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Sherlock the “Grammar Nazi”

Using *YouTube* comments to explore popular attitudes towards prescriptivism

A number of previous studies have demonstrated the value of using metalinguistic *YouTube* comments to explore popular attitudes towards specific language varieties (see for example King & Wicks 2009; Cutler 2016). In this paper, I use a scene from Season 1, Episode 3 of the BBC’s *Sherlock* to consider popular attitudes towards linguistic variation and prescriptivism. In the scene, a man who killed his girlfriend in a fit of anger pleads with Sherlock to take on his case; Sherlock declines, expressing distaste not for the man’s crime or unrepentant attitude but for his nonstandard grammar. The scene has been posted to *YouTube* a number of times, where it is frequently – and approvingly – titled as “Sherlock the grammar nazi”. I explore the metalanguage that appears in the comments sections, focusing in particular on the stance that the comments construct towards nonstandard language. Overall, I argue that the comments provide evidence that the scene is read by many viewers as an invitation to adopt a position of what I have termed elsewhere as “prescriptive sociability”: drawing Sherlock, production team, and viewer into a cosy relationship built on shared linguistic values.

References

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