Constructing ‘nerdiness’:
Characterisation in The Big Bang Theory

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Abstract

This paper analyses the linguistic construction of the televisual character Sheldon — the 'main nerd' in the sitcom The Big Bang Theory (CBS, 2007—), approaching this construction of character through both computerised and ‘manual’ linguistic analysis. More specifically, a computer analysis of dialogue (using concordances and keyword analysis) in series 1 of The Big Bang Theory provides insights into how Sheldon is constructed through both explicit and implicit cues in his own and others’ dialogue, drawing on shared stereotypes of ‘nerdiness’. This corpus linguistic analysis is complemented through manual, ‘scene-based analysis’ of implicit cues in dialogue between Sheldon and Penny, drawing on (im)politeness theory. Previous analyses of film and TV dialogue have shown how linguistic deviance, e.g. in terms of politeness, can construct characters as somehow ‘anti-social’, ‘abnormal’, ‘rude’ or ‘not quite human’. The analysis of Sheldon’s repertoire provides insights into how and when linguistic deviance constructs nerdiness in contrast to other social identities. This allows us to consider which factors lead to viewers’ perception of characters as threateningly abnormal or funny abnormal or somehow non-human or indeed as other social identities. The analyses also show how dialogue projects a particular social identity drawing on stereotypes and shared knowledge with the audience.

Keywords: characterisation, television series, The Big Bang Theory, corpus linguistics, Impoliteness Theory

1. The significance of televisual characters

This article offers a linguistic study of characterisation — defined here as the way characters are constructed through linguistic and other resources — in the television sitcom The Big Bang Theory (CBS, 2007—present). While research into televisial characterisation seems to be an
emerging area of interest for linguists in various sub-disciplines (e.g. Baker 2005 on gender/sexuality in *Will and Grace*; Bubel 2006 on friendship relations in *Sex and the City*; Bubel & Spitz 2006 on humour in *Ally McBeal*; Mandala 2007 on friendship relations in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*; Mandala 2008 on code-switching in *Firefly*; Wodak 2009 on actant roles and ideology in *The West Wing*; Bednarek 2010, 2011a on expressivity and ideology in *Gilmore Girls*; Richardson 2010 on impoliteness in *House*; Mandala 2011 on impoliteness in *Star Trek: Voyager*), much more research has been undertaken into characterisation in other narratives, for example novels, drama or film (see contributions to this issue). What, then, are the arguments for studying televisual characters in particular?

Arguably, one very good reason lies in the fact that audiences are interested in the ‘lives’ of televisual characters and engage with them emotionally and otherwise. A good example of this is a story aired by the Australian television channel *Channel Seven* in their *Morning News* bulletin on 3rd November 2010. While the rolling news ticker at the bottom of the screen informed viewers of current news events, the background graphics – an image of a woman superimposed over an image of a ‘family’ snap – carried the headline *Shock Death* (figure 1).

However, rather than this story being about a real woman’s death, as suggested by the news ticker, this was in fact a ‘news’ item about a televisual character’s death, beginning as follows: ‘More than 2.3 million Australians tuned in to *Packed to the Rafters* [an Australian comedy-drama] last night … The shock story line saw Melissa Rafter die unexpectedly in a car crash’. While this is undoubtedly a case of self-promotion disguised as news and shows the intrusion of entertainment into news discourse (Bednarek & Caple in press), the example also illustrates
that television channels believe their viewers are interested in receiving such ‘news’ about televisual characters.

In fact, not only are audiences interested in televisual characters; they also engage with them interpersonally. As Roman suggests, '[t]elevision programs and characters have a unique ability to become an intimate part of a household and family' (Roman 2005: 130). Indeed, media psychology has identified a range of ways in which viewers can form social and interpersonal connections with media figures such as televisual characters, including parasocial interaction, (wishful) identification, or affinity/liking (Cohen 1999; Giles 2002). Because of their cumulative nature (multiple seasons and episodes, often broadcast over several years), television series ‘can capture an audience’s involvement in a way equalled by few contemporary media’ (Creeber 2004: 4). In other words, viewers build up a particularly close and intimate relationship with characters in TV fiction, perhaps knowing more about them than they do about many people in the ‘real’ world (Wickham 2007: 91, 93).

Television series also produce fans who may be very active in their engagement with the series, with audiences as consumers, fans, cultists or enthusiasts (de Kloet & van Zoonen 2007, citing Abercrombie & Longhurst 1998), and audience members produce genres such as threads, blogs, review columns and fan fiction about television series as well as taking up certain catchphrases (Richardson 2010: 89–92, 100–103), personalising and speculating about events and interpreting characters (Baym 2000, in Briggs 2010: 81–83).

A final point to do with audience engagement and television characters lies in the important role of the characters in terms of how audiences engage with televisual narratives (see Bednarek 2010, 2011a; Richardson 2010: 63–84). As one researcher puts it,

> [t]he point of connection between ourselves and the text is, after all, primarily about the people we see on screen. We want to be like them, or we desire them or are amused or frightened by them: it is frequently character that dictates the drama, that makes things happen, things we are interested in precisely because we know and have gradually aligned ourselves with their character. The history of television fiction resonates with audiences because great characters made it so …

(Wickham 2007: 91)

One such ‘great character’, I argue, is the character of Sheldon in the US American television sitcom The Big Bang Theory (introduced below), on whose construction my analysis focuses. In this analysis — as in the other contributions to this special issue — the focus is not on how ‘real’ or ‘authentic’ the analysed scripted dialogue is, but rather on how char-
acters are established as stylised representations of particular social identities and on how narrative personae are constructed with recourse to stereotypes shared by audiences.

2. The Big Bang Theory

The Big Bang Theory is a contemporary US American sitcom (on features of this genre see Brock 2011; Baker 2005: 93–130; Mills 2005) about two young physicists, Sheldon and Leonard, their scientist friends Howard Wolowitz and Raj Koothrappali, and their new neighbour Penny, a pretty blonde who wants to be an actress but works as a waitress. A main source of humour is the contrast between these very different characters. The sitcom has been highly successful both in terms of industry awards and audience figures (http://www.cbspressexpess.com/div.php/cbs_entertainment/release?id=22817, accessed 17 February 2011). The actor Jim Parsons, who plays Sheldon, has been particularly successful in winning both an Emmy and a Golden Globe. Sheldon is also considered by many as the most noteworthy and popular character in the show (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sheldon_Cooper).

I approach the analysis of Sheldon in this article from various perspectives, including both computerised and ‘manual’ linguistic analysis. Firstly, I offer a ‘character-based analysis’ (Androutsopoulos 2010) that makes use of computerised concordance and keyword analysis (Scott & Tribble 2006). Secondly, I offer a manual ‘scene-based analysis’ (Androutsopoulos 2010) of dialogue between Sheldon and Penny, drawing on (im)politeness theory (e.g. Bousfield 2008b; Bousfield & Locher 2008; Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2010a). I also make use of Culpeper’s (2001) categorisation of textual cues that give rise to audiences forming particular impressions of characters. I will introduce these methodologies and frameworks in more detail where relevant below.

3. Nerd stereotypes/schemas

As one of the concerns in this article relates to the way in which characters are constructed in televisual dialogue with recourse to stereotypes shared by audiences, a brief discussion of the relation between televisual text and audience as well as of stereotypes may be useful. Firstly, like other mediated texts, there is a ‘double articulation’ (e.g. Lorenzo-Dus 2009: 161), that is, an interaction between the on-screen televisual characters on the one hand, and an interaction between the characters and the audience on the other — see figure 2.

In other words, televisual dialogue is designed for the audience or the ‘overhearers’ (Bubel 2006), who are ratified and intended to be there
The dialogue is designed with this target audience in mind, aiming for common ground (Bubel 2006: 57; Bednarek 2010: 14–17). There are several ways in which this double-articulation or overhearer design will be taken up later in this article: in connection with the above-mentioned relationships that viewers can form with televisual characters (e.g. identification, affinity); in relation to how viewers might interpret dialogue in terms of identity; and with respect to stereotypes or schemas (mental representations or knowledge structures). Stereotypes or schemas are part of the relevant common ground that scriptwriters aim for. This includes schemas about social identities (e.g. Culpeper 2001). In *The Big Bang Theory*, the most relevant social identity at stake seems to be that of the nerd or geek.

But what stereotypes or schemas do audience members have or know of for geeks/nerds? There are several ways in which we can find out about potential features of such stereotypes, including dictionary definitions (Culpeper 2001: 16). I drew on a combination of dictionary entries from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, collocates in the ‘Corpus of contemporary American English’ (http://corpus.byu.edu/coca/), wikipedia entries, google images and related websites as well as academic literature. These resources suggest that Western audiences (and media) stereotypically associate geeks and nerds with the following traits:

- intelligent, studious;
- an interest in, obsession with, or knowledge of, all things technological or scientific, especially as relating to computers;
- an interest in sci-fi and fantasy and related activities;
- socially inept/awkward, loners/outsiders, reclusive, unsociable, having only online friends, often socially isolated or ridiculed, no conversational skills;
- unattractive, e.g. in terms of weight (either very skinny or overweight), with glasses, weird clothing;
- frequently white males (note the specific term *nerd girls* to describe female nerds and see Bucholtz 1999 and Inness 2007a, b for further discussion of nerds/geeks and gender);
- physically awkward or unfit, uninterested in sports;
- sexually inactive/virgins.
Nerds are also frequently shown as young (e.g. in the high-school context), and they can be linked to obsessive-compulsive or Asperger-like behaviour. It must be pointed out that, while geeks/nerds are frequently negatively evaluated, the term can be reclaimed by speakers, and geeks/nerds are also associated with ‘economic fame and fortune’ (Inness 2007: 4). Bucholtz argues that nerds ‘are not socially isolated misfits, but competent members of a distinctive and oppositionally defined community of practice’ (Bucholtz 1999: 211). However, we need to make a distinction between the identity category of ‘nerd’ as claimed by real-life participants, and the stereotypical category of the ‘nerd’ as constructed in the media. What we are dealing with here is not a set of resources that is available to participants as a style that can be used to claim membership in a particular oppositional community; rather, we are dealing with **scripted** identities that are *offered* to viewers as a particular construction of identity. This article does not aim to say anything about ‘real-life’ nerds but is squarely focused on the mediated representation of identity in a highly successful popular television show.

By way of illustrating some of the above stereotypical aspects, compare figure 3 and figure 4 below — the first images to come up when using google images to search for ‘geek’ and ‘nerd’ (search undertaken 16 February 2011).

![Figure 3. Google images for ‘geek’](image1)

![Figure 4. Google images for ‘nerd’](image2)
I will draw on these stereotypical associations with nerds when discussing my analyses of Sheldon below but will first briefly introduce my analytical framework.

4. Framework

4.1 Character- and scene-based analyses

Androutsopoulos (2010) talks about character-based analyses as focusing on how (movie) characters are attributed particular ways of speaking, in contrast to scene-based analyses that concern choices of different codes in a scene. I use the terms character-based and scene-based more broadly here: the character-based analysis concerns analysing in a summative way instances across a series that make a character distinctive, whereas the scene-based analysis focuses on the character’s behaviour in a particular scene, interacting with one or more other characters. In both types of analyses attention is paid to characterisation — how characters are constructed through linguistic (and other) devices. A useful methodology for character-based analysis is corpus linguistics — the computerised analysis of large amounts of texts, as this allows a summative analysis of a character across episodes. For the character-based analysis of Sheldon, I hence make use of software and the following three electronic corpora:

- BBT: a 53,127 word corpus of transcripts for all 17 episodes in season 1 of *The Big Bang Theory* (transcribed by the same fan transcriber and downloaded from http://bigbangtrans.wordpress.com/, including descriptions of settings, character actions and gestures, etc.);
- SHELDON: a 14,896 word corpus of Sheldon’s dialogue only, extracted from the corpus above (excluding his name, no scene descriptions, etc.);
- OTHERS: a 32,643 word corpus of dialogue by all other speakers, extracted from the corpus above and including speaker names but no scene descriptions, etc.

These three corpora allow me to compare Sheldon’s dialogue with dialogue from all the other characters while also permitting the analysis of features in the series as a whole. To do so, I will use both a concordance and a keyword analysis — two corpus linguistic methodologies that I will now describe briefly. (For ease of reading, I will postpone my introduction to the framework used for the scene-based analysis to section 5.3 below.)
4.2 Concordances and keywords: A brief introduction

One way in which a computerised character-based analysis can be undertaken is through the analysis of concordances for linguistic expressions. Concordances are produced using corpus linguistic software, here Wordsmith (Scott 2004). Wordsmith’s Concord programme produces lists of all instances of a search term in the corpus, including its co-text (words occurring to the right or to the left of it). Baker (2006) gives a very accessible overview of using concordances in discourse analysis. By way of exemplification figure 5 below shows concordances for work* (*stands for any number of characters) in SHELDON, displayed in the KWIC format where the search term is presented with its immediate co-text to the right and to the left:

Concordances allow us to examine all instances of particular linguistic expressions across the series. Each instance can also be looked at in its wider co-text when clicking on the relevant concordance line.

Moving on to the second corpus linguistic methodology applied in this article, keyword analysis concerns the automatic identification by corpus software (here Wordsmith Keywords, Scott 2004) of word forms (e.g.
his, her, him) or word clusters (e.g. you know) that are statistically speaking more or less significant in a node corpus (i.e. the corpus that is of interest) when compared to a reference corpus (i.e. the corpus that works as a standard of comparison, baseline or norm) (Scott & Tribble 2006). Word clusters can range from two (you know) to more words (if you will, I hardly think so) and are not necessarily complete syntactic units. Keywords belong to Culpeper’s implicit cues to characterisation (Culpeper 2001: 199–202), and the methodology has been applied to both televisual and literary characterisation (e.g. Culpeper 2001, 2002; Bednarek 2010, 2011b), at times making use of word sense tagging (e.g. Baker 2005: 93–130; McIntyre & Archer 2010).

5. Analyses
5.1 Character-based analysis: Concordances, keywords and characterisation

Concordance analysis was applied both to SHELDON and to OTHERS in order to explore particular textual cues that characterise Sheldon. The term textual cues originates in Culpeper’s (2001) model of characterisation, which combines insights from literary theory, cognitive theory and sociolinguistics. In this model, representations of characters are constructed in the mind (e.g. via inference) through explicit and implicit ‘textual cues that give rise to information about character’ (Culpeper 2001: 163). Explicit cues include self- and other-presentation where characters provide information about themselves or other characters (Culpeper 2001: 167). Examples for such explicit cues from my data are: I’m a genius (self-presentation in Sheldon’s dialogue) and Sheldon is batcrap crazy (other-presentation in Leonard’s dialogue). In contrast, implicit cues convey ‘character information which has to be derived by inference’ (Culpeper 2001: 172), for example, conversational structure, lexical and syntactic features in character speech, accent and dialect, paralinguistic features, visual features, etc. Such implicit cues only occur in the respective character’s dialogue (i.e. in SHELDON). An example for such an implicit cue from my data is the utterance Actually, I don’t need a team, I could easily defeat you single-handedly, which points implicitly to Sheldon’s belief in his own superiority (in terms of conversational behaviour, face work or impoliteness).³

In order to investigate the construction of Sheldon’s character in Sheldon’s own dialogue, concordances for I and I’m in SHELDON were produced and explored for the information they provide into Sheldon’s character. While such analysis does not produce a full picture of the character, it does show a considerable amount of character traits, as table 1 demonstrates:

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³
Table 1. Character information in SHELDON.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character trait</th>
<th>Example dialogue</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>believes in his own intellectual</td>
<td>They call me a genius because I’m a genius.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>superiority</td>
<td>You see, I’m a superior genetic mutation, an improvement on the existing mediocre stock.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Actually, I don’t need a team, I could easily defeat you single-handedly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>As I have explained repeatedly, unlike you, I don’t need validation from lesser minds.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I have a masters and two PhD’s, I should not have to do this.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Alright, but if we’re going to use flight metaphors I’m much more suited to being the guy from the FAA, analysing wreckage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>You tell people I’m a rocket scientist? I’m a theoretical physicist.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Penny, I have an IQ of 187, don’t you imagine that if there were a way for me to have had soup at home I would have thought of it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Don’t be ridiculous. I have no peers. [Preceded by Leonard: No, no. You gave me an explanation, it’s reasonableness will be determined by a jury of your peers.]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I don’t guess. As a scientist I reach conclusions based on observation and experimentation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I’m taking a sabbatical, because I won’t kow-tow to mediocre minds.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>was a child prodigy</td>
<td>Yes, in fact I am the youngest person ever to win it [the Stephenson award].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No, it’s true, I did a series of experiments when I was twelve …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Before that I was in college, and before that, I was in the fifth grade.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not bad, I myself started graduate school at fourteen.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>struggles with social skills</td>
<td>What would we talk about? We’ve no overlapping areas of interest I’m aware of, and you know I don’t care for chit-chat. [Preceded by: Sheldon: Hello Penny. Leonard just left. Penny: I know. I want to talk to you.]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Oh! I don’t usually pick up on those things [people being upset].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hunger? Indigestion, I’m sorry I’m really not very good at this [knowing what feeling Leonard is getting].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character trait</td>
<td>Example dialogue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| is different    | I think a birthday party is a terrible idea. I envy Leonard for growing up without that anguish.
|                 | Year after year, I had to endure wearing conical hats while being forced into the crowded sweaty hell of bouncy castles, not to mention being blindfolded and spun towards a grotesque tailless donkey as the other children mocked my disorientation. |
|                 | Have I pointed out that I am extremely uncomfortable with dancing, loud music and most other forms of alcohol induced frivolity? |
|                 | It’s about an Indian princess who befriends a monkey, who was mocked by all the other monkeys because he was different. For some reason I related to it quite strongly. |
| is health obsessed / has food issues | Anyway, the local cuisine was a little more sausage-based than I’m used to, and the result was an internal blitzkrieg with my lower intestine playing the part of Czechoslovakia. |
|                 | I need to measure my fluid intake and output to make sure my kidneys aren’t shutting down. |
|                 | I shower twice a day and wash my hands as often as I can. |
|                 | Penny, I just want you to know that, you don’t have to live like this. I’m here for you. [to clean her place] |
|                 | When I was a little boy and got sick, which was most of the time … |
| has an affinity for and knowledge of computer-related activities | I know, and I do yearn for faster downloads … |
|                 | I have a very wide circle. I have 212 friends on myspace. |
|                 | I know everything about this stuff [computers]. |
|                 | Good idea, I need my wrist brace, all this button pushing is aggravating my old Nintendo injury. |
| does not like change | I like the hamburgers where we usually have hamburgers, you can’t make the assumption that I’ll like the hamburgers here. |
|                 | No, I sit there. [in response to Penny sitting on ‘his’ seat on the sofa – a recurring topic is that Sheldon always has to sit in the same spot] |
|                 | It [the honorary Justice League of America membership card]’s been in every wallet I’ve owned since I was five. |
| does not drive | Ah, because it’s in Long Beach, and I don’t drive. |
|                 | I don’t drive, and the only things available within walking distance are a Thai restaurant and a gas station. |
According to information gained from Sheldon’s dialogue, then, he is highly intelligent (a child prodigy) and believes in his own intellectual superiority, showing arrogance, and is different from others in terms of not driving and/or enjoying social activities as well as struggling with social skills. He is also slightly health obsessed and has issues with food/general health. We can also see that he likes computer-related activities and is an expert in the area. In fact, utterances that indicate Sheldon’s expertise concerning computers and gaming show that while he may struggle with social skills as far as interactions with ‘non-nerds’ (especially Penny) are concerned, he is clearly positioned as someone who has certain skills in the ‘nerd’ community. At other times, however, he also struggles in his interactions with his ‘nerdy’ friends (Leonard, Raj, Howard).

As we can see, these character traits are partial instantiations of the nerd stereotype, in terms of Sheldon’s intelligence, interest in technology, lack of social skills/difference and physical unfitness. Sheldon’s dislike for change can be linked to obsessive-compulsive behaviour and his arrogance may be tied to his lack of social skills, since this type of behaviour is conventionally frowned upon. His difficulty with reading others’ emotions can be associated with Asperger’s. As suggested above, at least sections of the audiences would have these associations, considering the traits that Western audiences and media stereotypically associate with geeks and nerds. Other character attributes are perhaps less easily tied to ‘nerd’ stereotypes, for instance, that Sheldon does not drive.

Through further concordancing we can investigate how far this characterisation is supported by the dialogue of other characters. Through exploring concordances for Sheldon* in OTHERS, it becomes apparent that while not all 190 occurrences provide information on Sheldon’s character, and even though there are only few examples where Sheldon’s character is explicitly described by others (i.e. Sheldon is …), the above characterisation of Sheldon is further confirmed. According to the other characters, Sheldon

- is highly intelligent (a child prodigy): ‘So anyway, we’re eight years old, and Sheldon converts my easy-bake oven to some kind of high-powered furnace’. (Missy, Sheldon’s sister);
- believes in his own intellectual superiority: ‘Hang on. Sheldon, is proving that you are single-handedly smarter than everyone else so important that you would rather lose by yourself than win as part of a team’. (Leonard);
- struggles with social skills: ‘Sheldon, you have to let somebody else answer’. (Leonard);
- is ‘different’: ‘Not to mention, Sheldon is batcrap crazy’. (Leonard);
is health obsessed/ has food issues: ‘Penny, you’ll have to excuse Sheldon, he’s a bit of a germophobe’. (Leonard)

Other traits include being familiar with the sci-fi series Star Trek (Sheldon, what, do I need to quote Spock’s dying words to you. – Leonard) while we can also glean social relationships, i.e. his being Leonard’s and the others’ friend (Guys, let’s remember that Sheldon is still our friend and my room mate. – Leonard). Interestingly, a lot of dialogue concerns other characters explaining social conventions to Sheldon:

(1) For God’s sake, Sheldon, do I have to hold up a sarcasm sign every time I open my mouth. (Leonard)
Sheldon, do you understand the concept of blackmail? (Penny)
You left with his date. Friends don’t do that to each other. (Leonard)
Sheldon, are you going to introduce us? (Leonard)
Sheldon you just can’t dictate … (Leonard)
You know, Sheldon, you don’t have so many friends that you can afford to start insulting them. (Howard)
Sheldon, you can’t be selfish, we all paid for it, so it belongs to all of us. (Leonard)

And – a fact that will become important later – Sheldon is shown as willing to learn such unfamiliar conventions:

(2) Penny: Uh, Sheldon, I didn’t see your present.
Sheldon: That’s because I didn’t bring one.
Penny: Well why not?
Howard: Don’t ask.
Sheldon: The entire institution of gift giving makes no sense.
Howard: Too late.
Sheldon: Let’s say that I go out and I spend fifty dollars on you, it’s a laborious activity, because I have to imagine what you need, whereas you know what you need. Now I can simplify things, just give you the fifty dollars directly and, you could give me fifty dollars on my birthday, and so on until one of us dies leaving the other one old and fifty dollars richer. And I ask you, is it worth it?
Howard: Told you not to ask.
Penny: Well, Sheldon, you’re his friend. Friends give each other presents.
Sheldon: I accept your premise, I reject your conclusion.
Howard: Try telling him it’s a non-optional social convention.
Penny: What?
Howard: Just do it.
Penny: It’s a non-optional social convention.
Sheldon: Oh. Fair enough.

(The Big Bang Theory, season 1, episode 16, The Peanut Reaction)

We can see that concordance analyses are useful in showing us how features of televisual characters are established through their own and others’ dialogue, demonstrating what Bal (1997: 126) calls accumulation (of character traits). The characterising effect of these textual cues is strengthened through narrative repetition (Lothe 2000: 84), as they are reinforced through self- and other-presentation. It has also become apparent that the televisual dialogue draws on mainstream nerd stereotypes and thereby constructs shared common ground with the audience.

5.2 Character-based analysis: Keywords and characterisation

Concordance analysis has proved to be a useful tool for character-based analysis; this section will now briefly explore keyword analysis. A keyword analysis, using SHELDON as a node corpus and OTHERS as a reference corpus, can determine what word clusters Sheldon uses more frequently than other characters, which can provide further insights into his character.\textsuperscript{5} To do full justice to the results generated is not possible within the scope of this article. Instead, I will limit my observations to pointing out some particularly relevant results. Sheldon’s key clusters do indeed point to similar character traits as those already observed through concordance analysis (the numbers in brackets below refer to the number of different episodes that a cluster occurs in, i.e. their dispersion rather than their raw frequency). For example, there are expressions that relate to science (a nobel prize [3], my research [3]) and/or seem to show him speaking in words that we may associate with formal academic writing rather than casual or informal spoken language:

\begin{itemize}
  \item number of (2), a series of (2), the fact that (4), lack of (4), the result (4), the possibility/possibility that (3), your premise (3), in addition (2)
\end{itemize}

Table 2 below shows frequencies for these clusters in the ‘Corpus of contemporary American English’ (more than 425 million words of American English, evenly divided between spoken, fiction, popular magazines, newspapers and academic journals — see http://corpus.byu.edu/coca/).

As this table shows, with the exception of the fact that and your premise, all these clusters are most frequent in academic journals and therefore clearly associated with academic discourse. Even the fact that is
Characterisation in The Big Bang Theory

Table 2. *Frequencies in the ‘Corpus of contemporary American English’.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word/Cluster</th>
<th>spoken</th>
<th>fiction</th>
<th>magazine</th>
<th>newspaper</th>
<th>academic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>number of</td>
<td>17663</td>
<td>4147</td>
<td>19794</td>
<td>19150</td>
<td>41402</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a series of</td>
<td>2744</td>
<td>2401</td>
<td>4984</td>
<td>4280</td>
<td>6177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the fact that</td>
<td>16124</td>
<td>4861</td>
<td>7658</td>
<td>6438</td>
<td>12276</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lack of</td>
<td>3543</td>
<td>2659</td>
<td>5997</td>
<td>6408</td>
<td>14762</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the result</td>
<td>2029</td>
<td>1045</td>
<td>5012</td>
<td>3320</td>
<td>6025</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the possibility</td>
<td>3078</td>
<td>1357</td>
<td>2413</td>
<td>2455</td>
<td>5780</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>possibility that</td>
<td>1300</td>
<td>475</td>
<td>863</td>
<td>772</td>
<td>1738</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>your premise</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>premise</td>
<td>741</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>673</td>
<td>656</td>
<td>1519</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in addition</td>
<td>2939</td>
<td>1057</td>
<td>7937</td>
<td>6699</td>
<td>21517</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

highly frequent in academic journals, more so than in any other written variety, and the word *premise* itself is clearly associated with academic discourse. In fact, *your premise* is so infrequent in unscripted American English (raw frequency = 31; relative frequency = 0.034 per 10,000 words) that its occurrence in Sheldon’s dialogue is highly marked (raw frequency = 3; relative frequency = 2.02 per 10,000 words). Interestingly, ‘real-life’ nerds have also been shown to use formal vocabulary (Bucholtz 2011a: 144), as part of using what Bucholtz (2011a: 151) calls *superstandard English*. This positions them as intelligent (Bucholtz 2011a: 153). The same can be said for Sheldon, although such clusters position him specifically as a scientist as well.

We can also find clusters that seem to point to a tendency for Sheldon to define things, for example *this is a* (6) in figure 6.

```
that, heads up you people in the front row, this is a splash zone. You could have
a great idea. Relativity was a great idea. This is a notion, and a rather sucky one at
at that. Why? Oh, Penny, Penny, Penny. This is a complex battle simulation with a
don’t yell at you at Big Boy. We don’t. This is a disturbing aberration. He asked
this hamburger surpasses the Big Boy? This is a single decker hamburger whereas
is open at the sides, a poncho is closed, this is a poncho, and neither is a reason to
mother go into menopause? Oh, Penny, this is a natural human process, and we’re
I know, but why? This is not a sarape. This is a poncho. A sarape is open at the
on a couch is valid. I’m just inferring that this is a couch, because the evidence
up. This is not anyone’s home, this is a swirling vortex of entropy. Because
the auction. I wonder why no-one else bid, this is a classic piece of sci-fi movie
from buying it, ergo you would still have it. This is a classic rookie time travel mistake.
```

Figure 6. Concordances for this is a in SHELDON.

Similarly, the key clusters *this is not* a (3) and *if you will* (3) can be related to defining or labelling things. All of the above are associated
Table 3. Clusters indicating arrogance in SHELDON.

| reference to own opinion | I hardly think so (3)  
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>it occurs to me (2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| going to have to (2): You’re going to have to call her; I can see we’re going to have to spell out everything for this girl; And if water is involved we’re going to have to ground the crap out of the thing.  
| you might want to (2): And that’s probably just a sinus infection, but it could be sleep apnoea, you might want to see an otolaryngologist. It’s a throat doctor; You might want to speak in a lower register.; Leonard, I’m not expert here but I believe in the context of a luncheon invitation, you might want to skip the reference to bowel movements.  
| to point (4): I was wrong to point it out; I do feel obligated to point out to you; I’ve hesitated to point this out  
| luckily for you (3)      |                        |
| of course (12)/well of course (4)  
| once again (3)  
| remind you (3): let me remind you; need I remind you; I must now remind you |

with the stereotypical nerd’s interest in science and Sheldon’s identity as an (intelligent) ‘scientist’-nerd. Other clusters seem to point to character traits that are related to Sheldon’s belief in his own superiority (his arrogance), as table 3 illustrates.

A further key cluster is an interesting (2) (an interesting turn of events, an interesting development, an interesting thing about), a cluster which might link Sheldon intertextually to characters such as the android Data and the human/Vulcan Spock in Star Trek who are emotionally stunted, but tend to find events fascinating or interesting (Martin & White 2005: 50, for examples see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cFods1KSWsQ&feature=related). In fact, out of 14 occurrences of interesting in season 1, 50 percent are produced by Sheldon alone, the rest being split between Penny (3), Leonard (2), Howard (1) and Lesley (1). In The Big Bang Theory, this adjective is therefore more strongly associated with Sheldon than any of the other characters, who may at times also use it.

Some clusters (e.g. Leonard Leonard Leonard [2]) also show Sheldon’s use of too much repetition in getting other characters’ attention and indicate impatience or unawareness of social conventions (figure 7):
Indeed, one of Sheldon’s trademark obsessive-compulsive actions that becomes cemented in later seasons is his tendency to repeatedly knock and, without pausing, say people’s names three times (e.g. knock knock knock Penny knock knock knock Penny knock knock knock Penny).

While I have not been able to do justice to a full-blown keyword analysis (which would also necessitate further concordancing), it has become apparent that such analysis can be very useful for uncovering statistically significant implicit cues to characterisation, and that, again, the traits revealed can easily be linked to stereotypes about nerds. However, such an analysis has its limitations. For instance, it is unclear whether or not it would show Sheldon’s inability to understand sarcasm and irony, and his difficulty with non-literal phrases and expressions — something which can again be associated with Asperger’s and has come up in the concordance analysis (For God’s sake, Sheldon, do I have to hold up a sarcasm sign every time I open my mouth) while also being apparent in the dialogue between Penny and Sheldon which will be analysed in more detail below:

(4) Sheldon: This is great. Look at me, out in the real world of ordinary people, just living their ordinary, colourless, workaday lives.

Penny: Thank you. [ironically]

Sheldon: No, thank you. [genuinely; emphasis on you]

... Penny: ... you know I always say, when one door closes, another one opens.

Sheldon: No it doesn’t. Not unless the two doors are connected by relays, or there are motion sensors involved.

To conclude, a corpus-based analysis is highly useful in demonstrating repeated patterns of behaviour and may give us an impetus to further investigate particular features in more detail — this is the purpose of the next section.
5.3 Scene-based analyses: Face-aggravating behaviour

The above character-based analyses have paid specific attention to a synoptic summary of how instances across a series establish a character (Sheldon). This will now be complemented by a scene-based analysis that investigates dialogue between two characters and hence takes interactional aspects into consideration in drawing on (im)politeness theory (e.g. Culpeper 2001; Richardson 2010).

While linguistic research has been dominated by investigations of politeness rather than impoliteness phenomena, with a focus on communication that is ‘cooperative’ (Locher & Bousfield 2008: 1–2), more recently researchers have argued that non-cooperative behaviour (impoliteness, rudeness, etc.) also deserves systematic attention (see contributions to Bousfield & Locher 2008; Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2010a). This kind of research ‘is still in its infancy’ (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2010b: 535), and one of the current disagreements concerns the role of intention. For example, Bousfield (2008a) and Culpeper (2008) only count intentional face-aggravating behaviour as impoliteness, whereas Terkourafi (2008) sees impoliteness as unintentional, in contrast to (intentional) rudeness (which Culpeper sees as non-intentional). To avoid such terminological obstacles, I will not specifically talk about impoliteness or rudeness, but examine an interaction between Sheldon and Penny with a focus on non-cooperative behaviour on Sheldon’s part, more specifically his ‘face-aggravating behaviour’ (Locher & Bousfield 2008: 3). Another cover term for this could be ‘inappropriate verbal behaviour’ (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2010b: 550). From this perspective, face-aggravating behaviour concerns the omission of appropriate or the addition of inappropriate moves (Terkourafi 2008: 60).

To analyse Sheldon’s face-aggravating behaviour many different analytical approaches can be adopted (see the state-of-the-art overview in Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2010b). One key distinction is that between first- and second-order approaches (Locher & Bousfield 2008). The former focus on participant assessments of what is face-aggravating: the latter focus on analysts’ assessments of what is face-aggravating (based, for example, on pragmatic theory). I use a combination of both: on the one hand, I draw on Bousfield’s (2008b) categorisation of impoliteness realisations to analyse the scene (second-order approach). On the other hand, I also take into account how Penny takes up Sheldon’s behaviour (her reactions) in order to help determine whether or not Sheldon’s behaviour is face-aggravating. This includes her (emotional) reactions as well as her own increasingly face-aggravating behaviour (first-order approach). Concerning the second-order approach, I have classified Sheldon’s contributions according to the impoliteness realisations in Bous-
field (2008b: 99–143, based on Culpeper 1996). Such realisations include condescending, scorning or ridiculing the hearer, using obscure or secretive language (e.g. jargon), hindering/blocking the speaker (e.g. interrupting), or invading the other’s space (e.g. speaking about information that is too intimate). Although originally intended to cover only intentional face-aggravating behaviour, this classification has proved to be useful for investigating other types of face-aggravating behaviour as well (Archer 2008).

In the context of characterisation, like keywords, such face-aggravating behaviour constitutes implicit cues to characterisation (Culpeper 2001). Its importance for characterisation has been noted by many researchers (e.g. Culpeper 2001: 247, 251), as has been the significance of character interaction (Pearson 2007: 45). With respect to The Big Bang Theory, analysing interactions where only Sheldon and Penny interact was seen as particularly illuminating, since Penny is the main ‘non-nerdy’ character that is contrasted with Sheldon and his friends. Such interactions occur only in seven episodes in the first season, of which the very first scene (in episode 4) was chosen, because early episodes are especially significant in establishing characters (Bubel 2006: 63; Pearson 2007: 42). The scene takes place after Sheldon has been fired from his position as theoretical physicist and in his spare time, has decided to run experiments to produce perfect eggs:

(5) (Sheldon takes his eggs and sits down. Takes a photograph of them. Writes in his notebook, then takes a forkful. Writes in notebook again.)

01 Sheldon: Use new eggs. (There is a knock on the door).
02 Penny (popping her head round): Hi, hey. I’m running out to the market, do you guys need anything?
03 Sheldon: Oh, well this would be one of those circumstances that people unfamiliar with the law of large numbers would call a coincidence.
04 Penny: I’m sorry?
05 Sheldon: I need eggs. Four dozen should suffice.
06 Penny: Four dozen?
07 Sheldon: Yes, and evenly distributed amongst brown, white, free range, large, extra-large and jumbo.
08 Penny: Okay, one more time?
09 Sheldon: Never mind, you won’t get it right, I’d better come with you.
10 Penny: Oh, yay!

Scene: Penny’s car
Penny: How come you didn’t go into work today.
Sheldon: I’m taking a sabbatical, because I won’t kow-tow to mediocre minds.
Penny: So you got canned, huh?
Sheldon: **Theoretical physicists do not get canned.** But yeah.
Penny: Well, maybe it’s all for the best, you know I always say, when one door closes, another one opens.
Sheldon: **No it doesn’t.** Not unless the two doors are connected by relays, or there are motion sensors involved.
Penny: No, no, I meant …
Sheldon: **Or the first door closing causes a change of air pressure that acts upon the second door.**
Penny: Never mind.
Sheldon: **Slow down.** Slow down, please slow down.
Penny: We’re fine.
Sheldon: Look, you’re not leaving yourself enough space between cars.
Penny: Oh, sure I am.
Sheldon: **No, no. Let me do the math for you,** this car weighs let’s say 4,000lb, now add say 140 for me, **120 for you.**
Penny: 120?
Sheldon: Oh, I’m sorry, did I insult you? Is your body mass somehow tied into your self worth?
Penny: Well, yeah.
Sheldon: Interesting. Anyway, that gives us a total weight of, let’s say, 4,400lb.
Penny: Let’s say 4,390.
Sheldon: Fine. We’re travelling forward at, good Lord, 51 miles an hour. Now let’s assume that your brakes are new and the callipers are aligned, still, by the time we come to a stop, we’ll be occupying the same space as that Buick in front of us, an impossibility that nature will quickly resolve into death, mutilation and … oh look, they built a new put-put course.

Scene: The supermarket.

Sheldon: This is great. **Look at me, out in the real world of ordinary people, just living their ordinary, colourless, workaday lives.**
Penny: Thank you.
Sheldon: No, thank you. And thank you, ordinary person. Hey, you want to hear an interesting thing about tomatoes.
Penny: Uh, no, no not really. Listen, didn’t you say you needed some eggs.
35 Sheldon: Uh, yes, but anyone who knows anything about the dynamics of bacterial growth knows to pick up their refrigerated foods on the way out of the supermarket.

36 Penny: Oh, okay, well maybe you should start heading on out then.

37 Sheldon: No, this is fun. Oh, the thing about tomatoes, and I think you’ll really enjoy this, is, they’re shelved with the vegetables, but they’re technically a fruit.

38 Penny: Interesting.

39 Sheldon: Isn’t it?

40 Penny: No, I mean what you find enjoyable.

41 Sheldon (as Penny selects vitamin supplements): Oh boy.

42 Penny: What now?

43 Sheldon: Well, there’s some value to taking a multivitamin, but the human body can only absorb so much, what you’re buying here are the ingredients for very expensive urine.

44 Penny: Well, maybe that’s what I was going for.

45 Sheldon: Well then you’ll want some manganese.

Scene: On the stairwell of the apartment building.

45 Sheldon: That was fun. Maybe tomorrow we can go to one of those big warehouse stores.

46 Penny: Oh, I don’t know Sheldon, it’s going to take me a while to recover from all the fun I had today.

47 Sheldon: Are you sure. There are a lot of advantages to buying in bulk. For example, I noticed that you purchase your tampons one month’s supply at a time.

48 Penny: What?

49 Sheldon: Well think about it, it’s a product that doesn’t spoil, and you’re going to be needing them for at least the next thirty years.

50 Penny: You want me to buy thirty years worth of tampons?

51 Sheldon: Well, thirty, thirty five, hey, when did your mother go into menopause?

52 Penny: Okay, I’m not talking about this with you.

53 Sheldon: Oh, Penny, this is a natural human process, and we’re talking about statistically significant savings. Now, if you assume 15 tampons per cycle and a 28 day cycle, are you fairly regular? (Penny shuts door in his face.) Okay, no warehouse store, but we’re still on for put-put golf, right?

(The Big Bang Theory, season 1, episode 4, The Luminous Fish Effect)
As becomes readily apparent, Sheldon’s interactional contributions in this scene show many instances of face-aggravating behaviour. I have identified seven of Bousfield’s (2008b) realisations, sometimes needing to double-classify the same utterance because it falls into more than one realisation. As indicated through bold face in the transcript above, Sheldon:

- uses obscure language (turn 3);
- condescends (turns 3, 14, 24, 31, 35);
- criticises/dispraises Penny or her actions, including criticisms of her intellect, her linguistic choices, her driving, her life, her behaviour (turns 9, 14, 20, 22, 31, 41);
- disassociates from Penny (turn 14 denies common ground with people other than theoretical physicists, including Penny; turn 31 implies that he is not one of the ‘ordinary’ people to whom Penny belongs);
- disagrees with Penny (turns 15-16, turns 23-24, turns 36-37)
- interrupts Penny (turns 17-18);
- invades Penny’s space (talks about topics that are too intimate, such as Penny’s weight in turn 24, tampons/periods – a gender-related taboo topic – in turns 47-53).

While Bousfield’s classification provides a theoretical basis or justification for analysing these instances as face-aggravating, Penny’s own behaviour also does. For example, her behaviour shows that she does not understand Sheldon’s obscure way of phrasing things (I’m sorry) and her emotional reactions (e.g. sarcastic Oh, yay and Thank you; exasperated What now?) point to her negative evaluation of Sheldon and his behaviour. Much of this is expressed through tone of voice, facial expression, etc. and would only become fully apparent through a multimodal analysis. Further, her own behaviour becomes increasingly face-aggravating, especially towards the end of the scene, where she explicitly disassociates from Sheldon (I’m not talking about this with you) and shuts the door in his face.

It must be noted that Sheldon’s behaviour is not exclusively face-aggravating throughout the scene. For instance, he does adhere to some conversational norms, giving a clarification to Penny’s I’m sorry (I need eggs), expressing (eventual) agreements (Penny: So you got canned, huh? Sheldon: Theoretical physicists do not get canned. But yeah. Penny: Let’s say 4,390. Sheldon: Fine.), and apologising (Oh, I’m sorry, did I insult you?). Thus, while his dialogue shows face-aggravation as outlined above, the fact that this does not occur throughout the dialogue might indicate that it is not intentional. This is further confirmed by Sheldon’s apparent lack of understanding of social norms, for instance when he
finds out that it may be insulting to guess a woman’s body weight (Turns 24–26: Sheldon: ... now add say 140 for me, 120 for you. Penny: 120? Sheldon: Oh, I’m sorry, did I insult you? Is your body mass somehow tied into your self worth? ... Interesting). These features indicate to viewers (even those previously unfamiliar with Sheldon) the unintentionality of his face-aggravating behaviour. This is also confirmed by the exchange between Leonard and Sheldon following the scene:

(6) Leonard (entering): Hey, I just ran into Penny, she seemed upset about something.

Sheldon: I think it’s her time of the month. I marked the calendar for future reference.

This clearly shows Sheldon’s lack of awareness (and hence unintentionality) of the face-damage he has caused Penny. It arguably distinguishes him from other filmic or televisual characters that are constructed as intentionally damaging or threatening others’ face, such as House in *House* (Richardson 2010), Chigurgh in *No Country for Old Men* (Piazza et al. 2011a) or the Colonel in *Scent of a Woman* (Culpeper 2001). At the same time, it brings him closer to characters such as Seven of Nine in *Star Trek: Voyager* (Mandala 2011) or Data and Spock in other *Star Trek* series, characters who appear to damage others’ face unintentionally because of their partial ‘alienness’ and seem willing to learn more about ‘normal’ human conventions.

The ‘virtual’ (Richardson 2010: 184) un/intentionality of face-aggravating behaviour, then, may give rise to different characters and character types. For certain characters, linguistically deviant behaviour is ‘a matter of relational mismanagement’ (Culpeper 2008: 31) rather than a result of intentional face-aggravation. However, un/intentionality is not enough to determine character, as there are clear differences between characters such as House and Chigurgh (intentionally face-aggravating), or Sheldon and Seven of Nine (unintentionally face-aggravating). Audiences would at least take into account potential causes for both intentional and unintentional face-aggravating behaviour, for instance, physical pain in the case of House, assimilation into an alien race in the case of Seven of Nine — in other words, the character’s biography. Unintentionality has also been associated with other causes (Terkourafi 2008: 52, 62, 64; Bousfield 2008a: 133). In all characterisation, the audience as ratified overhearers have a number of clues to draw on that help them interpret the face-aggravating behaviour of characters. For example, audience members familiar with *The Big Bang Theory* are likely to link Sheldon’s face-aggravating behaviour to his lack of social skills, his Asperger-like personality and mainstream stereotypes about nerds — fea-
tures that the corpus-based analyses have revealed and that are reinforced throughout the series. As Wickham (2007) notes, ‘[s]itcoms … rely on recognition to be funny – recognition of what a character we have come to know is likely to do in a given situation’ (Wickham 2007: 102–103). In other words, Sheldon’s behaviour in this scene may be attributed to particular expectations that are related to Sheldon and his behaviour. It has been pointed out that it is important to consider participant expectations about a particular discursive practice, i.e. the norms of courtroom discourse differ from those of other types of discourse (Locher & Bousfield 2008: 7–8). Culpeper (2008: 30) mentions four types of norms:

- **Personal norms** based on the totality of X’s social experiences.
- **Cultural norms** based on the totality of X’s experiences of a particular culture.
- **Situational norms** based on the totality of X’s experience of a particular situation in a particular culture.
- **Co-textual norms** based on the totality of X’s experience of a particular interaction in a particular situation in a particular culture.

To these norms we can perhaps add a fifth, *individual* norms, based on the totality of X’s experiences of Y’s behaviour. In other words, as we repeatedly interact with specific others, we build up expectations or norms relating to how they typically behave, associated with their personality, or identity. Factors that may also be influential in how audiences construct characters include whether or not the characters take pleasure from face-damage, the specific kinds of face-aggravating behaviour engaged in (how ‘damaging’ is it, how ‘witty’ is it, how ‘dangerous’ is it, is it physical as well as communicative, etc.), stereotypical behaviour associated with characters’ professions (cf. Richardson 2010: 178 on the rude doctor schema), etc.

To sum up this section, the audience’s interpretation of a character’s face-aggravating behaviour interacts with factors such as unintentionality, character biography, character personality/identity and social stereotypes in complex ways. Textual cues ‘influence one another through the ways in which they are combined’ (Lothe 2000: 84) and allow us to construct characters as threateningly abnormal, or funnily abnormal, or somehow non-human, or indeed as instantiations of particular social identities. Using terminology from sociocultural linguistics (e.g. Bucholtz 2011a), we could also say that scriptwriters construct *styles* for characters using a cluster of semiotic resources that *index* or point to particular identities.
6. Nerdiness and Sheldon

It can be seen from the above that Sheldon’s semiotic practices, his style, indexes his identity as a full-blown nerd/geek, or in Culpeper’s terms, ‘instantiates’ a nerd/geek schema. In fact, all four main ‘nerd’ characters in *The Big Bang Theory* instantiate the schema to a certain extent: they are rather unattractive males (mostly white, though one Asian), either physicists or engineers with MAs/PhDs, they like sci-fi, comic books, do role plays, do not have girlfriends (at least at the beginning of the series), are youngish (in their twenties), and so on. Clearly, Sheldon and the others form part of a subculture of nerds. The *Big Bang Theory* plainly has recourse to mainstream and media stereotypes (compare also Penny as an instance of the ‘dumb blonde’ [Inness 2007] in popular media) and like other media texts it thus both shapes audience stereotypes and is shaped by mainstream stereotypes in a reflexive relationship (Andriotopoulos 2010). However, even while the characters may all be nerds, they have their own individuality and clear differences: there are degrees of nerdiness in *The Big Bang Theory*. Thus, while playing along with stereotypical associations of nerdiness, to some degree the sitcom also shows the uniqueness of personalities. To give just one example, Leonard seems to have the least difficulty in engaging with members of the opposite sex, while Raj is unable to even speak to them unless he is drunk. Howard is a failed womaniser, while Sheldon is more or less asexual. Full investigation of these issues would necessitate analysing the other major and minor nerd characters (Leonard, Raj, Howard, Leslie, Leonard’s mother, etc.) in as much detail as I have analysed Sheldon in this article. However, Sheldon is apparently styled as someone who fulfils all the stereotypical character traits of a nerd/geek as well as some others that are shared with particular psychological conditions. His arrogance, obsessive-compulsive and Asperger-like behaviour distinguishes him from the other nerds in *The Big Bang Theory* and contributes to his being evaluated, even by the other ‘nerds’, as batcrap crazy. This does not necessarily mean that viewers evaluate Sheldon negatively — the reading of media texts clearly depends on the position taken by the viewer (e.g. Bednarek 2010: 214–222). For instance, Sheldon’s rejection of social skills/conventions such as small talk or taboo topics might be evaluated by some viewers positively, as unmasking meaningless conventions and practices that have been naturalised and conventionalised and typically remain unquestioned. In this way, Sheldon might be evaluated as someone who is not simply a nerd, but a ‘wise fool’.8

In analysing televisual characterisation, it has also become clear that Sheldon’s character traits are reinforced in multiple ways: they are reinforced through self- and other-representation throughout the series, they
draw on commonly held stereotypes and audience knowledge, and they are instantiated in individual scenes. A full multimodal analysis would show further reinforcement through features such as visual appearance, the character’s clothing, facial expression, paralinguistic behaviour (e.g. Sheldon’s distinctive ‘laughter’ — see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TGggsvdWoJs), typical character actions (e.g. visits to the comic book store), etc. Identities such as nerdiness are constructed through semiotic practices that include more than language but may also encompass hairstyles, clothes and accessories, activities, musical preferences and other values (Bucholtz 2011a). Full analysis of Sheldon’s semiotic practices would show how these work together in the construction of his particular ‘nerd’ identity. Sheldon also accumulates further characteristics in later seasons (e.g. his bazinga catchphrase, which he uses to mark his attempts at jokes/humour). This multiple reinforcement and accumulation may be an effective way of drawing an audience into a series, multiplying the ways in which they can quickly build up an impression of a particular character, thus making them ‘care’.

In terms of the interaction between members of the audience and the media figure Sheldon and drawing on media psychology (cf section 1), audience members can in general interact with him as if they know him personally (parasocial interaction), hence humanising the character. If they share some of Sheldon’s characteristics, they may at least partially identify with him (note the success of The Big Bang Theory with self-described nerds and the appearance of the cast at ‘nerdy’ events such as the Comic-Con 2009). Finally, members of the audience may simply like the character (affinity). Thus, audiences may like a character for aesthetic reasons, i.e. in terms of the character being interesting, having great dialogue, being performed by a fantastic actor, and so on. This relates to Clark’s (1996) notion of appreciation (Bibel 2006: 5) and the importance of pleasure in viewing television (Fiske 1994: 239). In this context, it is important to note that televisual dialogue fulfils many different functions (Kozloff 2000: 33–34), the creation of character being only one of them. Unconventional but entertaining, and often witty, dialogue can contribute to branding a series and also works to provide pleasure and entertainment to the audience (Richardsion 2010: 169, 185). Norm-breaking dialogue is also clearly associated with genre features and the creation of audience laughter in sitcoms (e.g. Stokoe 2008). The stereotypical styling of others is clearly tied to the production of entertainment (Androutsopoulos & Georganakopoulou 2008: 465). Insofar as viewers accept such stereotyping unquestionably, they might be said to be co-constructing such stereotypes in a collective process (cf. Ladegaard 2011: 102–104). However, the ways in which audiences engage with televisual characters needs a lot more research drawing on audience studies (Liv-
ingstone 1998; Briggs 2010). It would be particularly interesting to explore how self-described ‘nerds’ engage with the nerds of popular culture, such as the nerdy teenagers described by Bucholtz (1999, 2011a) who ‘are not — as they are popularly figured in cultural representations — socially dysfunctional oddities and outcasts’ (Bucholtz 2011a: 63). At the same time, we have seen that Sheldon’s dialogue seems to exhibit certain aspects of these nerdy teenagers’ speech (formal lexis) — a fuller comparison would be interesting but was beyond the scope of this article. Combining research into ‘real-life’ identity and ‘mediatisations’ of identity is a fruitful area for linguistic research (cf. Bucholtz 2011b). Further research also needs to be undertaken into other television ‘nerds’ to get a fuller picture of the representation of ‘nerdiness’ in contemporary television. Finally, other methodologies should be applied to the data to get at implicit linguistic cues (phonetic and phonological features, conversational structure, syntactic features, etc.) and other (multimodal) semiotic indexes and the way they combine to produce a particular style (cf. Bucholtz 2011a: 238).

Nevertheless, I hope that this article has demonstrated the insights that we can gain from including televisial characterisation as an area of (socio-)linguistic study and that it has illustrated the different but complementary perspectives that methods such as corpus linguistic and pragmatic analysis offer us in this study. In this sense, I see this paper as a contribution to the rather recent and exciting field of research into televisial characterisation currently being undertaken in various sub-disciplines of linguistics.

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Notes

1. I thank David Caldwell for preparing these corpora and editorial help and the editors of this special issue as well as two anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback on earlier versions of this article.

2. The first scene of each of the 17 episodes was checked for accuracy against the transcripts. The transcripts for these scenes (~ 6431 words in total) were 99.5 percent accurate; errors recurring most frequently concerned standardisation for wanna, gonna, gotta, which were sometimes transcribed as want to, going to and got to.

3. For a more detailed discussion of research on televisial characterisation see Bednarek (2010), Richardson (2010), and, from Media Studies, Pearson (2007), Wickham (2007).

4. This is part of a longer interaction, which clearly shows Sheldon’s belief in his intellectual superiority over others, even other scientists:

   Missy: Yup, I’m always bragging to my friends about my brother the rocket scientist.
   Sheldon: You tell people I’m a rocket scientist?
Missy: Well yeah.
Sheldon: I’m a theoretical physicist.
Missy: What’s the difference?
Sheldon: What’s the difference?
Missy: Goodbye Shelly.
Sheldon: My God! Why don’t you just tell them I’m a toll taker at the Golden Gate Bridge? Rocket scientist, how humiliating.

All concordance lines were examined in their interactional context to clarify what aspects of identity they revealed, but for reasons of space this interactional context cannot be fully reproduced in table 1.

5. Keywords settings: max p value 0.05, min frequency 3, max wanted 2000, log likelihood statistics.

6. Culpeper’s approach is criticised and modified by Bousfield (e.g. 2008a, b); and both his and Bousfield’s modification are discussed in more detail by Archer (2008) and García-Conejos Blitvich (2010b: 544–545).

7. The role and status of intentionality in impoliteness is hotly debated. My own focus is on character impression formation on the part of the audience and how intentionality may play a role here. This may differ from interpretation of face-aggravating behaviour in the ‘real’ world.

8. As pointed out by one of the anonymous reviewers.

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Bionote

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