

Audiovisual dialogue economy in *The West Wing*

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Abstract & Keywords

English:

The article explores how the feel of the *West Wing* is reproduced through language in the screenplay of A. Sorkin. In particular, it gives a linguistic account of the walk-and-talk technique, a prominent story enhancer that emphasizes the hectic life of characters and functions as a language economy device. The article also illustrates the most relevant linguistic features used in episode 10 of the series and it reveals that artificiality is preferred to linguistic realism and naturalness. In fact, the type of audiovisual product in question, the limited time available to convey much information, and the need to be sharp and effective do not allow for the natural inconveniences of real interaction to be included in the screenplay.

Keywords: walk-and-talk, film language, economy, spoken and written language

The West Wing has often been praised for its accuracy in depicting the inner workings of the White House and for its fictional realism. Former White House staffers served as consultants for the show and enabled executive producer Aaron Sorkin, who created the series and wrote its screenplay, to capture the feel of the *West Wing*. Describing how this is achieved through language is the aim of this contribution, which will give an account of the witty screenplay of Sorkin. In particular, the walk-and-talk technique, whereby characters converse in the hallways of the *West Wing* in a fast and snappy mode, will be described as the most outstanding narrative feature which contributes to making this American political drama serial unique, with distinctive language peculiarities (cf. also Chiaro in this volume). Further linguistic insights will be accounted for to describe the nature of the dialogues in episode 10 of *The West Wing*. In particular, the intentionally partial attempt to imitate real conversation, and the deliberate linearity and polished nature of the exchanges, which is typical of written registers, will be highlighted and exemplified.

1. Screenplay and screenwriter

Screenplays are a specific text type (Cattrysse, Gambier 2008: 39), i.e. a specific genre or category of discourse (Swales 1990: 33), used for specific purposes, meant for specific receivers, having a specific format. Screenplays are the product of a long and complex writing procedure that includes several stages, and they are a central point of reference for the development and fine-tuning of all the technical and organizational operations that have to be carried out in any film production (Costa 2009: 161). Screenplays provide a very analytical description of the film: they give a precise account of dialogues and actions, locations and costumes, special effects and visual effects. They belong to the pre-production phase of filmmaking (Costa 2009: 150; "Pre-production", n.d.). Before serving the film (or TV show) director, who will direct actors and film crew throughout the whole filmmaking process, screenplays are considered by possible financiers and stakeholders. In this respect, they have a very important practical function: they enable prospective producers to consider whether to finance the film itself. Screenplays can be the product of the work of a single writer as well as of multiple writers, each working on a different stage of the screenplay's development. The process of writing and rewriting screenplays can be very long, but it is always decisive in the success of a film or a TV show.

If films and TV shows are carefully written by qualified and skilled individuals, though later directed by others, who is the actual film author? Is it the director, or is it the screenwriter? Nowadays, most screenwriters are unknown to the audience even though they are vital to the realization of any film or TV series. This fault can be attributed to the importance that is typically accredited to film directors, who are seen as the real creators of cinematic works of art (Parent-Altier 2007: 12). The identity problem of film director vs. screenwriter is so complex, controversial and debatable that we will not deal with it here. Suffice it to say that the two figures do not (necessarily) share tasks, functions and skills. Directors work on the set, screenwriters deal with the meticulous and rigid writing process on a daily basis. The "work of art" of directors is concrete and tangible: it provides an audiovisual product that travels around the world. On the other hand, from the audience's perspective, the work of art of screenwriters is ethereal and intangible: it is

completed on the set. And even though screenplays are deemed crucial, screenwriters are not given the credit they actually deserve, and they are often debased. This is particularly so in the TV industry, with just very few exceptions.

2. The screenplay of Aaron Sorkin

Aaron Sorkin is one of these exceptions. An acknowledged screenwriter, he has an unmistakable style and is recognized for the quality of his writing, which is meticulous, subtle, vivid and imaginative (*The West Wing Script Book*, n.d.). These are features that may occasionally be missed during the rapid-fire pace of *The West Wing*: Sorkin is the master of the choppy dialogue that is the trademark of his style, and the most adequate formula to support the widely used walk-and-talk shooting technique that characterizes the series.

The walk-and-talk device has been popularized by Aaron Sorkin himself who developed it on *The West Wing*, even though it had been widely used before in many US television dramas (Martin, 2010 “Walk and Talk”, n.d.). Technically, the walk-and-talk sequences consist of single tracking shots of long duration involving multiple characters engaging in fast conversation – but never watching where they are going – as they move rapidly through the set; characters enter and exit the conversation as the shot continues without any edits (Aaron Sorkin, 2011). Characters talk fast, and when there are two of them walking and talking, a third character can join them and enable one of the original characters to leave the conversation while the remaining two continue the walking and talking. The screenplay slug lines (i.e. the scene heading occurring at the start of every scene) make this explicit:

FADE OUT. END ACT ONE. ACT TWO FADE IN: INT. HALLWAY – DAY: Sam is standing in the hallway reading some papers, when C.J. rounds the corner and approaches. They talk on the way through the hallway to their offices.

The group exits the Oval Office. CUT TO: INT. HALLWAY – DAY: C.J. is talking to a staffer and handing her some papers. Danny approaches and follows C.J. as she starts to walk to her office.

The walk-and-talk sequences can be extended, as in the following excerpt, although they are often short and sharp exchanges coming one after the other, and spaced out by quick exchanges made while standing still. The rhythm can be hectic and pressing, with very short urgent turns which are perfectly interwoven and organized, without hold-ups in the delivery:

CUT TO: INT. JOSH'S BULLPEN AREA – DAY: Donna approaches Josh in the very festively decorated bullpen, as several staffers are busy working around them.

DONNA Good morning, Josh.

JOSH Good morning Donna, and a Merry Christmas to you and your whole Protestant family.

DONNA Thank you.

JOSH As you can see I have not yet bought your Christmas present.

DONNA Yes, and I know you're agonizing over how to best express your appreciation and affection for me at this time of the year.

JOSH That and how I scrape together the ten bucks.

DONNA I've prepared a list. [She gives him a small piece of paper as they continue to walk.]

JOSH Of Christmas gift suggestions?

DONNA Yes.

JOSH [reads] 'Ski pants, ski boots, ski hat, ski goggles, ski gloves, ski poles.' I'm assuming you already have skis?

DONNA Page two?

JOSH Right. [They cut the corner into a HALLWAY.]

DONNA Just pick something off the list, and, you know, feel free to pick two things.

JOSH I should feel that freedom?

DONNA Yeah.

JOSH Thanks.

DONNA I want to learn how to ski.

JOSH Why?

DONNA I like the equipment.

JOSH Okay.

DONNA Where you going?

JOSH I, uh, need to speak to Leo.

DONNA Why?

JOSH He wants to talk about your Christmas present.

DONNA Really?

JOSH Yeah.

DONNA So you'll think about the skis?

JOSH Yeah. I'll give that a lot of thought. [Donna walks off. Josh waits until her back is turned before crumpling up her list and throwing into a wastebasket. Josh then enters MARGARET'S OFFICE. Nobody inside.]

Technically, the walk-and-talk technique enables characters to keep the conversation moving forward while an operator walks backwards in front of them allowing for a continuous moving medium two shot (Figure.

1):



Figure 1. Medium two shot in *The West Wing*: the frame depicts the head and torso of two characters. The bottom of the frame typically cuts them off somewhere around the waist

The main purposes of the walk-and-talk storytelling device are to give energy to the scenes and to make the exchange more visually interesting. The walk-and-talk technique is a useful medium for quick-fire humour and is intended to underline the busy lives and importance of the characters. It suggests that there is so much to do and so little time to do it that even traveling time must be used to serve additional functions (TV tropes, n.d.; Martin, 2010). Besides achieving two purposes simultaneously (traveling towards an objective and exchanging information through dialogue), the nature of the walk-and-talk technique enables scriptwriters to compress information and avoid long expository dialogues, thus embracing the vital economy principle which distinguishes film language. Undoubtedly, language contributes to conveying the unstoppable sense of urgency which blends with strong character development against a background of day-to-day activities being accomplished in the highest office in the country.

3. The language of *The West Wing*

Although such strong urgency specifically distinguishes the walk-and-talk fragments, it is actually present in the whole screenplay. Watching episode 10 of *The West Wing* ("In Excelsis Deo", written by A. Sorkin and R. Cleveland, directed by A. Graves) and flipping through its script, we can observe only a few passages where characters take time while talking and indulge in longer turns. Mrs Landingham's touching explanation to Charlie, who is concerned by her unusual sadness, is one of the few instances. She slowly explains that her sons decided not to avoid the draft and declined the offer of a deferment to finish med school. This time drama is conveyed through an extended monologue (vs. quick-fire dialogues):

They didn't want one [a deferment]. Their father and I begged them, but they wanted to go where people needed doctors. Their father and I begged them, but you can't tell kids anything. So they joined up as medics and four months later they were pinned down during a fight in DaNang and were killed by enemy fire. That was Christmas Eve 1970. [beat] You know, they were so young, Charlie, they were your age. It's hard when that happens so far away, you know because, with the noises and the shooting, they had to be so scared. It's hard not to think that right then they needed their mother... Anyway, I miss my boys.

Other instances of medium-length turns are the briefings given to the White House Press Corps, though they are representative of a variety of language written to be spoken as if written: briefings are instances of planned discourse:

There's been no change in the President's 10 a.m. departure time so we're still looking at about noon. This is a half day for us, so I'm gonna make it a half day for you too. There is no more news from The White House. The lid is on. Have a Merry Christmas.

Most dialogues, however, prefer language economy devices. They treat every word as a precious component, and choose powerful and informative wordings and constructions. Exchanges are ‘short, sharp and tight’ (Carter et al. 1997: 196) – in other words, they seem to accomplish the four Gricean maxims in full, whereby speakers ideally have to be brief, truthful, relevant and informative (Grice 1975). They integrate well with the audiovisual components of the product, and as a result, they easily capture the viewer’s attention. This effectiveness is achieved mainly by resorting to a balanced blend of selected features of the written and the spoken register as well as avoiding wordy phrasings and meaningless modifiers, thus encouraging shorter formulations. This is made possible by careful editing, which cannot take place when interlocutors co-construct real life conversation. We know that “[it]n narrative films, dialogue may strive mightily to imitate natural conversation, but it is always an imitation. It has been scripted, written and rewritten, censored, polished, rehearsed, and performed. Even when lines are improvised on the set, they have been spoken by impersonators, judged, approved, and allowed to remain” (Kozloff 2000: 18). In *The West Wing*, the attempt to imitate conversation is partial. Many features from the grammar of conversation i.e. performance phenomena (Biber et al. 1999: 1052-1066), are deliberately left out.

This is not necessarily representative of film language in general: in some cases, when not pruned from the script, “actual hesitations, repetitions, digressions, grunts, interruptions, and mutterings of everyday speech [are] deliberately included” (Kozloff 2000: 18). Take this example from *Annie Hall* (W. Allen 1977, USA; screenplay by W. Allen and M. Brickman), a classic.

INT. LOBBY: Alvy, dressed, puts things into a gym bag. One knee is on the bench and his back is turned from the entrance. Annie walks toward the entrance door dressed in street clothes and carrying her tennis bag over her shoulder. Seeing Alvy, she stops and turns.

ANNIE Hi. Hi, hi.

ALVY (Looking over his shoulder) Hi. Oh, hi. Hi.

ANNIE (Hands clasped in front of her, smiling) Well, bye. (She laughs and backs up slowly toward the door)

ALVY (Clearing his throat) You-you play ... very well.

ANNIE Oh, yeah? So do you. Oh, God, whatta- (Making sounds and laughing) whatta dumb thing to say, right? I mean, you say it, "You play well," and right away ... I have to say "you play well". Oh, oh ... God, Annie. (She gestures with her hand) Well ... oh, well ... la-de-da, la-de-da, la-la.

Annie and Alvy have just met. The passage is an essence of local repetitions, pauses and hesitations, discourse markers and interjections, lexical bundles, questions and imperatives, and short elliptical response forms. Things do not seem to differ even after the characters start being more intimate:

He starts kissing Annie's arm. She gets annoyed and continues to read.

ANNIE Alvy, I ...

ALVY What-what-what-what's the matter?

ANNIE I-you know, I don't wanna.

ALVY (Overlapping Annie, reacting) What-what-I don't ... It's not natural! We're sleeping in a bed together. You know, it's been a long time.

ANNIE I know, well, it's just that-you know, I mean, I-I-I-I gotta sing tomorrow night, so I have to rest my voice.

ALVY (Overlapping Annie again) It's always some kind of an excuse. It's- You know, you used to think that I was very sexy. What ... When we first started going out, we had sex constantly ... We're- we're probably listed in the Guinness Book of World Records.

ANNIE (Patting Alvy's hand solicitously) I know. Well, Alvy, it'll pass, it'll pass, it's just that I'm going through a phase, that's all.

ALVY M'm.

ANNIE I mean, you've been married before, you know how things can get. You were very hot for Allison at first.

The dialogues flow, they are fast, but they encompass the typical problems of online ordinary speech: overlaps (marked even in the screenplay’s slug lines), hedges and discourse markers are abundant, as are sound, word and clause repetitions, starts and repairs. The style is informal – which shows grammatically in the use of verb and negative constructions (*it's, it'll, don't*), and in the choice of non-standard features (*gotta, wanna*). Speakers never become inarticulate but they constantly take time and make this clear by resorting to filled and unfilled pauses, which signal hesitations, efforts on the part of the speakers to plan what to say next, unfinished turns, need to keep the floor or to launch a new utterance.

If films can occasionally afford to ‘waste time’ replicating natural speech performance phenomena, TV series, and *The West Wing* in particular, are subject to strict time limitations per episode and therefore have to rely on time-saving features and forms of grammatical reduction. Hence the preference for deictics,

ellipsis, substitutions, contracted and condensed forms, which all contribute to creating a sense of informality and a casual tone in spoken discourse, at the same time making it succinct and pertinent. The need to save time and be short and sharp determines a preference for both interactions based on fast exchanges as opposed to long turns, and monologues or voice-over narrations. The latter however are characteristic of several films and TV series. Suffice it to think of the initial monologue of Alvy Singer in *Annie Hall* or the constant voice-over narration of Will Freeman in *About a Boy* (P. & C. Weitz 2001, UK). Other instances of voice-over narrations are found in the comedy-drama series *Desperate Housewives*, where the eyes of the dead neighbor of a group of women follow their lives and narrate the show, and in the American TV drama *Dexter*, to mention just a few examples. A brief excerpt taken from the opening of episode 10 of *The West Wing* includes most of the features mentioned above in a few lines:

MANDY *The President will stand next to the tree with flag on the left and the Carollers will be off to the side.*
 C.J. *With the Santa hats on?*
 MANDY *No. Dickensian costumes.*
 C.J. *Nice.*
 MANDY *Maybe we'll have both.*
 C.J. *You think?*
 MANDY *You think they'll clash?*
 C.J. *Might.*
 TOBY *Someone tell me why I'm standing here.*
 C.J. *To weigh in on this.*

Everything in this exchange is built on what the previous speaker has said. Consequently, repetitions can be avoided with the desirable effect of saving time. The conversation is built on a shared physical context, which facilitates the use of substitute forms and different types of ellipsis. It is built on a shared background knowledge and therefore both viewers and on screen interactants can easily draw on implicit meaning. Specifically, in this excerpt we note a series of elliptic replies, where the missing content is recoverable from the preceding utterances (With the Santa hats on? <that is Will the Carollers be off to the side with Santa hats on?> and: Dickensian costumes <that is No. The Carollers will be off to the side with Dickensian costumes>). We observe the use of substitute forms which rely on the linguistic context (Maybe we'll have both <i.e. Maybe we'll have Santa hats and Dickensian costumes>) and of deictics which point extra-textually and situate the speaker (Someone tell me why I'm standing here <that is Someone tell me why I'm standing in the Northwest lobby of the White House>). The very frequent omission of function words (Might <that is They might>) and the regular use of situational ellipsis (You think? <that is Do you think? >) contribute to the pungency of the dialogues and to giving edge to their style. A further touch of colloquialism is given by the choice of informal lexical items (*to weigh in* vs. more formal *to become involved in an argument or discussion in a forceful way*).

In a crucial paragraph on the principles of on-line production, Biber et al. (1999: 1066-1067) mention 'keep talking', 'limited planning ahead', and 'qualification of what has been said'. Remaining with the previous excerpt, which is somehow representative of most of the entire screenplay, we can claim that the devices chosen by the scriptwriter enable characters to keep the conversation moving forward smoothly most of the time: no stops or communicative breakdowns ever take place and therefore speakers do not need to resort to repair strategies to retrieve the situation (for example hesitations, backtracking and restarting, leaving pieces of discourse dangling and incomplete, or giving the floor to another person). This has positive repercussions on the communicative effectiveness and leaves no room for misunderstandings. Secondly, heavy elaboration of structure and meaning, especially at the beginning and in the middle of a sentence, is avoided (cf. the typical non-elaboration principle that characterizes conversation: Biber et al. 1999; Chafe, Danielewicz 1987). This follows the rules of conversation, where there's little time to plan ahead. Although most sentences are short, we can find exceptional cases where the sentence structure is simple and linear, but the constituents show a very elaborate nominalized configuration – a typical feature of written registers. A linear SVC[1] sentence can in fact be quite long:

S	V	C
We	believe	a congressman is about to expose something about his past that's gonna be damaging to him

and so can an SVOiOd sentence:

S	V	Oi	Od
I	could give	you	a name of an influential Republican who likes to have kinky sex

The principle of end weight, which is more extreme in spoken than in written English, is respected to facilitate the comprehension of receivers (both audience and on screen interlocutors) (Biber et al. 1999: 898). Regarding the third principle, whereby the lack of time to plan the discourse prevents speakers from

producing linear structures (cf. also Halliday 1985 and the intricacy of spoken language vs. the linearity of written language), we observe that it is not accomplished in the screenplay. This reminds us of the shortness, sharpness and tightness of the dialogues mentioned before. The tight dramatic structure of the dialogues and their organization remind us of theatre dialogues more than of real conversation (Remael 2004). The contents depart from those of ordinary talk, where they are often ‘humdrum and banal’ (Taylor 2004: 8). Hold-ups in delivery, which are the most noticeable form of disfluency in conversation, are absent. There’s no room for linguistic digressions: what is being said is focused, intense and clear-cut; sudden, abrupt and loud; closely fitting, concise in style and lacking slack:

JOSH *There's a thing that's gonna happen.*
SAM *What?*
JOSH *Lillianfield knows that Leo's a recovering alcoholic.*
SAM *Everyone knows that Leo is a recovering alcoholic.*
JOSH *Yeah, but they don't know that there were pills. There was Valium. He was in rehab.*
SAM *When?*
JOSH *Six years ago.*
SAM *He was Secretary of Labor six years ago.*
JOSH *Yeah.*
SAM *He was high when he was running the Labor Department.*

In Halliday’s (1985: 87) words, “[t]he complexity of the written language is its density of substance, solid like that of a diamond formed under pressure. By contrast, the complexity of spoken language is its intricacy of movement, liquid like that of a rapidly running river”. The language of *The West Wing* encapsulates both qualities. It is solid in its structure, which cannot be modified, and which is formed under the pressure of the genre constraints. It is certainly liquid, like a rapidly running river, which has to flow fast along its artificially created course.

4. Translating Aaron Sorkin

Film language is a ‘variety of spoken discourse’ (Taylor 1999; Kozloff 2000; Freddi, Pavesi 2009). It emerges from the effort to imitate face-to-face conversation. It normally encapsulates a selected set of linguistic features that belong to the spoken register to give the impression of authenticity to a patently artificial product. The blend of spoken and written language features is usually balanced. Most films and TV series consciously weigh the features to include in the final dialogues to make them natural in their accepted artificiality. Those of *The West Wing*, though, seem to be closer to the written end of the spoken-written language continuum. Dialogues are linear and vivid, neat and polished. Although the dynamics of real conversation are maintained, every turn is clear and accurate, speakers never overlap, there is no trace of online planning pressure, information is packed and organized, and grammar is not intricate.

Though well thought out (or because of this), Sorkin’s writing may be a double edged weapon for audiovisual translators, especially when the walk-and-talk technique is employed, or any time dialogues are fast-paced. Sorkin’s ability to be short sharp and tight in English might put translators to the test, especially when the target languages are Latin languages. Most of the words and expressions are essential and omitting or condensing them might easily change the original meaning of the message or alter the style. The quick-fire nature of the dialogues might be particularly challenging when subtitling. The attempt to maintain most of the original dialogues might cause subtitles to be too long and not usable. On the other hand, the lack of those elements that subtitles usually omit without interfering with the original message (disfluencies and errors, orality markers such as voiced pauses etc.) are not there in most of the (walk-and-talk) dialogues of *The West Wing* and this requires a major adaptation effort to achieve communicative equivalence.

The audiovisual translation of *The West Wing* therefore poses a series of challenges and raises a series of questions: Can transfer (that is full expression with adequate rendering; Gottlieb 1992: 166) be used at all when subtitling? How can voice-over solve effectively the problem of very fast exchanges? Is there a specific audiovisual translation method (for example dubbing vs. subtitling) that facilitates a more effective and enjoyable translation? Dubbing for instance usually enables translators to rewrite the original text and to adjust it without necessarily having to struggle with omissions: is this an advantage or is it a limitation? Finally, how can audio description for the visually impaired audience find its way between dialogues, if dialogues are so tight? Can audio introductions make up for the lack of pauses between dialogues? These and many more questions emerge when thinking about Sorkin’s screenplays and their translation into different languages. To observe how different audiovisual translators face these problems might help us determine whether audiovisual translation strategies tend to be homogeneous in spite of the language pair involved and of the type of translation resorted to, or if they adapt to the method employed.

5. Concluding remarks

An examination of both the screenplay and the show of *The West Wing* reveals accurate and recurring language choices that enable the screenwriter to generate the characteristic pungency of the dialogues. This is achieved through leaning toward language choices that depart from naturalness. The awareness of the rules of conversation is here exploited to deliver an enjoyable product that however does not attempt to imitate natural speech. Natural speech is characterized by a series of features deriving from the interaction between

interlocutors, and by a series of features deriving from on-line production pressure. The various components of real dialogues that are captured and maintained in *The West Wing* are functional to building a deliberately artificial product rather than a product that resembles daily speech. The exchange structure for the negotiation of meaning between interlocutors is maintained, but it is made artificial by depriving it of all the natural inconveniences of real interaction. Unlike the typical approach in many recent films and TV series, no movement toward realism or naturalistic style can be detected. The dialogues are so well structured and polished that they may come across as too perfect and not necessarily genuine, even though they are appreciated by the audience and are especially fit for some circumstances (for example during the walking and talking flashes). The pace of the dialogues is so fast, however, that there is no time left for the viewer to focus on the extent of editing that led to the final scripted dialogues. The tightness and the speed of the dialogues themselves give character to the show, but may cause problems to audiovisual translators. Depending on the type of audiovisual translation in question, the problems that may arise regard the possibility to produce subtitles that stay on screen for a suitable span of time, voice-overs that keep up the pace of the original soundtrack, audio descriptions that find their way into a very thick network of dialogues. How a solution can be found to these problems – and much more – will be the subject of other articles of this Special Issue of *inTRAlinea*, and food for thought for future research.

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Notes

[1] We follow the convention whereby S = subject, V = verb, Od = direct object, Oi = indirect object, C = complement, A = adjunct.

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