Paralinguistic character structure in popular syndicated television: 2" TV

ALAN D. MANNING

We might refer to them collectively as 'the shows that wouldn't die': programs that enjoy perpetual popularity in syndication, some of which barely lasted three years in first run (e.g., Gilligan's Island, Star Trek, and more recently, M*A*S*H — programs that apparently retain their appeal even after every episode has been seen numerous times). This acceptable repetition is remarkable given the ephemeral nature of most television programming: 'it's a rerun' is usually a denunciation and our cue to switch channels, and most programs 'die' upon cancellation or after a few cycles in syndication at best. The clear exceptions deserve explanation, and where possible, one coherent explanation, which can only be formulated if we can identify significant properties common to these exceptional 'undying' programs — properties not also typical of most, less durable series.

I propose here that many of these exceptional programs share a common underlying formula of character-group organization that surfaces empirically as a simple rule: the number of main characters in a perpetually successful syndicated series is typically a function of some power of two ($2^n$). This is, four ($2^2 = 2^2$) or eight ($2^3 = 2^3$) characters, or alternately, three ($2^3 - 1$) or seven ($2^4 - 1$) human characters in cases where the (background setting) of a program by itself constitutes an indispensable entity in the ongoing narrative (e.g., 'the island' in Gilligan's Island or the U.S.S. Enterprise in Star Trek). For example:

FOUR CHARACTERS ($2^2$):

* I Love Lucy: Lucy, Ricky, Ethel, Fred
  * Bewitched: Samantha, Darren, Endora, Larry
  * Gunsmoke: Matt, Kitty, Doc, Chester/Festus
  * Get Smart: Max, 99, Control, (CHAOS)

EIGHT CHARACTERS ($2^3$):

* M*A*S*H: Hawkeye, Trapper/B. J., Houlihan, Burns/Winchester, Blake/Potter, Radar, Father Mulcahy, Klinger

Semiotica 89/1-3 (1992): 47-82

0037-1998/92/0089-0047 $2.00
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Gilligan's Island: Gilligan, Skipper, Mr. Howell, Mrs. Howell, Ginger, Professor, Mary Ann, \(\text{the island}\)

Star Trek: Kirk, Spock, McCoy, Scotty, Sulu, Uhura, Chekov, \(\text{Enterprise}\)

Componental analysis from linguistic theory and an instructive analogy from human color perception suggest a principled psychological explanation of this 2^\text{nd} character rule, which in turn may contribute to at least a partial explanation of the popularity of the 'undying' programs that conform to that rule.

Theoretical issues

This discussion touches on at least two crucial issues in semiotic theory: (1) the role of 'structure' (i.e., contrastive feature systems) in light of 'post-structural' thinking, and (2) the relationship between language and other semiotic systems.

Since Lévi-Strauss borrowed the strategy from the Prague School linguists, 'structuralist' features have been used to analyze other cultural signs besides language, including television programming. And yet, feature analysis is currently out of favor in most circles, since it seems to ignore all the richness and complexity of sign interpretation (linguistic or otherwise) that cannot be reduced to a handful of primitive features. By borrowing a tactic from generative linguistics, to search for constraints on the acceptable form of a sign (apart from the problem of interpretation), I suggest a rescue of feature analysis and identify the equivalent of grammatical form in television programming — the handful of programs organized around a well-formed, feature-based system are more widespread, more permanent fixtures in the semiotic life of our culture than the great multitude of programs which are not so organized.

It is true that just about anything, any form, can constitute a meaningful sign in a particular context: a footprint or a broken branch, for a detective; a raised finger or a raised eyebrow in silent communication between intimates; and so on, \textit{ad infinitum}. But it is a relatively restricted set of signs that are consistently meaningful to a society at large in a variety of contexts. Natural languages are a part of that restricted sign-set and are organized around grammars that constrain their form. Most young people in the U.S. (who are otherwise ignorant of American culture of the 1960s) can accurately recite the theme to Gilligan's Island, suggesting that this program also belongs to that limited but widespread sign-set.

Here I advance the hypothesis that Gilligan's Island and other culturally
omnipresent programs are likewise organized around a kind of grammar. Thus, popular television programs serve to illustrate paralinguistic principles in another domain of human interaction, suggesting that the grammatical patterns of natural languages may be not so widely separated from other forms of semiotic exchange. Indeed, the similarity of both linguistic word-groups and television character patterns to the paradigm of universal color categories suggests a common psychological principle underlying them all. Subsequent discussion is organized as follows: First, I will define the type of program to which the proposed paralinguistic analysis seems most directly applicable. Second, I will outline linguistic and perceptual patterns analogous to the observed character patterns that could conceivably contribute to a TV series’ long-term watchability in syndication. Third, I will discuss differences between the proposed analysis and other analyses of popular television in the current literature, including structural analysis (i.e., the structuralism pioneered by Lévi-Strauss, which also utilizes componental features as a formal device).

The specific television programs for which I currently have enough information to formulate reliable analyses are drawn almost exclusively from American television. The extent to which the proposed analysis is applicable to television programming in other countries is certainly worth investigating, but such is beyond the scope of this article. However, readers in other countries (who watch any television at all) should be familiar with several programs discussed below, such as *I Love Lucy*, *Gunsmoke*, *Gilligan’s Island*, and *Star Trek*, since these have been popular in international syndication (and in many languages besides English) for several years. Such international popularity is in keeping with the fact that each of these programs has a theoretically ideal character pattern. $M^*A^*S^*H$ has more recently developed essentially the same character pattern and the same pattern of syndication success; consequently it will also be familiar to many viewers, in English-speaking countries at least.

Since it would not be possible in such a short space to provide a comprehensive analysis of all television programs, I intend with these few examples to demonstrate the general method of analysis that may then be applied to other cases. For example, I would predict that *Cheers*, an even more recent program with a $2^n$ pattern, will eventually have domestic and international success comparable to that of the programs mentioned above.

For comparison, I will discuss other American programs approximating the ideal pattern which have had noteworthy (if not overwhelming) syndication success: for example, *The Beverly Hillbillies* and *Hogan’s Heroes*. Finally, I will discuss programs (past and present) that manifest only fragmented or ambiguous versions of the $2^n$ pattern: *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970–77) has had only average success in syndication (relative
to the previous examples), in spite of original popularity in prime time and critical acclaim. Based on the proposed analysis, I would predict, for example, that Night Court will ultimately not be as successful in syndication as Cheers, and that Star Trek: The Next Generation (in its present form) will not be nearly as watchable in rerun as the original Star Trek.

Focus of the analysis: Non-literal families and non-serial plots

Popular syndicated programs not necessarily subject to the 2nd character rule have at least one of two obvious narrative components. For example, My Three Sons and The Brady Bunch, with five and nine main characters respectively, portray literal (rather than metaphorical) family groups; serial programs like Dallas support a large and flexible number of main characters (from ten to about fifteen in any given season). Family-style character relationships constitute ‘the dominant metaphor for all North American television’ (Attallah 1984: 239–240). There are two ways of managing a narrative with a family group (literal or metaphorical) at its focus, as Jane Feuer notes: ‘the episodic series depends upon a continual re-integration of the family’ while ‘the continuing serial depends upon a continual disintegration of the family’ (1986: 105).

In other words, the family group in a continuing serial or ‘soap opera’-style program (e.g., Dallas) exists only as an ideal that is never actually realized; from one installment to the next, all conflict is never quite resolved and the family is never completely integrated, but viewers keep watching, presumably in the (vain) hope that it will be. The 2nd character pattern to be described below creates (among other things) a tightly integrated character-group; consequently the pattern does not reliably occur in serial programs like Dallas or L.A. Law. Convincing representation of an integrated, literal family seems rather straightforward: supply a parent or parents and a child or children. But convincing representation as a family of a group of characters that are in fact not a family would apparently require some exceptional strategy in order to integrate the group. The 2nd character pattern may constitute such a strategy.

Series about literal families in non-serial (episodic) form have dominated American television since the 1950s (from The Aldrich Family to Leave it to Beaver to All in the Family to Family Ties). Non-serial shows featuring metaphorical, non-literal families (the castaways of Gilligan's Island, the prisoners of Hogan's Heroes, the crew of the Enterprise) emerged in the 1960s, and ‘workplace families’ became prominent in the 1970s and early '80s (Mary Tyler Moore Show, M*A*S*H, Taxi, Cheers). However, the late '70s and early '80s also saw the (re)emergence of ‘prime-time soaps',


serial dramas centered around literal families (the Ewings of *Dallas*, the Carrington-Colbys of *Dynasty*, etc.). In hindsight, it is not surprising that the most recent (mid-to-late ’80s) trend should exploit this paradigm’s final logical permutation, serial drama centered around non-literal workplace families: the precinct of *Hill Street Blues*, the staff of *St. Elsewhere*, the legal firm partners of *L.A. Law*, etc.

True to the principle of ‘continual disintegration’, these more recent workplace families are permanently and perpetually divided, in contrast with the always resolvable differences between characters in episodic television ‘families’. For example, the contrastive relationships among characters of *Hill Street Blues* and *St. Elsewhere* were

not just eccentricities, as in MASH, but real differences of class, race, politics, and personal style that produce real conflicts among them. ... [The characters] have conflicts over promotions, assignments, girlfriends, and questions of ethical conduct. The resolutions impose costs; someone always loses. (Zynda 1984: 260)

Nevertheless, the set of undying syndicated programs comes almost exclusively from relatively static and unrealistic episodic comedy (like *M*A*S*H*, or the even more surreal situation portrayed on *Gilligan’s Island*) or adventure from remote times and places (like *Gunsmoke* and *Star Trek*), while relatively dynamic and realistic serial dramas (like *China Beach* or *L.A. Law*) are all but unwatchable in rerun. From this we may conclude that the popularity of a program in syndication has very little to do with its being a convincing simulation of reality, if there is not in fact a negative correlation. The 2º (four or eight) character patterns typical of popular syndicated programs (and rarely if ever found in serial drama) seem quite similar to *linguistic structures* that we use to categorize and interpret reality, but which are likewise quite distinct from direct perception of reality. In sum, these programs become immortal in our culture because they are *not* merely imitations of social reality; these programs are immortal because they are absorbed as permanent quasi-linguistic patterns of social communication — that is, as *paralanguage*.

**Parallels in linguistic categorization**

Words with related meanings commonly cluster in groups of four and rather less often in groups of eight (Hurford and Heasley 1983: 115–117). Also, as a rule, words (like characters in the average sitcom) make reference to reality without directly simulating reality; words are necessarily finite and discrete elements, while their ‘meaning’ — the perceptions to which words make reference — are full of infinite detail and nondiscrete grada-
tion. For example, just four terms — *hot*, *cold*, *warm*, and *cool* — refer to the much more numerous possible gradations of human temperature perception. Furthermore, the same temperature we call ‘hot’ in one context may be ‘warm’, ‘cool’, or even ‘cold’ in another. For example, an 80° day in Minnesota in winter is ‘hot’, but an 80° day in Louisiana in summer is ‘cool’; and 80° body temperature is ‘cold’ (dead).

Similar four-word groups include *Spring*, *Summer*, *Fall*, and *Winter* (e.g., June 15 may be referred to as a ‘spring day’ or a ‘summer day’); *true*, *false*, *right*, and *wrong*; or, for an eight-word example, *North*, *South*, *East*, *West*, *Northeast*, *Northwest*, *Southeast*, and *Southwest*. The clear-cut ‘abstract’ distinctions between these words are not matched by clear boundaries in their interpretations, the perceptions they represent. This point becomes significant in later discussion. Some eight-member patterns in English grammar include the set of interrogatives (*who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, *why*, *how*, *which*, and *whether*) and the set of grammatical inflections (Plural [-s], Possessive [-s], Present-3rd person [-s], Past [-ed], Present Participle [-ing], Past Participle [-en], Comparative [-er], and Superlative [-est] — Parker 1986: 70).

Comparable category-groups of four and eight with a linguistic basis (i.e., a common word for each category) can also have an evident non-linguistic component, such as the four playing-card suits (diamonds, hearts, spades, and clubs) or the eight basic categories of color: ‘red’, ‘yellow’, ‘blue’, ‘green’, ‘orange’, ‘purple’, ‘black’, and ‘white’.

Finally, there are category groups that are essentially non-linguistic (i.e., there is no unique, commonly known term for each category), viz. the four narrative movements in television discussed previously: (a) literal family, serial plot, (b) non-literal family, serial plot, (c) literal family, non-serial plot and (d) non-literal family, non-serial plot (the focus of this analysis).

**Complete intercombination of componential features:** $N_G = 2^n f$

It is easily seen that the four program formats above are based on the presence or absence of just two basic components. In linguistic theory, two or three semantic components hypothetically intercombine to form the kinds of word-groups discussed above. Such components are called *features*, and are conventionally labeled by upper-case expressions in square brackets [...]. The significance of the numbers four and eight in a group of related words, categories, or television characters lies in the fact that these are exactly the numbers you would expect if two or three underlying features were operating (being present or absent) in every possible combination. This is expressed in the formula $N_G = 2^n f$, where $N_G$ means the
Number of members in a Group and \( n_f \) means the number of underlying features. As we have seen, two features define a four-member group (since \( 4 = 2^2 \)); adding a third feature doubles this number to eight (\( = 2^3 \)). So, for example, the four terms man, woman, boy, and girl are based on the presence (+) or absence (−) of two features we might label as [MALE] and [ADULT] as follows:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{man} & \quad [+ \text{MALE}, + \text{ADULT}] \\
\text{woman} & \quad [- \text{MALE}, + \text{ADULT}] \\
\text{boy} & \quad [+ \text{MALE}, - \text{ADULT}] \\
\text{girl} & \quad [- \text{MALE}, - \text{ADULT}]
\end{align*}
\]

Adding a third feature [HORSE] to the system creates four other terms, making eight terms in all (see Parker 1986: 30–31).

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{stallion} & \quad [+ \text{HORSE}, + \text{MALE}, + \text{ADULT}] \\
\text{mare} & \quad [+ \text{HORSE}, - \text{MALE}, + \text{ADULT}] \\
\text{colt} & \quad [+ \text{HORSE}, + \text{MALE}, - \text{ADULT}] \\
\text{filly} & \quad [+ \text{HORSE}, - \text{MALE}, - \text{ADULT}]
\end{align*}
\]

Certain subtle but significant aspects of feature analysis are perhaps better illustrated by those examples that are partially non-linguistic, since the working components are more directly observable. Consider the four suits in a deck of cards, referred to by the words hearts, diamonds, clubs, and spades. Visually, the four figures corresponding with these words clearly share component features; both clubs and spades have ‘stems’ on the bottom; spades and diamonds have a pointed ‘apex’ on top (see Figure 1B). Based on these features, each suit-word has a unique specification: hearts = [NO STEM, NO APEX], clubs = [STEM, NO APEX], diamonds = [NO STEM, APEX], spades = [STEM, APEX]. We might visualize these relationships as groups of overlapping circles, each circle representing a feature as illustrated in Figure 1. One circle on a piece of paper creates two (\( 2^1 \)) regions, inside and outside the circle (see Figure 1A); two overlapping circles create four (\( 2^2 \)) regions (see Figure 1B); three symmetrically overlapping circles create eight (\( 2^3 \)) regions (Figure 2).

The system of four card suits fit in the two-circle diagram in Figure 1B. Hearts, with neither [STEM] nor [APEX], are outside of both circles; clubs are exclusively in the [STEM] circle; diamonds exclusively in the [APEX] circle; spades occupy both circles. The eight basic colors are commonly represented as regions defined by three overlapping circles as illustrated in Figure 2 (Varley 1980: 13,21). Each circle contains one of three primary colors which intercombine to create three more ‘secondary’ color-regions and a seventh ‘composite’ color-region in the center, against an eighth ‘background color’ created by the absence of any primary color.
Figure 1. Elements in a feature-based system may be represented as regions created by overlapping circles, where each circle represents a feature, or in other words, a set of objects that share a common feature-characteristic.

Now, the actual hue in each region of this color paradigm depends on which colors are chosen as primaries and the medium in which they are mixed. So, if you take 'red', 'yellow', and 'blue' crayons, the familiar or subtractive primaries, and color three overlapping circles on a white sheet of paper, you obtain the pattern illustrated in Figure 2A. Secondary colors, 'orange', 'green', and 'purple', appear in the three regions where two primaries overlap, and 'black' appears in the region where all three primaries overlap. If, on the other hand, you mix red light (a slightly more orange shade) with green and blue light (a slightly more violet shade), you obtain the pattern illustrated in Figure 2B, known to those who work with color video monitors: here, three additive primaries (the three colors on a video screen: orange-red, green, violet-blue) each occupy one feature-circle.
exclusively. The three subtractive primaries (the three colors used by printers: magenta-red, yellow, cyan-blue) each occupy the 'inner leaves', the regions where two feature-circles overlap. White is at the intersection of all circles (the combination of all colors), and black is outside of all circles (essentially a non-color or the absence of color).

The same three features underlying both eight-region color systems in Figure 2 have a readily identifiable physiological basis — i.e., the three types of color receptors (cones) in the eye, commonly labeled R, G, and B (Varley 1980: 34). Two relevant points about features are illustrated: first, the three color features define eight category positions without comprehensively defining the colors themselves (since the actual hue in each position may vary); second, though these features have a definite physical
basis, they are still abstract in the sense that they should not be confused with actual primary colors inside the feature circles (any more than you would confuse the feature [STEM] with an actual club). Each cone responds to a range of color (Gouras 1981: 250). Nevertheless, cone R is most sensitive to the orange-red spectrum, cone B is most sensitive to the violet-blue spectrum and cone G is most sensitive to shades of green, and so the additive primaries are here defined by the features [R], [B], and [G] respectively. The more familiar subtractive primaries ‘red’, ‘yellow’, and ‘blue’ each represents a two-color-receptor balance: [RB], [RG], and [GB] respectively. This point will also become significant in later discussion.

To summarize to this point, a significant number of highly durable syndicated television programs have either four or eight characters (often counting a well-defined background setting). These programs typically have episodic rather than serial format and portray metaphorical rather than actual family groups. Certain linguistic structures are comparable to the integrated character-groups in popular syndicated television on these two points: First, related words commonly occur in groups of four or eight. Second, the discrete abstract relationships between word-categories (like the surreal society of characters on Gilligan’s Island, etc.) are also ‘unrealistic’ when directly compared with the subtle variations and non-discrete gradations in real experience (e.g., the eight basic color terms versus the thousands of perceptible gradations in actual hue).

Four- and eight-member linguistic category-groups (and partially non-linguistic categories like color and card suits) are evidently based on two or three component features. Each alternative combination of the features specifies one member’s position in the category-group. It is therefore conceivable that television characters in a four- or eight-member group might also share among themselves two or three ‘features’ that essentially define each member’s position in the group. I will now analyze several programs in this way, and then discuss some advantages that such paralinguistic analyses may have over other approaches to these programs.

**Two and four-member character patterns**

The four-character pattern common in popular syndicated television can also be thought of as a double elaboration of the two-character ‘hero-sidekick’ pattern typical of prominent characters in modern cultural mythology, such as the Lone Ranger and Tonto, Holmes and Watson, or Tarzan and Jane (see Figure 3A). Particular characteristics of each pair vary, but all these hero-sidekick pairs are based on the presence or lack of that basic characteristic — here given the generic label [HEROIC
FEATURE] — that more or less defines the heroic status of the ‘foreground’ (i.e., most prominent) character. For example, Holmes solves crimes with passionless reasoning abilities Watson lacks; Tarzan grew up in the jungle and Jane did not; both the Lone Ranger and Tonto right wrongs, but the Lone Ranger has a mask (a secret identity) and Tonto does not.

In this analysis the four-character pattern is based on two definitive character features rather than one. Figure 3B diagrams positions held by the main characters of I Love Lucy, Gunsmoke, Bewitched, I Dream of Jeannie, All in the Family, and Moonlighting (compare with Figure 1B). Again, the particulars of each program example vary, but in general terms two characters each possess one of two normally incompatible characteristics — here generically labeled [LEFT] and [RIGHT]. A third character
synthesizes both characteristics and a fourth character is not defined by either characteristic.

So, for *I Love Lucy*, [LEFT] designates Ricky Ricardo’s career in show business and [RIGHT] designates Ethel Mertz’s domestic role as a housewife. (Fred Mertz, in the background, is neither a domestic nor a show business character.) The standard narrative of *I Love Lucy* thus concerns housewife Lucy Ricardo (the most prominent character) and her attempts to break into show business or to associate with show business personalities. The [LEFT] feature of *Gunsmoke* would be Festus’s (or the earlier Chester’s) rough frontier mannerisms, while the [RIGHT] feature would be Doc’s educated and orderly manner. The standard narrative of *Gunsmoke* thus concerns sophisticated frontiersman Matt Dillon’s attempts to bring law and order to the rough frontier.

This analysis reveals differences between these programs as well as similarities. Though *Betwitched* and *I Dream of Jeannie* are similar in terms of their overt premise (mortal cohabitates with supernatural being), the lead female roles occupy different positions in the four-character pattern. The central *Betwitched* character, Samantha, a witch living as a normal middle-class housewife, mediates between the world of ‘witchcraft’ [LEFT] and the world of ‘mortals’ [RIGHT], represented on one hand by her obnoxious witch-mother Endora and on the other by her equally obnoxious middle-class husband Darren. But while Samantha clearly understands and moves between two worlds, Jeannie is planted exclusively in the [LEFT] domain of *Arabian Nights* magic, given the basic premise of *I Dream of Jeannie* that Jeannie has been in her bottle for two thousand years and has no (and later only a limited) understanding of the modern technological world [RIGHT]. Astronauts in the 1960s moon program (icons of modern technology), Maj. Tony Nelson and Maj. Roger Healey represent the [RIGHT] feature domain here, but Major Nelson, the ‘pure’ technocrat and second foreground character, resists and avoids Jeannie’s magical services whenever possible, while Major Healy, a ‘sidekick’ supporting character, occupies the middle position, as represented by Roger’s regular attempts to exploit Jeannie’s magic for his own benefit. *All in the Family* and *Moonlighting* (before its slide into self-destruction) also instantiated this second type, with Michael and Archie talking past each other from caricatures of left and right politics, and with Maddie and Dave talking past each other (rapidly and simultaneously) from their respective viewpoints of responsible [RIGHT] and irresponsible [LEFT] behavior.

Prominent foreground characters articulate the basic elements of each program; but background characters, by their inarticulate but persistent presence, illustrate the more central point of this analysis: that the very number of continuing characters in a program plays a significant role in
its long-term acceptability. Some characters, like Edith Bunker, are overtly important to the narrative (e.g., to evoke and suffer Archie’s rude behavior), but some simply fill a space in the character pattern. Fred Mertz, for example, contributes very little to the narrative of *I Love Lucy*, except as a ‘pal’ for Ricky, and Kitty serves as little more than a perpetual potential love-interest for Matt in *Gunsmoke*. However, Fred and Kitty occupy a defined region in a feature-based character pattern (regions created by the feature-circles in Figure 3B) that (by this analysis) must be filled to correctly form an integrated group. Well-formed, two-feature programs that originally lack a fourth character or a well-defined background setting ultimately develop one (as *Moonlighting* eventually added Herb Viola to its original three-continuing-character cast). Well-formed two-feature programs with five original characters — more characters than defined regions — will eliminate one, such as the gay housekeeper in the *Golden Girls* pilot, who was dropped from the series, leaving four main characters (Harris 1984).

Not many television programs can be considered well-formed in this kind of analysis, since most lack the correct number of characters and/or correctly distributed character features, but that is precisely the point here. Not many television programs remain watchable in syndication for years, but of those few that do, a significant number manifest such character patterns, particularly the more complex (2^3) eight-region patterns to be examined below. Before proceeding, however, I should clarify the differences between this type of analysis and the sociological/psychological approaches to television that dominate the current literature.

The principle difference is my focus on the general and consistent form of a meaningful object, which is typical of modern linguistic analysis, rather than the particular and variable interpretations of a meaningful object, which are the usual focus of sociological and psychological analyses of television. In sociological terms, we might perceive in each program a conflict between the staid values of [RIGHT], the bourgeois middle-class (e.g., Darren Stevens) and the innovative values of [LEFT], an enlightened elite (e.g., the jet-set witch Endora); in psychological terms, a conflict between psychological authority (e.g., the ‘traditional’ Archie Bunker) and psychological autonomy (e.g., the ‘modern’ Michael Stivic — Homans 1983: 9–14). Such interpretations may be compelling, but they are simply not the only interpretations possible.

In other words, there are two levels of ‘meaning’ in television (and in all of art, for that matter): the interpretive level (e.g., what does *Moonlighting* say to us about liberalism and conservatism, hedonism and the work-ethic?) and the formal level of uninterpreted program events (e.g., who held a limbo contest on a slow day at Blue Moon Investigations, and who objected?). ‘Serious’ television analyses seem to deal almost exclusively
with the interpretive level, while the formal level might seem fit only to supply trivia questions. I would suggest that both levels are important and worthy of study, but that an analysis of television characters modeled after the standard linguistic analysis of word groups must be grounded in the formal rather than the interpretive level. That is, the componential features at the foundation of the analysis must be derived from universally recognized conditions in a program's basic situation and narrative (i.e., the 'surface text') rather than from debatable interpretations of the situation and narrative.

First, as the reader should now recall, a word like 'hot' has a wide range of interpretations; the word may 'say' 80° to Minnesotans in winter or 110° to Texans in summer. The fundamental linguistic analysis of 'hot' is not based on any or all of these several interpretations, but rather on its constant formal relationship with the words cold, cool, and warm. Second, at the formal level of surface text, it is possible to distinguish a 'right answer' from a 'wrong answer' (this is why trivia contests are possible). For example, we can verify by observation of Moonlighting that Dave held the limbo contest and Maddie objected to it, and not the other way around. We cannot so easily decide, for instance, whether Moonlighting's portrayal of Maddie is feminist or sexist.

**Difficulties in recent program analyses**

Whether studies have focused on the slippery 'meaning' of a program or on relative concrete data, the results have been disappointing, as Rowland and Watkins (1984) note:

To see significance in every cultural artifact and to celebrate that meaning without any appeal to discipline or some basis for validation was to discredit much of the more cautious, tentative, yet rich analyses of television and popular culture. ...(1984: 14)

Many studies currently published in mainstream communication journals seem filled with sophisticated treatments of trivial data, which, while showing effects significant at p < .05, make slight contributions to what we really know about human mass-mediated communication. ... (1985: 26)

Two essential problems emerge: the problem of validity — analyses that tell us much, but which are not truly reproduced by any other analyst and which are easily contradicted; and the problem of being revealing — here, analyses based even on 'hard' statistical evidence that tell us nothing. These are horns of a dilemma, for the more consequential and revealing the
analysis, the more controversial it becomes; the less controversial the analysis (i.e., the more ‘valid’), the less consequential and relevant it seems.

Validity (i.e., reproducibility of analysis) is hard to come by among analysts looking, for example, for sociological or psychological interpretations in television or film because of the inherent flexibility of interpretation. Even those ‘cautious, tentative, yet rich analyses’, the best examples in the literature, acquire validity at the expense of being truly revealing. For example, Atallah concludes that ‘from the mass of television writing to the content of situation comedy, the same themes reoccur: class and sexuality, authority, and modes of social interaction’ (Atallah 1984: 247). This conclusion is convincing, but of limited relevance to the question of program popularity, since it applies to nearly all programs, successes and failures alike.

General principles that relate diverse examples of ‘classical’ television and also set these apart from the tide of ephemeral programming are clearly sought, but they have not been forthcoming. In her oft-cited discussion of ‘the Why of Star Trek’, Karin Blair reviews and dismisses three common explanations of that program’s continuing popularity: (1) internally consistent plots and ‘scientific verisimilitude’, (2) ‘resonance’ with both ancient Greek and modern American mythology, and (3) an unusual love and camaraderie among the actors and production staff. As an alternative explanation strategy, Blair proposes that the popularity of Star Trek can ‘more easily be understood by referring to basic and universal psychic structures’ (1979: 311).

My proposed analysis reflects the spirit of Blair’s statement above, that a correct general analysis of popular television should address the universal psychological makeup of program viewers. However, I would then ask the following question: which ‘basic and universal psychic structures’ actually provide the key to understanding the popularity of Star Trek and many other programs as well? Blair identifies an archetypal theme from Jungian psychoanalysis — Paradise and the Fall — appearing in various Star Trek episodes. In these episodes Kirk, Spock, and company consistently reject opportunities to return to a ‘Biblical’ paradise free of obstacles, work, and pain. Star Trek instead creates a new image of paradise based on technology and the work ethic, which serve to overcome obstacles and pain (1979: 311–320). That this theme is prominent in Star Trek is all but indisputable (i.e., up to this point Blair’s analysis is quite valid), but Blair’s analysis simply cannot account for other popular programs, or even other popular Star Trek episodes that do not express that particular archetype. That is, the relevance of the paradise archetype to Blair’s own stated objective, to explain the popularity of Star Trek, is easily disputed. For all we know Star Trek may be popular in spite of rather than because of its supplanting
of traditional paradise with a new technological vision. Indeed, the ill-fated fifth Star Trek film (The Final Frontier) overtly stresses this theme and was universally condemned at its opening as the worst of the film series.

**Difficulties in structuralism and their remedies**

Stating that analyses of popular culture 'are remarkable in their general poverty', Colin MacCabe cites deficiencies in the 'intellectual' identification of high cultural forms in popular culture and the 'proletarian' celebration of popular culture's portrayal of social reality. At the same time he dismisses the structuralist approach, which solves the division between high and popular culture by dissolving it. Structuralist method refuses to differentiate amongst its objects. All cultural forms are analysed in relation to a series of contradictions and oppositions which are variously realised across all signifying systems. (MacCabe 1986: vii–viii)

MacCabe's criticism of structuralism is again directed at its relevance: an analytic strategy is weakened if it applies equally to all objects that can be analyzed. Other analysts such as Honko affirm 'the fruitfulness of the structural mode of thinking itself', but also point out that 'the usefulness of some of its results is questionable' (as cited in Parker and Thoruneyer 1986: 150). To the extent that my proposed analysis uses oppositional features and thus resembles structuralism (a critical methodology currently out of favor in most circles), it seems prudent to emphasize the differences. First, structuralism is grounded in a tradition of interpretive analysis, as Fiske's structuralist reading of Dr. Who (1984) illustrates:

The triadic hero in this story consists of Dr. Who, Romana, and K9. Their basic relationships are structured on the dimensions of first, machines (controlled) to human (controller), and second, of degree of individuality, which goes with authority. (1984: 174)

[the TARDIS] ... is the mechanical equivalent of the Doctor, who also clothes his science in the garb of eccentric individualism. It is also a metaphor for control — spatial physics expands its interior presumably ad infinitum, whereas externally it is not only compact, but a police box [an emergency telephone kiosk] — a metonym of social law and order. (1984: 177)

Second, Fiske only explains the popularity of Dr. Who by stating that its interpretations 'fit neatly and naturally with readings of social experience that we use the same discourses to understand' (1984: 170). He does not attribute its popularity to the feature-based character structure in itself, since the structuralist approach uses its features primarily as a device for
framing an interpretation (the reading of Dr. Who as a discourse about individualism, authority, and control). This predilection for interpretation goes back to Lévi-Strauss’s original structural analyses of myth (his *Mythologies*), which ‘embark upon long journeys of interpretation, witnessing endless permutations between chains of oppositions’ (Mercquier 1986: 58).

Structural features, as *interpretational elements*, have no independent validity — they are subject to reinterpretation or ‘deconstruction’. For example, the proposed opposition *control–controlled* (an interpretation of human vs. machine) is neutralized by the TARDIS, which is a machine (‘controlled’), but which also looks like a police box — in Fiske’s own words, ‘a metaphor for control’. The observation that Dr. Who’s interpretations conform with social experience reveals little about its unique popularity, for what television program, popular or otherwise, *cannot* be interpreted in conformity with the social experience of those who watch it? In MacCabe’s terms, what cultural artifact, high or popular, cannot be analyzed in terms of features, so long as those features are derived from an interpretation of the artifact (e.g., a TV program or film), rather than the artifact itself? A principle that applies equally everywhere is useless for making distinctions.

The remedy for structuralist method lies in removing its componential features from the shifting domain of interpretation (to recover validity), and recognizing where componential feature analysis can and cannot be successfully applied (to recover a revealing analysis). In short, this means reforming structuralism to reflect the linguistic methodology from which structural analysis was borrowed. Parker and Thornmeyer (1986) have already recommended this in folklore studies:

> ... it may in fact be the case that the structural study of folk narrative does not have something to gain from generative linguistic theory; however, many potential gains have been pre-empted, because structural analysis has attempted to utilize the *mechanical* apparatus of linguistic theory rather than the *conceptual* framework. That is, investigators might truly profit from applying linguistic *metatheory* and *methodology* to the study of folk narrative. They might begin to conceptualize the phenomena within their domain and analyze them the way linguists conceptualize and analyze language. (1986: 174; emphasis in the original)

To apply this advice to the case at hand, componential features should not be used as a mere mechanism for expounding the structuralist’s preferred interpretation of a program. Componential features should serve their usual purpose in a linguistic analysis, as a means of defining formal (systematic) relationships among elements in a word-group or character-group, specifically separate from the various interpretations of those words or characters in infinite, indeterminate contexts. The word ‘hot’ evokes a
broad range of physical temperatures; the character ‘Archie Bunker’ evokes a broad range of social interpretations. Social interpretations of television are nevertheless as important to us as the referential interpretations of words (for otherwise how could we use them to talk about the world?). I only suggest here that formal structural relationships among words and characters constitute an equally important (if not indispensable) foundation for their separate referential/social interpretation. The balance of this article will elaborate on the methodological principles outlined above. The validity of this analysis can be assessed by others because it is based on a specific formula with empirically accessible arguments: the number of main characters and the characteristic features of those characters in the surface text. The analysis, if valid, reveals a distinction between programs with the very longest and most successful syndication records and other programs, extremely popular in first run, that have failed to achieve comparable levels of success.

‘Classic’ character patterns: Gilligan’s Island and Star Trek

If a three-circle diagram like those in Figure 2 is used to illustrate relationships among the characters of Gilligan’s Island, the sense in which the island can count as the eighth member of the group becomes apparent. One logical permutation of any feature-set will be that case in which none of the component features is used. In the additive color system this is ‘black’ [non-R, non-G, non-B], essentially an ‘un-color’ that serves as background against which seven true color-categories are represented. By straightforward analogy, then, the island is an ‘un-character’ background for the seven ‘true’ characters shipwrecked on Gilligan’s Island, as illustrated in Figure 4A. As shown in Figure 4B, the spaceship Enterprise serves as background for the seven main characters of the original Star Trek. Likewise, a stereotypical ‘swimming pools-movie stars’ image of Beverly Hills, California serves as the background setting for the seven main characters of The Beverly Hillbillies (see Figure 6A below).

In this kind of eight-member, three-feature pattern, while one ‘background’ member has none of the definitive features, another ‘composite’ member is defined by all three features, three other members are defined by different feature-pairs, and the three remaining members are defined by only one distinct feature each. In all then, any one feature (defined here as a readily identifiable character attribute in the narrative form itself) is shared by four and only four members of the group. In the diagram this means four characters per ‘circle’. As illustrated in Figure 4A, the charac-
Figure 4. Seven-integrated-characters + background patterns of (A) Gilligan's Island and (B) the original Star Trek, each based on three distributed character features. Characters in subtractive positions (the balance of two features in the ‘inner leaves’) define primary social themes in the narratives.

ters of Gilligan's Island are readily sorted into subsets with four members each:

Four characters are men (Gilligan, the Skipper, Mr. Howell, the Professor).

Four characters had been prominent figures, well known to the outside world (of the narrative): Mr. Howell — 'the Wolf of Wall Street'; Mrs. Howell — 'prominent socialite'; the Professor — 'researcher and well-known scoutmaster'; and Ginger Grant — 'movie star'. The other four group members, including the 'uncharted' island, are of course utterly unknown and obscure.

Finally (and sometimes rather strangely), only four of the characters are
known by their 'actual' names: Gilligan, Mr. Howell, Mrs. Howell, and Mary Ann, as opposed to the characters whose names are NOT known or used. The island, unnamed on any maritime chart, remains unnamed by the castaways. Jonas Grumby (the Skipper) and Roy Hinckley (the Professor) are identified by name only in the series pilot, and then only by the radio 'voice' (Cohen and Freeman 1964). From the beauty mark on her cheek, to her rendition of 'I Wanna be Loved by You', to her untimely 'demise' (as presumed by the outside world), the character called Ginger Grant ('GG') transparently models the persona of Marilyn Monroe (‘MM’ — whose death was still a recent, tragic topic when the pilot was shot). Ginger's appellation should likewise be considered a typical Hollywood pseudonym, hiding her 'actual' name (Norma Jean?). Interleaving these four-character subsets defined by three characteristics, here labeled [MALE], [RENOWN], and [NAME KNOWN], effectively creates seven specifications that correspond with the seven characters of Gilligan's Island (Figure 4A).

The other prominent syndication champion is Star Trek, which is even more amazing given its relatively small total number of episodes (79), as compared with Gilligan's Island (98) or M*A*S*H (251). This probably means that any given episode of Star Trek has been aired more often than any other single episode of any other program, which hasn't diminished their appeal at all. Like Gilligan's Island, Star Trek utilizes seven main characters and a well-defined setting (here, the Enterprise and the rest of her crew); relationships between these characters can likewise be defined by three fundamental characteristics (Figure 4B), labeled [LOGIC], [EMOTION], and [SUPPORT].

Even though Star Trek ostensibly portrays the adventures of the 430-member crew of a twenty-third-century interstellar military patrol ship, the character pattern of Star Trek is, in some ways, simply a four-element system like those in Gunsmoke, I Love Lucy, etc. as described earlier (see Fig. 3), with three human(oid) characters and the ship itself as the fourth (background) element: the voluminous commentaries on Star Trek focus mainly on Capt. Kirk, Mr. Spock, and Dr. McCoy — the 'Big Three' as they are known in Trek fandom. Scarcely a commentator fails to observe that these three represent a dialectic between 'logic' (Spock) and 'emotion' (McCoy) that is synthesized by Kirk, for this is explicit in the narrative itself (see for example Gerrold 1984: 16; Worland 1988: 115). Spock is from the planet Vulcan, where rational, logical behavior is esteemed as the highest virtue. McCoy is forever provoked to irrational, emotional outbursts by Spock's lack of human feeling. In most episodes, characters overtly discuss the relative merits of each type of behavior. Though Kirk has 'Earth-emotions' and is prone to irrational, heroic actions to save his
ship from danger, he is good enough at logical thought to regularly beat Spock at chess (Peeples 1966); Kirk is thus intermediate between the domains of [LOGIC] and [EMOTION] in Figure 4B.

Aside from this foregrounding of three characters, however, the series and its later incarnations in paperback and on film have consistently integrated four [SUPPORT] characters into what is considered the essential Star Trek 'family'; these characters usually supply the perfunctory dialogue:

(1) Commander 'thaer warp engines are overloaded' Scott or 'Scotty', the ship's engineer;
(2) Lieutenant 'hailing frequencies are open' Uhura, the communications officer;
(3) Lieutenant 'ahead, warp-factor two' Sulu, the ship's helmsman; and
(4) Ensign 'dee alien, she was very becomeful' Chekov, a general-purpose junior officer.

Taken by themselves, these four characters form a semi-independent two-feature pattern: Chekov and Scotty both have [ACCENTS], as opposed to Uhura and Sulu's normal speech; Uhura and Scotty have [TECHNICAL SUPPORT] duties (crew members wearing red in original TV series), as opposed to Sulu and Chekov, who provide executive support (wearing yellow-green shirts like the Captain's). As illustrated in Figure 4B, these characters are also readily integrated in one pattern with Kirk, Spock, and McCoy by including the technological characters Uhura and Scotty in [LOGIC] with Mr. Spock and Kirk, and by including Sulu (always the cheerful romantic) and Scotty (always sentimental about the ship's warp engines) in [EMOTION] with Dr. McCoy and Kirk (Manning 1986: 18–19).

'Color Television'

Now, having constructed this interleaved, three-set pattern originally to account for the consistent number of characters in these programs, I would point out other consistencies that emerge to further strengthen the credibility of the model. Each of these consistencies can be explained if it is granted that there is real psychological similarity between television character patterns and the paradigm of basic color categories.

(1) The single most prominent character in each program (in Fig. 4, Gilligan and Captain Kirk) appears in one of the inner 'leaves' of the three-circle pattern, where the two presumably 'stronger' features intersect. These prominent characters are directly analogous to the most perceptually
salient yellow (the color of school buses and highway caution signs), a
compound of [R] and [G] (as opposed to [B], the weakest color-perception
feature). Gilligan and Kirk’s most prominent ‘sidekicks’ (the Skipper
[MALE] and Spock [LOGIC]) presumably occur in pattern positions
analogous to orange-red (the usual color of hunting jackets and
highway construction cones, defined by [R], the strongest color-perception
feature).

(2) Conspicuous social themes in these programs (as opposed to the less
conspicuous but truly basic features) are best represented by characters in
the three inner ‘leaves’ of the pattern. For example, Star Trek was remark-
able in the 1960s for its portrayal of a racially integrated crew. Representa-
tives of the world’s three major racial groups occupy the three inner leaves
of the Star Trek pattern: Kirk—Caucasian (white anglo-saxon), Sulu—Asian,
and Uhura—Black (and female). In Gilligan’s Island, the basis for most of
the humor, the intellectually and culturally inept Gilligan, occupies the
inner leaves with the extremely intellectual but socio-culturally inept Profes-
sor and the extremely cultured but intellectually inept Mrs. Howell. These
familiar social themes are analogous to the familiar (subtractive) primary
colors, ‘red’ [RB], ‘yellow’ [RG], and ‘blue’ [GB], all compounds of more
basic features.

(3) ‘Chemistry’ relationships (strong feelings of attraction/repulsion), if
they develop in the narrative, develop between characters who differ by
two or three features. In contrast, characters who are usually comfortable
companions differ by just one feature. Thus, the Skipper [UNNAMED,
MALE] is companion to Gilligan [NAMED, MALE], but Gilligan is the
usual unwilling object of Ginger’s [UNNAMED, FEMALE] romantic
advances, Kirk [LOGIC, EMOTION] is companion to Spock [LOGIC,
NOT EMOTION], but Spock has a running feud with McCoy [NOT
LOGIC, EMOTION]. This is again unidirectional implication: not all
potential ‘chemistry’ relationships in these patterns must be explicitly or
fully realized in the running program situation, as for example between
the Professor and Mary Ann, Kirk and Uhura, or Sulu and Uhura, though
such relationships are often alluded to in individual episodes. The predic-
tion is that chemistry relationships that are written into a program must
come from positions of two or three opposing features to be considered
well-formed and acceptable.

This last rule can simply be attributed to the adage that opposites attract
(and then fight), but these chemistry relationships are also comparable to
the relationship of color opponents (e.g., [R] vs. [G]=[LOGIC] vs.
[EMOTION], etc.) and color complements (e.g., Yellow vs. violet-blue=
Gilligan vs. Ginger, Magenta-red vs. Green = the Professor vs. Mary Ann,
etc.).
Character-substitutions in persistent patterns: $M^*A^*S^*H$ and *Cheers*

Even before the series ended in 1982, $M^*A^*S^*H$ episodes were widely syndicated, with some stations running the program twice daily. In the past several years this intensity has diminished, but this program can still be found somewhere on the schedule in nearly every viewing market in America, and one might safely predict that through the year 2000 (if commercial stations still operate) it will be airing at about the same level that *Gilligan's Island* and *Star Trek* could be found in the mid-to-late 1980s, twenty years after their first runs. $M^*A^*S^*H$ fills every region in the $2^3$ pattern with a continuing human character, making eight in all, as opposed to seven, but beyond this distinction the formal parallels between $M^*A^*S^*H$, *Gilligan's Island*, and *Star Trek* are quite close (Figure 5A). Again, characters subdivide into three groups of four, labeled here by features [SURGEON], [APPARENT AUTHORITY], and [ACTUAL AUTHORITY]. This same pattern is conserved in spite of the major character/actor substitutions during the course of the series.

Four characters are surgeons in a mobile army hospital ($M^*A^*S^*H$) camp during the Korean War: Pierce, 'Trapper' McIntire (substitute B. J. Honeycutt), Burns (substitute Winchester), Blake (substitute Potter).

Four characters ostensibly hold the higher positions of military authority: Blake/Potter, as colonel and commander; Burns/Winchester, as major and second-ranking officer in the camp; Major Houlihan, head nurse; and Father Mulcahy, a chaplain representing religious authority in the camp.

It is a slightly different set of four characters who can actually impose their will in the camp, who in other words hold actual authority: Pierce (of course) and Radar, lowly corporal but powerful company clerk, controlling all requisitions, transfers, and three-day passes. Two others hold both apparent and actual authority: Potter (more so than Blake) and Houlihan (who in the early seasons controlled Frank Burns like a puppet). Falling outside of the set of real authority, Burns/Winchester and Mulcahy are usually quite powerless in spite of their positions.

The eighth character, Klinger, is originally defined by none of these features, or the lack of them: an orderly, not a surgeon, a corporal with no official authority and no true ability to exercise authority either. Indeed, Klinger was not a truly integrated member of the inner $M^*A^*S^*H$ ‘family’ (as symbolized by his persistent quest for a discharge from the unit), until Radar’s departure, which left a gap in the inner pattern that the Klinger character moved into, becoming radically altered from impotence to ability, as he became skilled at ‘scrounging’ scarce supplies for the camp. With Radar’s departure and Klinger’s promotion, a new unintegrated character,
Rizzo, the scruffy and shiftless motor-pool attendant, appears in the \( M^*A^*S^*H \) background.

Like Gilligan and Capt. Kirk, \( M^*A^*S^*H \)'s most prominent character, Pierce, occurs in the analogous 'yellow' position; his principle sidekick, Trapper/B. J., occurs in the 'orange-red' position (if it is stipulated that [SURGEON] is the strongest single \( M^*A^*S^*H \) feature). In social terms, the surface narrative of \( M^*A^*S^*H \) portrays the triumph of liberalism and compassion (Pierce) over hawkish insensitivity (Burns/Winchester) and the mediation of Houlihan between the hawkish and the liberal camps (Homans 1983: 14). These characters again occupy the inner leaves of the paradigm shown in Figure 5A, also in keeping with the subtractive color analogy. Adversarial 'chemistry' relationships exist between these same
three (i.e., they are always in conflict in the program): each of these characters differs from the others by two features: Pierce [SURGEON, ACTUAL AUTH., NO APPARENT AUTH.], Houlihan [NOT SURGEON, ACTUAL AUTH., APPARENT AUTH.], and Burns/Winchester [SURGEON, NO ACTUAL AUTH., APPARENT AUTH.].

At this writing, Cheers, about the motley staff and clientele of a mythical bar in Boston, is still a prime-time program, with consistently good ratings. Although for the normal observer it would be too early to say with confidence that many will keep watching the program in syndicated rerun long after its original run is cancelled, the analysis offered here supports that prediction; there are evidently an appropriate number of main characters, related in an appropriate way, as illustrated in Figure 5B.

Four characters are normally portrayed as being oafish or dim-witted [SIMPLETONS]: Cliff Clavin, Norm Peterson, the ‘Coach’ (substitute Woody Boyd), and Sam Malone, owner of the bar and the single most prominent character. Sam’s principle sidekick, the ‘Coach’ and his replacement Woody Boyd, are especially dim-witted. Regular customer and ‘know-it-all’ Cliff Clavin betrays his crass stupidity by his attempts at erudition. Conversely, the regularly unemployed Norm Peterson, usually drinking nonstop on the stool next to Cliff, easily takes on the coloration of a simple oaf (but see discussion below).

Four characters are portrayed as basically talented people who are nevertheless [SELF-DESTRUCTIVE]. Witty cocktail waitress Carla Tortelli conceives four children out of wedlock in the course of the series. Sam lost his professional baseball career to alcoholism; his legendary womanizing ruins his chances for a lasting romance. Besides being perpetually out of work and on the edge of alcoholism, Norm regularly risks severe indigestion at The Hungry Heifer, a local no-star restaurant. Dr. Frazier Crane is a prominent psychiatrist plagued by his own neuroses and all but completely destroyed by engagement/marriage to the ‘wrong’ women (Diane Chambers, and later the shrewish Lilith, a minor character used only occasionally in the series).

Four characters are comically [PRETENTIOUS]: Frazier Crane is the typical pompous intellectual, but Diane Chambers (substitute Rebecca Howe) is the essence of pretense; Diane flaunts her extensive but useless education, aspiring to be a dancer though she cannot dance, aspiring to be a writer though she cannot write, etc. The later character Rebecca varies this theme somewhat by pretending to a social and economic status that she can’t achieve, ordering a Mercedes she can’t afford, scheming for a promotion in a company where her reputation is already ruined, etc. As alluded to above, drinking buddies Cliff and Norm are each pretentious in their own way: the klutzy mailman Cliff comically pretends to have
professional/intellectual expertise and romantic success, while Norm successfully pretends not to have such qualities. Also for comic effect, Norm pretends his wife is a repulsive haridan when she is probably ‘in fact’ attractive and devoted; he hides his skill as a painter and an interior decorator, etc.

Episodic television programs resist change as a rule. Cheers is often touted as an exception to this rule, supposedly even to allow modifications in its ‘basic situation’ where the relationship between Sam and Diane moves from enmity (first season) to tumultuous romance (second season) to enmity again (third season) (see Feuer 1986: 105; Zynda 1984: 261). However, the ever-turbulent relationship between Sam and Diane/Rebecca is always in keeping with the chemistry of completely opposite character specifications. Whether they are overtly ‘a couple’ or not is a minor detail. The other main example of change in Cheers is the introduction of a new character (Frazier Crane) in the third season; Crane becomes popular with the audience, and is adopted as a main character by the fourth season. Such ‘change’ can be explained as acceptable creation of a basic pattern that does not really change at all once it is established. Indeed, the introduction of Frazier was essential to complete the seven-member + background pattern illustrated in Figure 5B. Frazier’s completion of the pattern in turn serves to explain why comparable characters introduced in subsequent seasons of Cheers are not likewise finally taken on as main characters (e.g., Evan Drake in the 1987–88 season and Robin Colcord in the 1989–90 season).

The key character replacements in M*A*S*H, Potter and Winchester, differ from their predecessors (Blake and Burns) on several points, but both remain [SURGEONS] and both remain figures of [APPARENT AUTHORITY]. If anything, Winchester, a wealthy cultural sophisticate, and Potter, a career military man, portray apparent authority more definitely than the ridiculously inept Burns and Blake.

Close approximations of the 2th pattern

An initial indication that their character patterns are slightly less accurate, the most prominent characters of The Beverly Hillbillies and Hogan’s Heroes, Jed Clampett (6A) and Col. Hogan (6B), are not located in the same (analog yellow) structural position with the most prominent characters of Gilligan’s Island, Star Trek, M*A*S*H, and Cheers (compare Figures 4 and 5 with Figure 6). Other aspects of these programs, however, coincide with the general pattern. In The Beverly Hillbillies, the hopeless ‘romance’ between the sophisticated Miss Jane and the oafish Jethro as
as well as the open hostility between the hillbilly matriarch Granny and the wealthy socialite Mrs. Drysdale correspond with opposing character specifications. In the "inner-leaves" of Hogan's Heroes, characters represent each of the three nationalities overtly parodied in that program: the Germans (Schultz), the French (Lebeau), and the British (Newkirk).

With certain qualifications, three features labeled [THE HILLS], [MONEY], and [MANNERS] define the relationships among the seven main characters of The Beverly Hillbillies (Figure 6A):

Four characters are [HILLBILLIES] (from Bug Tussle, Tennessee): Jed, Granny, Jethro, and Ellie Mae, who become suddenly rich as a result of an oil strike on their land and subsequently move to Beverly Hills, Cali-
fornia, where they experience cultural conflict with the ‘native’ characters—the Drysdales and Miss Jane.

Four characters have an interest in [MONEY]: Mr. Drysdale and Mrs. Drysdale (to the point of obsession, of course), and in a more limited sense, Jed and Jethro. Jethro tries to acquire trappings of wealth (an ‘education’ and gadgets associated with his self-image as ‘an international playboy’, ‘secret agent’, or ‘hollywood producer’), and Jed has at least a proprietary interest in his money (typically carrying great wads of unspent cash in his pockets). These four characters do contrast with the characters who have no interest in material wealth whatever: the idealistic Miss Jane; Ellie Mae, whose only interest is her pet ‘critters’; and Granny, who ultimately compels Jed to build her a rough cabin (‘just like home’) in the back of their palatial mansion.

Three characters clearly have gentle [MANNERS]. Jed and Ellie Mae are quite ‘genteel’, as is Miss Jane, as opposed to Mr. Drysdale, Jethro and Granny who are consistently loud, selfish, and intrusive. Mrs. Drysdale may be included in the [MANNERS] set as a stereotype of ‘mannered’ high society, although she is rarely polite in fact.

The Beverly Hillbillies has been successful in syndication over the last twenty years, but it does not seem to have quite the legendary status of Star Trek or Gilligan’s Island; on one hand its success may be attributed (in part) to a 2nd character pattern comparable to those of other successful programs, but on the other hand The Beverly Hillbillies’ somewhat lesser status is commensurate with a less accurate realization of the proposed pattern —Jed and Jethro are only somewhat interested in their money (nothing like the obsession of Mr. Drysdale); Mrs. Drysdale generally fails to conceal her boorishness behind ostensible high-society manners, and since this character is missing in many episodes and never appears in the program’s opening credits, her status as a main character is rather weak. Similarly, Hogan’s Heroes (Figure 6B) has a recognizable but less accurate 2nd character pattern, in keeping with its noteworthy but not overwhelming success in syndication.

First, there is a group of ostensible ‘prisoners’ in a Nazi POW camp that can openly [MASQUERADE] as Nazis in their subversive activities. That is, Hogan, Carter, and Newkirk can successfully pose as German officials, but Kinchloe, being black, and Lebeau, with his unhideable French accent (and small size), cannot. Oddly enough, Schultz, the head German guard, also belongs in this group of pretenders; as often as not, Schultz walks in on the sabotage projects of Hogan and company and with a forlorn ‘I know NOTHING’ looks the other way. So, in other words, Schultz is a secret ally, in spite of his uniform (the actor playing Schultz, John Banner, was in fact Jewish). However, this somewhat abstract
or ambiguous sense of [MASQUERADE] probably counts as a weakness in the character pattern. Four characters have strictly [LIMITED COMPETENCE]: Col. Klink and Sgt. Schultz preside over a prison camp from which no one has (apparently) escaped, but they are otherwise known incompetents. Among the prisoners Sgt. Carter is highly skilled with explosives but is otherwise a clumsy buffoon; Sgt. Lebeau is a skilled cook but is otherwise a pint-sized, stereotypically abrasive Frenchman. The pattern probably also would have been better realized if Lebeau were portrayed as a clumsy buffoon, but he was not.

Noteworthy pattern failures

The *Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970–77) and the earlier *Dick Van Dyke Show* (1961–66) had similar formats — main character moves between comic situations at work (at a television studio) and at home. However, the *Dick Van Dyke Show* had eight main characters (and an approximate 2^5 pattern) through its entire run: Rob Petrie (Van Dyke), Laura Petrie (Moore), their son Richie, neighbors Jerry and Millie Helper, and coworkers Buddy, Sally, and Mel. Oddly enough, *Mary Tyler Moore* had eight memorable characters, but only in retrospect, since these eight were never together for a single season, as shown in Figure 7A. Four characters — Mary Richards, Lou Grant, Ted Baxter, and Murray Slaughter — were present in every season, and by themselves this group constituted a four-member pattern defined by features (for want of a better label) [STRONG] and [WEAK], with Mary mediating between gruff, irascible Lou on one hand and Ted Baxter, a whining ninny, on the other, with the nondescript Murray in the background. So far so good, but each season the producers also insisted on promoting [OTHER FEMALE] roles as main characters, in effect interfering with the basic 2^2 pattern, but failing to establish a synchronous 2^3 group.

Again, this mode of analysis can be extended to programs in current production (at this writing). At present, *Cheers* and *Night Court* receive about equal acclaim (Tafflinger 1989), but *Cheers* established a 2^2 pattern early in its first run (Figure 5B), while *Night Court* has yet to settle on the minimum seventh main character (Figure 7b) with the requisite characteristics (by this analysis): a woman [NOT MALE] with the [IDEALISTIC] tendencies of Miss Sullivan, the public defender, but the [CRUDE] demeanour of the female bailiff, Roz. This hypothetical character stands in complementary opposition to Mac, the court clerk, who is married to an occasional guest character, Quon Li, a Vietnamese refugee. At a pinch the gentle Quon Li might be construed as [IDEALISTIC], but she hardly
seems [CRUDE] enough, and she is not a regular on the show. Thus, Night Court may have (at best) an approximate 2ⁿ pattern (in the league of Hogan's Heroes and The Beverly Hillbillies). In any case I would predict that Cheers will be strong in syndication for twenty years or more, while Night Court will be considerably less successful and may in fact fade away altogether in an increasingly competitive syndication market.

It is possible to have too many characters as well as too few; Star Trek: The Next Generation (1987–90 seasons) has been using at least eight main characters, as well as the background Enterprise & crew. For this and other reasons (see Figure 8) it is not as well-formed as the original Star Trek,
suggesting that the new Star Trek: The Next Generation will not do nearly as well in either domestic or international syndication in its current form. Currently, it is quite easy to find episodes of M*A*S*H in syndication, well-written and well-played to be sure; but one can also find earlier programs, not-so-well-written and not-so-well-played, like Gilligan's Island (a staple on American cable's TBS) and Star Trek (on the Fox network and in most video stores). These programs have also done very well in international syndication. In contrast, the critically acclaimed Mary Tyler Moore (more or less a contemporary of M*A*S*H) has all but disappeared. I have tried to show that this empirical fact may be, after all, largely a
matter of basic character patterns rather than anything particularly special about the writing, acting, setting, or ostensible social messages in these programs. The importance of the ‘family group’ (literal or figurative) is well understood, but producers, writers, and critic–analysts seem to operate on a quite mistaken assumption that ‘any group will do’ as a figurative representation of society, as claimed by Bryant (1979: 249). Not just any form will do in a linguistic representation. Of all the possible arrangements of words in a language, only a relatively specialized set are grammatical. I would suggest that there is a grammar of televised representation as well.

Conclusion

To quote Carl Reiner and Sheldon Leonard, ‘any analysis of situation comedy should primarily be an analysis of its characters’ (Williams 1974: 981); and commenting on the research of television, Rowland and Watkins observe that ‘further theoretical discourse is simply going to have to take far better account of formalist linguistics’ (Roland and Watkins 1984: 25).

I would make a few final points to clarify the relevance of this analysis. Probably, from the perspective of the television production, the assembly of well-formed character groups is (largely) a matter of luck rather than conscious planning or superior intuitions of series creators, as evidenced by the fact that the creators of successful syndicated programs (Gilligan’s Island, M*A*S*H, etc.) have not correctly duplicated successful character patterns in later projects.8

Out of the dozens of programs produced, odds are that a few just ‘stumble upon’ the required number of characters and their pattern relationships. Once created, the intuitive resistance to change in episodic television is enough to maintain the pattern in a program to the end of its first run; then natural selection (by viewers) causes these programs to predominate in the very Darwinian jungle of competitive television syndication.

Nevertheless, the question arises: could the 2nd pattern now identified be consciously used to create or modify a program in current production (maybe Star Trek: The NEXT Next Generation) so that it would ultimately be a long-term success in syndication? Possibly — and to validate this hypothesis, I would encourage any attempt. But as noted above, several other ‘realities’ of television production have to be taken into consideration, not the least of which is that a program must first survive two or three seasons in first run, so that there is an episode package to syndicate. The television industry is not known for taking risks or making investments over the long term. Gilligan’s Island and Star Trek were not highly rated
in their first-runs and barely survived three seasons. If such a program deliberately patterned along the lines of this theory were to fail in first run, such failure would not disprove the $2^\text{nd}$ hypothesis: all successful syndicated TV series (with non-literal families and non-serial plots) have $2^\text{nd}$ patterns, but not all TV series with $2^\text{nd}$ patterns must be syndication successes. We deal here with a necessary but not a sufficient condition.

I would liken the $2^\text{nd}$ character pattern of enduring TV programs to the characteristic curve in the support of nearly all long-span bridges (a parabola conforming to the rule $Y = kX^2$). That shape gives a bridge its strength; that shape keeps a bridge from collapsing after a brief period of use. If you want people to use a bridge for a long time, it must (a) have parabolic structure, but also (b) have someplace interesting on the other side of the bridge that people will want to visit, and (c) be built where people can reach it. Likewise, in order to succeed, a TV program also has to (b) show us an interesting place and (c) be shown at a time when people can watch it (time-slots are undeniably important).

The $2^\text{nd}$ principle by itself may not allow us to construct the perfect TV series, but it allows the comparison and evaluation of popular programs, like those listed above, which may differ in terms of genre, content, and/or basic themes within single formal framework. It tells us something about the mind of the television viewer (i.e., the human mind) by identifying what sort of pattern the mind responds to and ultimately imposes on the world through language and on television through its characters. We may have in these television programs the modern equivalent of the pervasive three- and seven-character (plus a background quest or threat) motifs in folklore: three little pigs (plus the wolf); Red Riding hood, her grandma, and a woodsman (plus a wolf); seven dwarves (plus Snow White), and so forth. Perhaps too, ‘$2^\text{nd} - 1$’ may represent the underlying psychology behind the mystical significance attached to the numbers three and seven.

Also, like the simple rule of line-perspective in landscape drawing, the $2^\text{nd}$ pattern provides an element of certainty and a basis for understanding the television medium while by no means destroying the potential for creativity. Remember that the constraints proposed are strictly formal: two or three traits must be intercombined in all logically possible ways resulting in a specified number of main characters (three or four, seven or eight). What the traits actually are and how they are interpreted in the characters is not constrained by this basic formula. Beyond the formal similarities of Majors Burns and Winchester, there are numerous differences that the basic character pattern of $M^*A^*S^*H$, for example, need not explain or constrain: both are surgeons, but one is talented and one is not; both have apparent military authority, but Winchester possesses social credentials, wealth, etc. as well. Consider all the landscape paintings using one conven-
tional perspective rule (parallel form-lines meet at the horizon); consider
the infinite variety, infinite landscapes, as infinite character types and
settings, that may be constructed on one reliable formal foundation, the
2ⁿ character rule.

Notes

1. As a general rule, main characters (i.e., essential characters, as opposed to minor charac-
ters that may appear from time to time in a program) are characters of the actors named
or shown in opening credits. There are some exceptions — e.g., the eight main characters
listed for M*A*S*H are not all named in opening credits until the later seasons. The
four 'support' characters of Star Trek were always listed in closing credits of the series,
but received opening billing only in the later series of Star Trek films. Unless otherwise
noted, information about television programs cited and their main characters comes

2. It is probably significant that the literal family portrayed in The Brady Bunch has eight
(2⁴) members, plus the housekeeper (the ninth main character, Alice); likewise through
most of its run My Three Sons portrays a four-member family (2²), plus the housekeeper
(Bub/Uncle Charlie), and Leave It to Beaver portrayed a four-member family plus one
memorable interloper, Eddie Haskell. So, the typical formula for 'literal family' pro-
grams that succeed in syndication might actually be 2ⁿ plus one, but the explanation for
this typical one-member addition to the basic pattern in 'literal family' programs goes
beyond the scope of this discussion.

3. Brent Berlin and Paul Kay's study on universal color terminology (1969) identifies
eleven terms in all — eight basic categories of hue: red, green, yellow, blue, orange,
purple, brown (red + black) and pink (red + white), and three other basic categories of
value: black, white, and gray. So in a more accurate analysis of the eight-member terminolo-
gy set of hue, brown and pink probably occupy the paradigmatic positions
labeled 'black' and 'white' in traditional color diagrams (Figure 2), which I have retained
for the sake of using an eight-member paradigm more familiar to readers as a model
for discussion.

4. For many months ABC was able to hold its Moonlighting audience by rerunning epi-
isodes from the first two seasons (J. P. Williams 1988). In the 1987–88 season, however,
the show began using serial plots and made steadily increasing use of a fifth character,
MacGillivray, coinciding with the dissolution of the program's audience and ultimate
 cancellation in 1989.

5. The specific term used to formally label conceptually abstract features may vary. Thus,
the expressions [STEM], [BLACK], [NON-RED], or [NON-POINTER BASE] would
all accurately label one and the same component feature in the system of card suits,
while [APEX] or [NON-ROUNDED TOP] would both accurately label the other com-
ponent feature; Parker (1986: 30–31) renders the feature [+ HORSE] as [- HUMAN].
Alternative labels for Gilligan's Island features might have been [NOT WOMEN],
[FAMOUS] and [NAMED]; alternative labels for Star Trek features might have been
[THOUGHT], [FEELING], and [JUNIOR OFFICERS].

6. In the Star Trek episode 'Mirror, Mirror' (written by Jerome Bixby, 6 October 1967),
Sulu makes a pass at Uhura; in another episode, 'Plato's Stepchildren' (written by
Meyer Dolinsky, 22 November 1968), Kirk kisses Uhura, with the result that many
Southern (U. S.) stations refused to run the episode (Irwin and Love 1986: 98).
7. Color receptors joined by a single group of neurons in an antagonistic relationship define color opponents: R and G are opponents, B is an opponent of R and G together (Gouras 1981: 253). Each primary color is the color complement of the secondary color that does not contain it; in familiar terms, orange and blue are complements, as are green and red, and purple and yellow; if you stare long enough at any color, its afterimage will be its color complement.

8. After Gilligan's Island for example, Sherwood Schwartz produced the remarkably unsuccessful Dusty's Trail for syndication, with seven characters patterned transparently on the seven characters of Gilligan's Island, but lacking essential basic features: none of the DT characters were famous, all of the DT characters' names were known, and there was no island or equivalent, well-defined eighth background element (unless you count poorly constructed Western sets).

After M*A*S*H, of course, came the unsuccessful After M*A*S*H, which did retain several of the characters/actors and writers from the original series, but did not successfully reconstruct a comparable character pattern.

References


Alan D. Manning (b. 1960) is Assistant Professor of English and Philosophy at Idaho State University, in Pocatello, Idaho. His principal research interests include semantics, language universals, applied linguistics, and visual communication. Among his publications are ‘Literary vs. technical writing: Substitutes vs. standards for reality’ (1988), ‘The invariant code-significance of lexical items’ (1989), ‘The semantics of technical graphics’ (1989), and ‘The SOV ... OSV frequency hierarchy’ (1989, with Frank Parker).