurrence in their data and, when employed, revealed frequent references to the mental condition and character of known killers such as Glen Tranter. A fourth exception is a study by Gregoriou (2007), who takes into account different types of 'deviance' within this genre, while lastly and most recently, we may cite the edited volume by

Douhwaithe and Tabbert (2022), which explores the analysis of crime-related language across a range of different disciplines.

As outlined above, this article aims to take the study of televisual crime fiction one small step further by focussing on a specific aspect of the show, namely the linguistic construction of blame to which the innocent protagonists are subjected, when they find themselves accused and wrongly convicted, and forced to spend several years of their young lives incarcerated for crimes that they did not commit. While we are aware that the portrayal of the characters at the diegetic level is fictional and that their language is scripted, we believe that the language they use has a mimetic nature on the grounds that it is extensively informed by the actual men who lived this experience and, thereby, is considered pragmatically plausible. With this in mind, our analysis is designed to provide insights into and shed light on the interactive mechanisms of authentic talk (see Piazza 2011: 86; Dynel 2017: 464) for the audience at the extradiegetic level.

In the rest of the article, we hope to demonstrate how a TRANSITIVITY and APPRAISAL analysis can serve to expose the finer details of texts and, in doing so, shed light on crucial strategies that may play a significant role in the construction of blame and, ultimately, have the potential to alter the fate of a suspected criminal, who may or may not be guilty of criminal activities.

Methodology

Background to the Central Park Jogger Case

The Central Park Jogger Case, also termed the *Central Park Five Case* at the time and, nowadays, more accurately referred to as the *Exonerated Five Case* is, without question, among the most high-profile criminal cases that resulted in a wrongful conviction in US history. The case stretches back to the late 1980s when five young black teenagers, Antron McCray, Kevin Richardson, Yusef Salaam, Raymond Santana, and Korey Wise were wrongfully accused of the sexual assault and attempted murder of a white female banker, Patricia Meili, who was randomly attacked while she was jogging through Central Park on the evening of 19 April 1989. The five teenagers were questioned together with dozens of others on the night of the assault and, ultimately, charged by police and taken to court. Two separate trials were held, with the first commencing in June 1990 and leading to the wrongful conviction of Antron McCray, Yusef Salaam, and Raymond Santana, who were sentenced as minors to 5–10 years in prison. Meanwhile, the second trial began in late October of the same year resulting in the wrongful convictions of Kevin Richardson and Korey Wise. While 14-year-old Kevin Richardson was also tried as a minor, 16-year-old Korey Wise was no longer classed as a child and, therefore, instead received a sentenced of 5–15 years in an adult prison. Although four of the five boys were released from prison in the late 1990s, it took until 2002 for their wrongful conviction to be exposed and, thus, their long-awaited exoneration. As already highlighted, this particular case was somewhat high profile and received a lot of attention at the time, both within the legal arena but especially in the media (cf. Green 2017; Bartley 2024). That said, since the truth surrounding this case has been exposed, it has not only shed light on the issue of wrongful convictions, but simultaneously the prevalence of systemic discrimination in our society and, thus, how this can also contribute to the construal of blame in one's discourse.

Critical discourse analysis

The present article, as briefly outlined in the Introduction, primarily employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA henceforth), although drawing on a Corpus Linguistics (CL henceforth) tool to facilitate both quantitative and qualitative research findings surrounding the discursive representation of the Exonerated Five (formerly known as the Central Park Five) as they are portrayed in *When They See Us*. Many studies have adopted a similar approach (cf. Levon and Paul 2015; Lorenzo-Dus et al. 2020; Gómez-Jiménez and Leanne 2023) in which a blend of CDA and CL, termed *Corpus Assisted Discourse Studies* (cf. Baker et al. 2008; Taylor and Anna 2018), enables researchers to examine the presence of ideologies in discourse of varying sizes (cf. Gillings et al. 2023).

Within the scope of CDA, as a discipline in its own right, there are several different approaches that the analyst may adopt when examining ideology in discourse, including but not limited to the *Discourse-Historical approach* (cf. Wodak and Paul 2005; Wodak and Michael 2009), *Mediated Discourse Analysis* (cf. Scollon and Suzanne Wong 2005) or the *Dialectal-Relational approach* (cf. Fairclough 1995, 2010). In this paper, the latter has been applied, as the most elaborate approach to date. The *Dialectal-Relational approach* derives largely from the work of Fowler et al. (1979), who proposed the notion of *Critical Linguistics* in order to explore, identify, and interpret why certain grammatical and/or lexical items were used in favour of others in any given stretch of discourse; moreover, Fairclough's Dialectal-Relational approach draws heavily on a range of linguistic theories that pertain to the realm of SFL, as we also do for the purposes of analysing our dataset in this article. SFL contends that there are three language metafunctions, namely 1) the ideational metafunction, concerned with the representation of our experiences, 2) the interpersonal metafunction, denoting the social relations that are a reflection of the language we use in social interactions, and 3) the textual metafunction, concerned with how a text is organized in order to ensure coherence (cf. Halliday 1985). As outlined above, the SFL frameworks adopted here are Transitivity (Halliday and Christian 2014), pertaining to the ideational metafunction, and Appraisal (Martin and Peter 2005; Bednarek 2008), which falls within the scope of the interpersonal metafunction. Each of these frameworks are now outlined in Sections entitled "Transitivity" and "Appraisal" below.

Transitivity

To date, two different Transitivity frameworks have been proposed, namely the Cardiff Grammar model proposed by Robin Fawcett (1980), which was subsequently modified by Amy Neale (2002, 2006), and the more widely used Sydney model put forward by Halliday and Matthiessen (2004, 2014). In this paper, we adopt the most recent version of the latter (Halliday and Christian 2014) for the purpose of exploring the extent to which the language patterns employed by the actors who portray the police in this docuseries show signs of a narrative of blame construal of the five teens under investigation in even the very early stages of a case of true crime that later emerged resulting in a wrongful conviction.

The Sydney Transitivity model comprises three general components, namely 1) process types, 2) participant roles, and 3) circumstances. While (1) and (2) are considered core elements of the Transitivity framework and, in fact, the focus in this paper, circumstantial information is instead deemed an optional extra and, as such, will not be dealt with here. To look at each of the core components in more detail, Table 1 below provides an outline of the different categories and subcategories of process types together with their corresponding participant roles. Following this, a brief description of process types and participant roles is provided.

As evidenced in Table 1 above, the transitivity system comprises six process categories, each representing a specific realm of experience. Thus, material processes are concerned with our actions and day-to-day happenings and how these either impact ourselves or others; in terms of participant roles, we may encounter an *Actor* (i.e. the 'doer' of an action), a *Goal* (i.e. the entity that is impacted by an action), a *Recipient* (i.e. the entity that portrays 'the receiver of goods), a *Client* (i.e. the entity that is the beneficiary of a service), a *Scope* (i.e. the area over which the process takes place), and an *Initiator* (i.e. the entity that makes or causes the *Actor* do something). Unlike the material process category, mental processes concern our inner thoughts, emotions, desires, and perceptions and may comprise a *Senser* (i.e. the entity that thinks, feels, perceives, or desires something), a *Phenomenon* (i.e. the entity that is thought, felt, perceived, or desired) and/or an *Inducer* (i.e. the entity that causes the *Senser* to feel, think, perceive, or desire something); meanwhile, relational processes construe the experience of being, becoming or having and consist of two subcategories, namely *relational attributive* and *relational identifying*. The former concerns examples that ascribe a quality to a given entity and, therefore, may encompass a *Carrier* (i.e. the entity that is ascribed an attribute), an *Attribute* (i.e. the quality that is ascribed to a *Carrier*) or an *Attributor* (i.e. the entity that ascribes an *Attribute* to the *Carrier*); the relational identifying subcategory, on the other hand, denotes examples that assign an identity to an entity and, thus, include an *Identifier* (i.e. the entity that identifies a second entity), an *Identified*

Table 1. Process type categories and subcategories together with their corresponding participant roles (Halliday and Christian 2014).

Process types (general categories)					
Material	**Mental**	**Relational**	**Verbal**	**Behavioural**	**Existential**
Process types (subcategories)					
Transformative	*Cognitive*	*(i) Attributive*			
Creative	*Emotive*	*(ii) Identifying*			
	Desiderative				
	Perceptive				
Relational attributive/identifying subcategories					
		Intensive			
		Possessive			
		Circumstantial			
Participant roles (according to process type)					
Actor	*Senser*	*(i) Carrier*	*Sayer*	*Behaver*	*Existent*
Goal	*Phenomenon*	*(i) Attribute*	*Receiver*	*Behaviour*	
Recipient	*Inducer*	*(i) Attributor*	*Verbiage*		
Client		*(ii) Identifier*	*Target*		
Scope		*(ii) Identified*			
Initiator		*(ii) Assigner*			

(i.e. the entity identified by another entity) or an *Assigner* (i.e. the role that assigns an identity to the *Identified*); verbal processes, put simply, denote an exchange of information and may comprise one of four participant roles, namely a *Sayer* (i.e. the one responsible for a communicative exchange), a *Receiver* (i.e. the entity who is addressed in a communicative exchange), a *Verbiage* (i.e. the role that represents 'what is said'), or a *Target* (i.e. the entity evaluated in the communicative exchange); behavioural processes encompass processes of consciousness and physiological states and consist of a *Behaver* (i.e. the entity that experiences a process of consciousness or physiological state) or a *Behaviour* (i.e. a restatement of the behavioural process); and lastly, existential processes include those verbs that represent the existence of something and entail just one participant, an *Existent* (i.e. the entity which exists, which may be a person, object, abstraction, action, event, or institution) (cf. Halliday and Christian 1994: 142).

Through an analysis of the TRANSITIVITY patterns and, in turn, of the varying realms of experiences that emerge in the discourse under analysis, we expect to obtain some valuable insights into how certain individuals (i.e. primarily the police in this instance) represent both the inner and outer experiences of particular characters (primarily the accused teens) as regards their alleged participation in a brutal attack on white female jogger, Patricia Meili. Thus, the latter concludes our description of the TRANSITIVITY model employed here and what follows is a description of the APPRAISAL framework (Martin and Peter 2005; Bednarek 2008).

Appraisal

As mentioned above, APPRAISAL (Martin and Peter 2005; Bednarek 2008) pertains to the interpersonal metafunction given that it considers choices made by the speaker/writer and how these reflect the speaker/writer's stance, as well as their relationship with the interlocutor(s) involved

in a particular exchange. APPRAISAL has three components or rather, systems, as they are referred to in this case; *Attitude*, *Engagement*, and *Graduation*. With *Engagement* defined as the 'resources for positioning the author's voice with respect to the propositions and proposals conveyed by a text (Rentel 2012: 342) and *Graduation*, concerned with the ranking of individuals' evaluations on a scale comprising two extremes, each of these systems is defined as attendant resources within the framework (Martin 2000: 165). In contrast, *Attitude*, the focus of this paper, has been described as a system of meanings that encompasses 1) our feelings and emotions, 2) ethics, and 3) aesthetics (Martin and Peter 2005: 42). Thus, to cater for each of these dimensions, the system of *Attitude* consists of three further subdomains, namely 1) AFFECT, 2) JUDGEMENT, and 3) APPRECIATION, each of which comprises categories and subcategories as outlined in Tables 2–5 below.[1]

While both AFFECT and APPRECIATION are very much self-explanatory (cf. Martin and Peter 2005 and; Bednarek 2008 for additional detail), the subdomains of JUDGEMENT shall be further explained below for clarification purposes.

Judgement

As evidenced in Table 4 above, the system of JUDGEMENT comprises two domains, namely *Social Esteem* and *Social Sanction*. Each of these is subdivided into further subdomains, with the former

Table 2. Affect domain and subdomains (Martin and Peter 2005).

Happiness/Unhappiness		**Satisfaction/Dissatisfaction**	
cheer	misery	pleasure	displeasure
affection	antipathy	interest	ennui
Security/Insecurity		**Inclination/Disinclination**	
confidence trust	disquiet surprise	desire	fear

Table 3. Affect domain and subdomain modifications (Bednarek 2008).

Category	**Before (Martin and Peter 2005)**	**After (Bednarek 2008)**
Security/Insecurity	Security: *confidence*, *trust* Insecurity: *disquiet*, *surprise*	Security: *quiet*, *trust* Insecurity: *disquiet*, *distrust*
Inclination/Disinclination	Inclination: *desire* Disinclination: *fear*	Inclination: *desire* Disinclination: *non-desire*
		Surprise

Table 4. Judgement domain and subdomains (Martin and Peter 2005).

Social esteem	**Social sanction**
normality	*propriety*
capacity	*veracity*
tenacity	

Table 5. Appreciation domain and subdomains (Martin and Peter 2005).

Reaction	Did X grab our attention?
Composition	Is X logical or complex?
Valuation	Is X worth something?

including references to 'how normal or not someone behaves' (i.e. *normality*), 'how able or unable someone is' (i.e. *capacity*), and 'how resolute or not someone is' (i.e. *tenacity*) (cf. Martin and Peter 2005: 52). Meanwhile, *Social Sanction* consists of two subdomains, namely *propriety*, concerned with 'how ethical someone is', and *veracity*, 'how truthful someone is' (ibid). The latter brings our description of APPRAISAL to a close and what follows is an outline of the dataset and procedures performed to analyse the language of *When They See Us: Episode 1*.

Dataset and analysis

In order to study TRANSITIVITY and APPRAISAL in our case study, a corpus of just over 3,500 words, comprising questions and statements by the police and the prosecutors, was generated. The corpus comprised data from episode 1 of the series, first retrieved from https://8flix.com/transcripts/when-they-see-us-season-1-dialogue/, before subsequent manual editions were implemented. That is, the text maintained only the dialogue to be annotated for TRANSITIVITY and APPRAISAL patterns; speaker names and other additional information such as descriptions of settings, gestures, facial expressions, or camera movements were removed.

The analysis was carried out using the UAM Corpus Tool (O'Donnell 2020), which enables both a manual or an automated annotation of text. This tool was developed by Mick O'Donnell at the Universidad Autonoma de Madrid and is readily available for academics online (http://www.corpustool.com/). The software allows for annotation of texts at a number of linguistic layers and proves particularly suitable for the analysis of TRANSITIVITY patterns and APPRAISAL resources.

As regards the latter, the annotation process was guided by two key principles: minimalism and contextuality (cf. Cavasso and Maite 2021). The principle of minimalism explains that the subject of annotation (span) should be of the shortest conceivable length, while concurrently encompassing all lexical units indicative of *Attitude*. As a result, spans of various lengths were annotated, including individual words, linguistic constituents and, on occasion, entire sentences. As far as contextuality is concerned, this involved making use of all surrounding contextual information in order to better comprehend the intended meaning of the evaluative expression under scrutiny.

The annotation process was carried out by both authors, who initially worked together on the annotation of both TRANSITIVITY and APPRAISAL patterns. During the second stage of this process, the authors worked independently on different text parts and the degree of agreement was then checked at a later date. The degree of agreement was determined by calculating the percentage of common annotations to both annotators, revealing a consensus in just over 80% of examples. That said, when two possible annotations were offered, these were discussed by both authors until a mutual agreement was reached.

Results and discussion

What does a TRANSITIVITY analysis of process and participant types reveal about the construction of 'a criminal character' and how this may contribute to a presupposition of guilt?

This subsection addresses our first research question in which we examine the transitivity patterns in the corpus in order to establish how the five teenage boys accused of rape and assault (at the diegetic level) are construed and, furthermore, how this reconstruction of events and participants may generally serve to nurture a presupposition of guilt before a case even reaches trial (cf. Bartley 2024). Thus, to begin with, Fig. 1 outlines the findings for the six process types and their frequencies across the discourse of episode 1 of *When They See Us* and, specifically, the interrogation by the police of Antron McCray, Kevin Richardson, Yusef Salaam, Raymond Santana, and Korey Wise.

As we observe in Fig. 1 above, the most frequently encountered process types in the police interrogation of the five accused teenagers are *material*, followed by *relational*, then *mental*, and

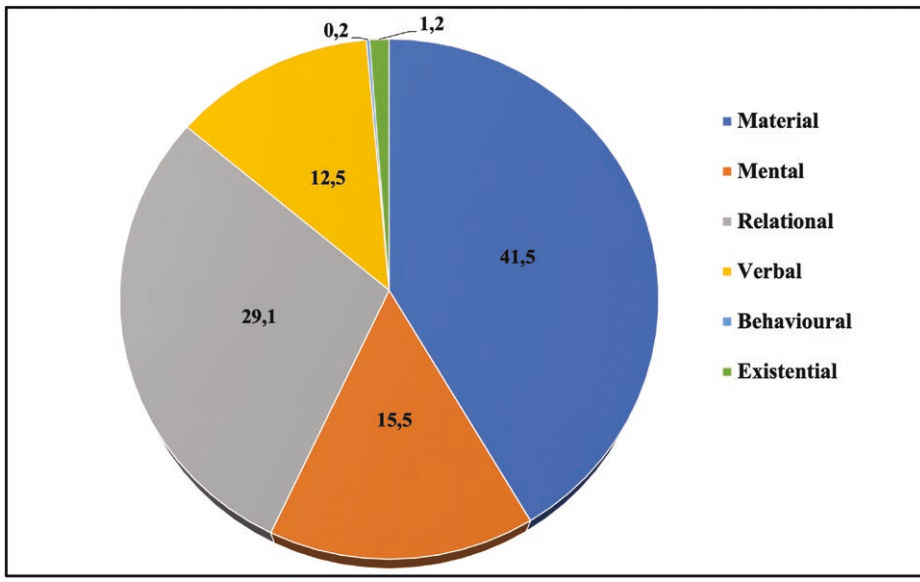

Figure 1. Transitivity processes (%) across corpus.

fourthly *verbal* clauses[2]. On closer inspection of material processes, what we witness, on the one hand, is how the police frequently surmise the actions of the accused and, as such ask questions to each of the boys that are merely rhetorical questions and not only difficult to deny, but at the same time, suggestive of violent activities on the part of the defendants, as illustrated in example (1) below. On the other hand, other examples reference the boys as *Actors* of a material clause, with presumably the aim of alleging their involvement in criminal behaviour, as observed in example (2) below.

1) […] What **were** *you* **doing** in the park last night? Who were you out in the park with? Out **wilding**[3] with Tron huh? […]
2) […] *These males* **terrorized** bicyclists here. *They* **put** two guys in the hospital with head injuries here. An old man *they* **attacked** here and a public school teacher jogging at the reservoir. And way up here, they brutally **raped** a woman and **discarded** her like a piece of garbage. […]

To briefly consider the relational process category, the findings reveal that the vast majority denote relational attributive clauses (89%), in which, moreover, there is a sense of the police trying to befriend the suspects, as evidenced in example (3) below; that is, they ascribe positive attributes to, in this instance, Korey Wise, perhaps in an attempt to get him on side and earn his trust in return for this cooperation in telling the story they wish to tell. In example (4), as we observed with material processes above, the question types employed by police make denial difficult. That is, 'And who was on top does not allow for the accused to counter the notion that someone was in fact on top of Patricia Meili; rather, the accused finds himself cornered into giving the police the name of a suspect.

3) […] You**'re** a good friend you know, sticking with your buddy. […]
4) […] Who took off her shirt? Let's go by *who* **was** there. **Was** it *Antron*? Did he touch her boobies? And *who* **was** on top? […]

The mental process category emerged as the third most frequent type with mental cognitive processes, as in (5), (6) and (7), used most often (in 38% of all mental clauses).

5) […] You probably get your pick of the girls, right? Which is how *I* **know** that you're not doing what these other fucking kids are saying. […]
6) […] Each of these boys assaulted Patricia Meili. They all raped her. And *we* **know** this because, in each of these boys' confessions, they all bear eyewitness against each other. […]
7) […] Oh come on Ray. *No-one* **will believe** that a kid like you would just stand there. You gotta put yourself in there. […]

In examples (5) and (6) above, the verb *know*, which carries a high degree of assertiveness, is, arguably, employed by police to demonstrate their absolute certainty of how this crime played out. Furthermore, society and, children in particular, are brought up to trust that the police will tell us the truth and find the true criminals responsible; thus, in this instance, it seems likely that the boys felt that they had no choice than to accept the detectives' version of events and, ultimately provide (an albeit false) confession, given that one would assume that 'the police know best. Example (7) further reinforces this idea when we observe the actor portraying Raymond Santana have his version of what happened undermined by being told that he will never be believed, unlike those in a position of authority.

Lastly, the verbal process category, found to represent just 12.5% of all clause types, was frequently found to give a voice to the actors playing the five teenage boys. That said, a closer look at the data revealed that this was by no means an indication that the now exonerated five would be given a chance to tell their story, as one may have predicted at first glance; rather, the police seemingly try to pit the teenagers against each other and, in doing so, are able to simultaneously position themselves as the ones trying to protect the boys and ensure that they can go home as soon as possible, as observed in examples (8) and (9) below.

8) […] They're saying all kinds of shit. You're involved is what they're saying. Ray did it is what they say. So if you let me help you, I want to help you. […]
9) […] You tell the truth, you clear things up, we send you home, okay? […]

The latter concludes our summary of the main TRANSITIVITY finding across the corpus. Thus, what follows is an examination of the Appraisal findings and the extent to which they further support the ideas previously discussed regarding the portrayal of the five boys who were (wrongly) accused as well as what these language patterns reveal about a narrative that, arguably, presupposes their guilt.

What can an APPRAISAL analysis tell us about the evaluative portrayal of 'a criminal character' and how this may contribute to a presupposition of guilt?

This subsection deals with our second research question in which we consider how the evaluation of the alleged criminal characters may have served to nurture a presupposition of guilt in the television portrayal of the Central Park Five case. As discussed above, the APPRAISAL framework accommodates an in-depth analysis of attitudinal lexis, which construes subjective judgement and, as such, proves a crucial tool for studying the general evaluative nature of the authorities' discourse in the first episode of *When They See Us*. With that in mind, we begin with a look at the frequency of each of the general ATTITUDE domains (i.e. AFFECT, JUDGEMENT, and APPRECIATION) encountered in the corpus in relation to the accused, as illustrated in Fig. 2, before homing in on which categories or subcategories appear more repeatedly than others and, thus, examine what these reveal to us about how certain characters are construed by those in a position of power.

As Fig. 2 shows, the prosecutors in the show frame the accused primarily by means of resources belonging to the system of *Judgement* (69.4%), while the other systems play a very minor role (Affect 19.6% and Appreciation[4] 11%). This preliminary observation is of interest here, since the result of interrogation is likely to encourage a discussion of the favourable or unfavourable character traits attributed to those individuals under suspicion.

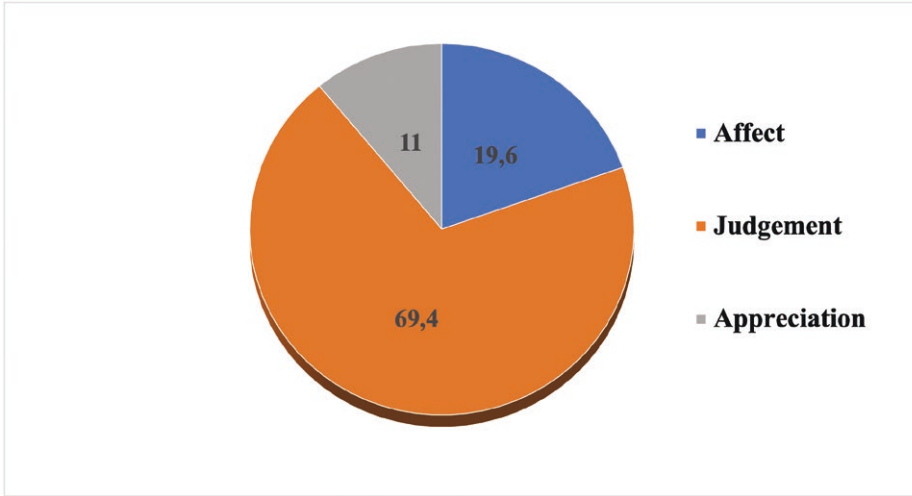

Figure 2. Appraisal categories (%) across corpus.

To begin with the analysis of *Affect*, albeit used rarely by police, it seems that when they do use this resource, they are inclined to use examples pertaining to the subdomains of in/security (2.4%) and dis/inclination (2.7%) when talking to each of the accused; more specifically, these examples denote emotions such as anxiety and/or confidence (in/security) and desire and/or rejection (dis/inclination). A possible motive for this strategic use of emotional language is that they were attempting at the time to simulate a narrative of 'support' to the interrogated teenagers, as we saw above with the TRANSITIVITY findings and, seemingly, try to get the teenagers on side; that is, they position themselves as 'helpers' or as 'caring adults', as opposed to as figures of authority who are focussed on attributing blame to the teenagers for the assault and rape of Patricia Meili. Examples of this rhetorical strategy by police include the following:

10) […] So if you let me help you, I want to help you […]
11) […] You got no reason to rape a lady […]
12) […] Hey! Calm down! Listen Ray, kids like you don't do this shit. Got too much going for you. […]
13) […] Come on, relax! Let's take a break from these, huh? What do you like to do after school kid? […]

In examples (10) and (11), the authorities resort to the resources of *dis/inclination* in order to frame themselves as adults who share a close emotional bond with the teenagers, thereby portraying their intentions as being genuinely inclined towards assisting and supporting them. In (12) and (13), we instead encounter references to *Insecurity: disquiet*, although the same idea is conveyed; that is, in examples (12) and (13), the police seem to insinuate that both Raymond Santana and another of the boys being questioned is suffering from temporary anxiety and, thus, in using this type of strategy, can appear to be offering to help the teenage defendants by appearing to act as a supportive resource.

To now turn to the other areas of ATTITUDE, 94.6% of the authorities' utterances make use of resources pertaining to the system of JUDGEMENT when referring to the accused. As evidenced above, JUDGEMENT is divided into two major groups of meanings, namely 'social esteem', which includes *normality*, *capacity,* and *tenacity*, and 'social sanction', comprising *propriety* and *veracity*. Interestingly and, most likely, as a strategic measure, the authorities' rhetorical moves seem rooted in choices that continuously alternate between the two domains, so that the interrogated teenagers are first 'esteemed' by the authorities' words, and soon after 'sanctioned' for their

supposed actions. Put differently, the characters portraying Antron McCray, Kevin Richardson, Yusef Salaam, Raymond Santana, and Korey Wise are consistently exposed to evaluative fluctuations concerning contrasting semantic realms, which in turn often results in the emergence of fear and emotional apprehension among the boys, as we observe in both examples (14) and (15) below.

14) […] You got no reason to rape a lady. You probably get your pick of the girls, right? […]
15) […] Weirdos do this shit. Weirdos and perverts rape ladies. That ain't you. […]

In example (14), the interrogated actors are positively appraised by means of the Social esteem subcategory *Capacity*, aimed here presumably at instilling the belief in the boys that an emotional connection can be established with the authority figures because the police are convinced of their abilities when it comes to interacting with the opposite sex. Example (15) adheres to the Social esteem category *Normality* and serves the same purpose; that is, the officers positively evaluate the social behaviour of the accused by implying that they are not 'weirdos' and, consequently, unlikely to be responsible for the assault on Patricia Meili. In this second example, the authorities explicitly point out that the five boys are not to be blamed, while again tactically using grammar in such a way that evokes an emotional bond with the teens[5].

Crucially, things change drastically at some point during the interrogation, when patterns pertaining to the *social sanction* domain begin to emerge progressively more: specifically, a notable 64.6% of utterances pronounced by the authorities pertain to the *Propriety* subdomain, as we observe in examples (17) and (18) below, followed by *Capacity* (14.3%), as in (19), and *Veracity* (13.6%), as illustrated in example (16), respectively.

16) […] You think you're gonna bullshit me. You're not gonna bullshit me. I could do this all day. […]
17) […] Where did you get that scratch? It was the lady when you was raping her, right? When you were shoving your dick right into her. […]
18) […] Just because you don't know him doesn't mean he didn't see you. Antron, everyone's saying that you did this! […]
19) […] You've been going over your statement. You think you know this pretty good. Cause we can't stop the taping if you mess up. […]

As is clear from these three examples, the authorities are beginning to undermine the content of the teenagers' words, thereby in some ways insinuating a contradiction with their previously delineated ethical conduct. More specifically, in example (16) the implicature is that the interrogated ones are *not* telling the truth, while in (17) and (18) the police utterances and rhetorical questions are a clear indication of the authorities' presumption that the boys *did* something and that they were *not* simply in the park for a casual stroll, as the teens had tried to explain. This abrupt change in evaluative style is not without consequences and serves to show viewers how police detectives can instil fear in the accused and, ultimately, coerce a confession out of them for criminal activities that we later discover were not, in fact, committed by the defendants.

From this moment onwards, the authorities' utterances are characterized by what we may call a specific 'evaluative signature', that is a consistent use of APPRAISAL patterns almost exclusively dominated by the *Propriety* subdomain, as illustrated in examples (20) and (21) below.

20) […] Don't you fucking raise your voice to me […]
21) […] Anton McRay and Raymond Santana saw you rape the lady […]

Here, the evaluative fluctuation is complete as the authorities begin by using offensive and threatening statements marked by taboo language[6] that one would not expect in formal settings, before subsequently seeming to align with McCray and Santana's testimony. At this stage, however, a very distinct stance is adopted by the police, who now explicitly attribute blame to the boys for the rape and assault of Patricia Meili, unlike in the initial stages of their questioning. This change

in evaluative style also coincides with a shift from *invoked* to *inscribed* patterns of APPRAISAL; that is, whereas *social esteem* was most often implied in the authorities' lexical selections, as we see in the initial examples above, *social sanction* soon emerges and very explicitly so. Put differently, the actors who portray the authorities in this docuseries are first seen to attempt to illicit a confession from the boys by establishing a 'friendly bond' with them; over time though, they instead appear more inclined towards eliciting a confession through the use of explicit evaluative language that is specifically aimed at censuring the moral standing of the accused. Quite evidently, the patterns recurrently used in this police interrogation, therefore, deviate significantly from those recorded in case studies belonging to the typical trial genre, whereby the evaluations tend to be 'invoked as opposed to inscribed' (Bartley 2020: 437).

Conclusion

The current article serves to contribute to the already extensive and comprehensive research that, to date, has examined the influential role of ideology in shaping narratives concerned with stories of crime (cf. Fowler et al. 1979; Fowler 1991; Fairclough 1995; Machin and Sarah 2006); more specifically, our analysis of the police's (strategic) linguistic choices in the TV show *When They See Us*, inevitably serves to offer insights into how the discursive representation of a powerless group (i.e. the accused teenagers in this instance) can evidence a presupposition of guilt, especially given that the discourse derives from those in a position of authority.

To briefly revert to the main findings in this paper, the TRANSITIVITY analysis revealed a high number of material processes used by police detectives during questioning; furthermore, the questions themselves were full of presuppositions regarding the teens' involvement in the crimes that they are alleged to have committed in Central Park in April 1989 against Patricia Meili and others; to add to the latter, when verbal processes were used by the actors who play the five suspects in the show, as opposed to allowing them to tell their story, instead served as an indication of how the police tried every which way to turn each of the teenagers against each other. Lastly, both the relational process and APPRAISAL findings proved indicative of an initial narrative of support on the part of police, which subsequently switched to a sudden attempt to instil fear and apprehension in each of the boys, presumably as an alternative tactic to achieve what they needed, that is a confession (albeit false) for the sexual assault and attempted murder of Ms. Meili.

Thus, in terms of each research question and what the TRANSITIVITY and APPRAISAL findings reveal about the construction or evaluative portrayal of a criminal character and whether or not this may have contributed to a presupposition of guilt, it seems likely that the language choices adopted by figures of authority are, indeed, indicative of this. It is also important, at this stage, to remark on the fact that the use of both a TRANSITIVITY and APPRAISAL analysis, that is, a triangulation approach (cf. Baker and Jesse 2016) employing more than one theoretical framework of analysis, is somewhat beneficial here because not only does it enhance the credibility of our research findings but, in turn, it offers a more complete picture of what this dataset may be implying.

To conclude and, bearing in mind that we have only just begun to touch the surface of the language patterns present in this TV series, it seems worthwhile to suggest that future research could consider a linguistic analysis of the remaining three episodes of Ava DuVernay's *When They See Us*. In doing so, a follow-up analysis is thought likely to either reinforce the findings thus far retrieved, or otherwise, bring other potential issues or factors to the surface that are yet to be uncovered.

Notes on contributors

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END NOTES

[1] Bednarek (2008) proposed slight modifications to the subdomain of AFFECT in order to better reflect a set of categories that appear as polar opposites. Specifically, changes were made to the categories of *Security/Insecurity* and *Inclination/Disinclination* with these amendments implemented in our own analysis and, thus, for that reason, are outlined in Table 3 for clarification.
[2] Due to the minimal number of behavioural and existential processes in the corpus, any discussion of these types will be kept to a minimum.
[3] The term *wilding* was coined by the press during their coverage of this high-profile case in order to refer to devastating levels of violent behaviour by black and Hispanic youths.
[4] Due to the rather infrequent use of *Appreciation* examples in the corpus, we will not examine this subdomain in further detail.
[5] The grammar option 'ain't' used for negations is in fact very common in the African American Vernacular English variety spoken by the teenage boys under arrest.
[6] Notably, the use of very explicit taboo language is multimodally intensified by body movements and voice pitch that strongly contribute to foregrounding the officers' anger.Although this article represents a collaboration between the two authors, with both having jointly authored the sections entitled "Dataset and Analysis" and "Conclusion", Dr Trevisan wrote the Introduction section, as well as the section on Research into televisual discourse and the representation of crime, and that which details the Appraisal findings from this study. Meanwhile, Dr Bartley elaborated the Methodology section and that which details the Transitivity findings of this article. All analyses were carried out together for the purpose of ensuring interrater reliability.

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