CATHERINE LALIBERTÉ, MELANIE KELLER, AND DIANA WENGLER

Linguistic Strategies of Estrangement in Historical Fiction: *Bridgerton* and *Downton Abbey*

Abstract: *Like science fiction, historical fiction presents us with worlds removed from our own and relies on estrangement as a formal device. The genre depends on distinct linguistic conventions to distance the viewer from the present. This study uses corpus linguistic methods to interrogate how clitics and modal verbs are used to evoke the past in* Bridgerton *(2020-pressent) and* Downton Abbey *(2010). While these two series make many divergent linguistic choices to characterise their universe, they both exhibit an overuse of* must*. Our comparison does not reveal unifying features of "bygonese," but the shared overuse of* must *emerges as a potential core characteristic of historical fiction language generally.*

Keywords: *historical fiction – television – bygonese – contractions – modal verbs*

1. Introduction

As exemplified by this special issue, the study of performed language is currently being rediscovered as not only inherently worthwhile but also as able to bring forth crucial nuances to our understanding of language. The recognition that performance constitutes an intrinsic part of language use and human behaviour means that models of communication are now expected to account for text types such as lyrics and telecinematic language (see Werner 2021). Naturally, the texts making up these types can differ from each other in numerous ways. Within telecinematic language especially, texts can be grouped according to the discourse tradition they participate in and the tropes that characterize them, i.e., their genre (historical dramas, westerns, police procedurals, etc). At the same time, the diversity of approaches to storytelling, characterization and world-building means that telecinematic language is often best studied via the close analysis of individual movies and television shows. The present research aims to contribute to the linguistic description of a specific genre, viz. historical fiction, by examining two important texts, *Bridgerton* (2020-present) and *Downton Abbey* (2010). As will be explained, historical fiction is particularly interesting from a pragmatic point of view because the fictionalization or performance of the past imposes a dissonance between the text and the viewers' own linguistic reality. On television, as in literary historical fiction, linguistic choices are a primary means through which this dissonance – or estrangement – is enacted and managed.

In section 2, we describe the concept of estrangement as it applies to historical fiction, as well as pre-existing linguistic approaches to the genre. Section 3 introduces the two series on which this project focuses, *Bridgerton* and *Downton Abbey*, the features which may typify them and the corpus methods we employ to test whether these features apply. The results are presented in section 4 and discussed in section 5 in

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relation to issues pertaining to the study of genres on linguistic grounds and to how this benefits linguistics in general.

2. Background

Historical fiction is not unlike science fiction and fantasy, in that it is a literary genre which presents, on some level, "an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment" (Adams 2017, 331; Suvin 1979, 7-8).[1] In portraying fictionalised pasts, historical fiction makes use of various strategies to convey pastness to readers and viewers which function by producing estrangement effects – that is, by creating a dissonance between the 'real' world and the imagined world in which the story takes place. In televisual historical fiction, costumes, hair, makeup, sets, props, music and plot elements, for example, are used to cue viewers in on the fact that the world they are presented is not quite the same as their own. Since estrangement is a communicative goal and a deeply pragmatic process, language also plays a prominent role among other estranging techniques. As examined by Adams (2017), estrangement can be produced by linguistic means such as naming, the use of new or unfamiliar words, and the employment of entirely (re)constructed languages. Where science fiction and fantasy invent names fit for otherworldly beings (e.g., *Galadriel* or *Obi-Wan Kenobi*), historical fiction naming is no less strange if we consider, for example, the character introduced as Simon Arthur Henry Fitzranulph Basset, Earl Clyvedon in the first book of the *Bridgerton* series, *The Duke and I* (Quinn 2000). Science fiction and fantasy make ample use of invented terms to label fictional world-specific creatures and objects (e.g., *Hobbit*, *lightsaber*), and historical fiction similarly makes use of words for concepts removed from most readers' everyday reality (e.g., *farthingale* in Margaret Lawrence's *Roanoke*). Science fiction and fantasy often invent entire languages, with famous examples including Sindarin in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and Klingon in *Star Trek*. While this is less common in historical fiction, we find reconstructed historical varieties such as neo-Early Modern English in *The Witch* or the made-up prehistoric language Ulam in *Quest for Fire*. These examples illustrate the point raised by Adams (2017, 342) that although historical fiction shares fundamental characteristics with science fiction and fantasy, its approach to language operates under constraints of verisimilitude and the intuitive knowledge that language in the past was "not in any principled way different" from what is spoken today (Nevalainen 1999, 499).

Authors of historical novels often speak of the genre as a balancing act between portraying language in the past in a way that is 'accurate' and the necessity of using language that is sufficiently familiar to avoid jeopardizing communication with their readers and to fend off over-estrangement (Baker 2021; Brayfield and Sprott 2013; Hughes 2015; 2019). As Stocker (2012, 313) also reports, David Mitchell, author of

1 The working definition of historical fiction here is the one suggested by Stocker for the historical novel: "the main setting is a time before the writer was born, and the writer operates within a factual-led framework without seeking to distort the past with an alternative or pseudo history" (2017, 78).

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Cloud Atlas, named the result of this compromise *Bygonese*, i.e., "a sort of dialect […] which is inaccurate but plausible" (2010, 20-21). Given that the presence of estrangement is a defining characteristic of the genre as a whole, it follows that works of historical fiction in telecinematic form must contend, as historical novels do, with the need to "broker a compromise between then and now" (Mantel 2013, 136) in their treatment of dialogue.

The study of present-day representations of the past is still an emerging area of academic linguistic interest. Traxel (2012), for example, surveys features of pseudo-archaic English in blogs and comedic works aiming to convey the impression of Middle or Early Modern English. Certain features like the inflectional suffix *-th* and redundant *-e* clearly enregister or evoke older English. In another study, Traxel (2022) provides detailed fact-checking of constructed pseudo-Old English in the novels *The Wake* (2014) by Paul Kingsnorth and *tapestry* (2013) by Philip Terry. Traxel's work focuses on questions of accuracy and consistency in the production of language meant to represent stages of English history in niche areas of the internet and in extraordinary literary experiments. The present study builds on his research by addressing linguistic strategies used in another type of media entirely, namely popular televisual historical fiction.

As discussed by de Groot (2008), television is the main vehicle for the packaging of history for the general public and plays a significant role in shaping people's understanding of their past. Accounting for the role of language in portraying the past on television can illuminate the perceived relationships between language and the past. The aim of this study is to contribute a quantitative linguistic perspective to the characterisation of historical fiction dialogue on television. In exploring two extremely successful TV series, *Bridgerton* and *Downton Abbey*, we address some of the linguistic techniques television writers use to convey a sense of pastness to their viewers.

3. Data and Method

Bridgerton is an American television series created for Netflix in 2020 by Chris van Dusen and produced by Shonda Rhimes, among others. Set in 1813 London, the series follows the Bridgerton family's eight children as they come of marriageable age in English high society. *Bridgerton* is adapted from Julia Quinn's series of young adult novels published between 2000 and 2013. Aesthetically, *Bridgerton* is extravagant, tongue-in-cheek, and self-aware: The series features, for example, extra- and intra-diegetic use of modern pop-songs played on string instruments, and opulent costumes clearly designed to appeal to the audience's fantasies about the era. At the time of writing, both seasons of *Bridgerton* were in the top 10 most-watched Netflix programs of all time, certainly making it the most popular costume drama since *Downton Abbey*.

Downton Abbey aired between 2010 and 2015 in the UK and the United States and was created and co-written by Julian Fellowes. The first season is set in 1912 and follows the aristocratic Crawley family as they face the arrival of a new heir to their estate, who is a commoner. The series covers themes of changing social relations in England at the time through the microcosm of the country house. *Downton Abbey* broke rating records, received multiple awards, and was deemed "a massive cultural

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phenomenon" of its time (Chaney 2016). The extreme popularity and cultural relevance of both series indicate that these shows can be taken to reflect norms of the genre. At the same time, such representations of the past consumed as entertainment have the potential to entrench popular conceptions of the past regarding a range of aspects, including language use.

Novelists speak of established norms in the genre whereby the avoidance of forms deemed too modern is the primary linguistic strategy (Baker 2021; Cook 2013, 122; Mantel 2012). In particular, contractions (*I'm*, *you'd*, *wouldn't*, etc.) are explicitly taboo in historical writing circles (Baker 2021; Unsworth 2009). There is a large overlap between forms that are perceived to be inappropriate for historical dialogue and forms that are associated with current informal registers – this applies to contractions but also to other elements such as the intensifier *so* (Cook 2013, 122), interjections like *ew* (Baker 2021), *okay* (Baker 2021), etc. The underlying principle is not that these items are in fact anachronistic, but that their strong association with present-day informal speech marks them as 'of' the present-day.[2] Conversely, past English speakers are believed to have been "more formal, more respectful" (Mantel 2013, 135) and, by implication, characters are to be represented as using language that is, for readers, formal.[3] Writers and audiences alike are conscious of the fact that formal language is more conservative than casual speech; this can be exploited by writers to enact estrangement via the 'otherness' of conservative spoken language in their constructed 'Bygonese.' The type of blockbuster historical fiction we deal with in this study should differ from conversational present-day English quantitatively rather than (only) in qualitative terms, contrary to the features studied by Traxel (2012; 2022), which are no longer productive outside of niche artistic uses. The exploration of genre-specific conventions therefore lends itself well to corpus-based variationist methods.

We compiled two corpora containing transcripts of the first season of *Bridgerton* (8 episodes) and of *Downton Abbey* (7 episodes) respectively. These transcripts consist of subtitle files publicly available online. We carefully checked all transcripts against the actual dialogue of each episode, paying special attention to the features we aim to study (see below). The corpora have roughly the same size, i.e., 48,622 (*Bridgerton*) and 44,032 word tokens (*Downton Abbey*). We compare *Bridgerton* and *Downton Abbey* with a subset of The TV Corpus (Davies 2019) constituted of UK dramas produced in 2016 and 2017, which we use as a control representative of British television language in general. This corpus amounts to 3,310,655 word tokens. Historical fiction notwithstanding, television language is by and large deemed "very informal" speech

2 This effect has been termed 'the Tiffany problem' by author Jo Walton, referring to the dilemma authors face when seeking to be historically 'accurate:' the skewed perception of Tiffany as a modern first name precludes its use in historical fiction, despite the fact that it is almost a thousand years old (Povey 2020).

3 It is interesting to note that characters are often of high social class or status, as in the two series we study here. The preponderance of aristocratic characters in historical fiction perhaps contributes to the impression that historical language as a whole is particularly standard or formal. Mantel's remark is indicative of a conception of the people of the past which is ahistorical.

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(Davies 2019). This comparison enables us to test the assumption that televisual historical fiction language is more formal and conservative than performed language in general.

We explore three features of present-day formal language, namely the use of full forms rather than contractions, the use of the modals *must*, *shall* and *need*, and the avoidance of the semi-modals HAVE *to*, NEED *to* and BE *going to*. As discussed, the avoidance of contractions is a known feature of literary historical fiction, and we expect the series that we cover to reflect this convention by over-using full forms. To test this hypothesis, we extracted all instances of contractions and their equivalent full forms from the *Bridgerton* and *Downton Abbey* corpora. Instances presumed to not allow contractions were excluded, e.g.:

- tag questions (e.g., *you're not crying, are you?*)
- tokens in stressed positions, like sentence-final placement (e.g., *I know who he is*)
- HAVE and DO as main verbs
- non-adjacent subjects (e.g., *you, my friend, are…*)
- subjects *this* or *which*

Examples (1) to (3) illustrate sites in which contraction is variable; tokens in such contexts are thus considered in our analysis. For the subset of The TV Corpus, the large frequency of full forms prevents the manual exclusion of non-variable instances – this caveat will be addressed again in section 4.

(1) **That is** because, like all of these paintings, it was done by a man who sees a woman as nothing other than a decorative object. **They're** like... (*Bridgerton*, episode 3)
(2) I **don't** know what **everyone's** on about. (*Downton Abbey*, episode 5)
(3) A kind of niggling disparity which wills you to look away but of course, you **cannot**. (*Fresh Meat* [2011-2016], The TV Corpus)

Research has shown that the use of the modals *must*, *shall* and *need* has been declining during the 20th century in American and British English, particularly in spoken language (Leech et al. 2009; Mair 2015). Still following the idea that historical fiction makes use of forms which present-day readers and viewers recognise as formal and conservative, we expect these verbs to be over-represented in *Bridgerton* and *Downton Abbey* compared to the control corpus. Examples (4) to (6) below illustrate their use in our data. We extracted all these verbs, making sure to include negated forms and only modal uses of *need*.

(4) He attempted something last night I **shan't** dignify with words when your sister planted a facer. (*Bridgerton*, episode 2)
(5) There's a meeting of my borstal charity. I've missed two, and I simply **must** be there. (*Downton Abbey*, episode 6)
(6) Now nothing **need** go wrong for either of us ever again. (*Stan Lee's Lucky Man* [2016-2018], The TV Corpus)

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Leech et al. (2009) and Mair (2015), who describe the decline of modals and *must*, *shall* and *need* in particular, find that the semi-modals HAVE *to*, NEED *to* and BE *going to*, by contrast, have been increasing in frequency during the same period, especially in spoken language. The ongoing grammaticalization of these semi-modals has been hypothesised to be partly responsible for the decline of some modals (Leech 2013), for example via HAVE *to* encroaching on deontic *must*.[4] Since the uses of core modals and semi-modals are interrelated, it may be expected that an over-use of declining modals will translate into a comparative underrepresentation of these newer semi-modals. In addition, as described above, writers of historical fiction generally strive towards the avoidance of informal modern speech, which implies that these constructions may be underrepresented in *Bridgerton* and *Downton Abbey*. Examples (7) to (9) demonstrate tokens we considered. All instances of these semi-modals were retrieved from the two corpora. For the control corpus, the data consists in all instances of the semi-modal constructions that are immediately followed by an infinitive.

(7) Now she **has to** fight for a wedding she doesn't even want. (*Bridgerton*, episode 5)
(8) The thing is, Lady Mary, I-- I'm here today because I **needed to** tell you something face to face before you went to the country. (*Downton Abbey*, episode 7)
(9) And as soon as my... radio's fixed... I**'m going to** tell you just that. (*Doctor Who* [2005-present], The TV Corpus)

4. Results and Discussion

This section first presents the frequency of contracted auxiliaries and contracted *not* with individual verbs in *Bridgerton*, *Downton Abbey*, and the subset of The TV Corpus consisting of recent (2016-2017) UK dramas. Results for modals and semi-modals are illustrated and discussed next. The section concludes with a comparison of the two series under study and a discussion of the differences between them.

4.1 Contractions

Figure 1 presents the percentage of full and contracted forms in the three corpora by verb, in affirmative contexts (*I'm*, *I'll*, etc.). For significance testing, we employed chi-square tests; if the number of observations was below 5, we used Fisher's exact test. Asterisks on top of the columns indicate the statistical significance of the measure, based on a comparison between the frequencies in the target corpus and the reference corpus (***: $p<0.001$, **: $p<0.01$, *: $p<0.05$). *Bridgerton*'s use of contractions and full forms is strikingly different from both *Downton Abbey* and the reference corpus: for all verbs except *had*, *Bridgerton* exhibits far more full forms than either of the other corpora. Surprisingly, *Downton Abbey* presents a lower proportion of full forms than the reference corpus for all verbs. Note that because the TV Corpus data includes full

4 For example, "*you **must** discuss the whole situation with your boyfriend*" and "*you **have to** discuss the whole situation with your boyfriend*" (Leech et al. 2009, 115).

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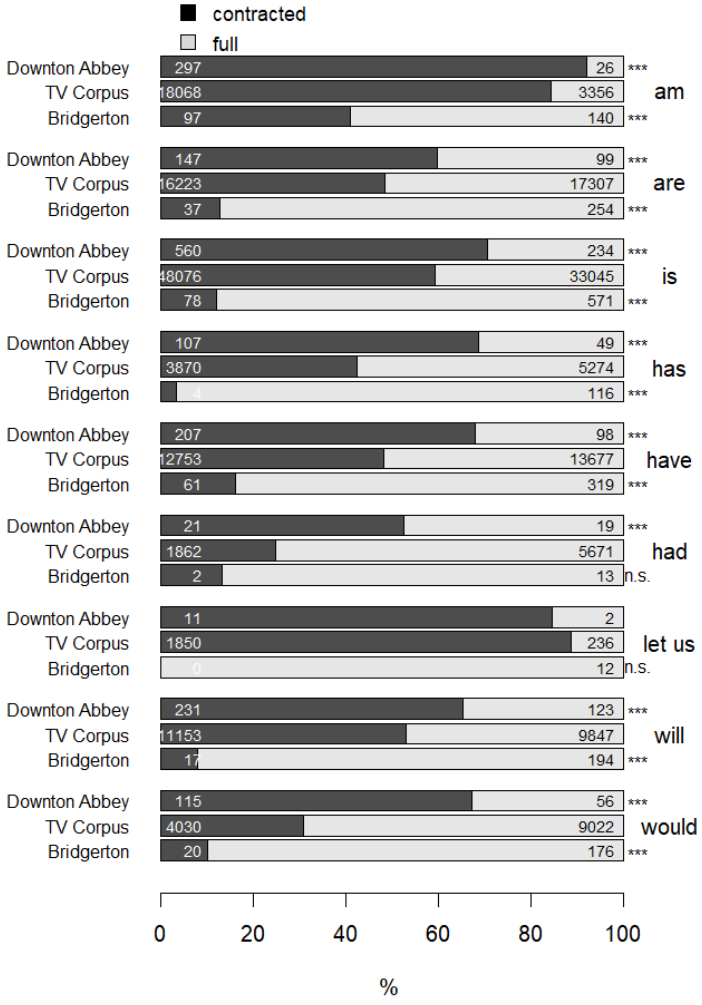
forms which cannot be cliticised (i.e., tokens not part of the envelope of variation), the frequencies labelled in the figures reflect inflated numbers for this variant. Even with this caveat, the results are in stark contrast to the *Bridgerton* pattern in particular.

Figure 1: Rates of full and contracted forms by verb in affirmative contexts only in *Bridgerton*, The TV Corpus control data, and *Downton Abbey* (*Downton*).



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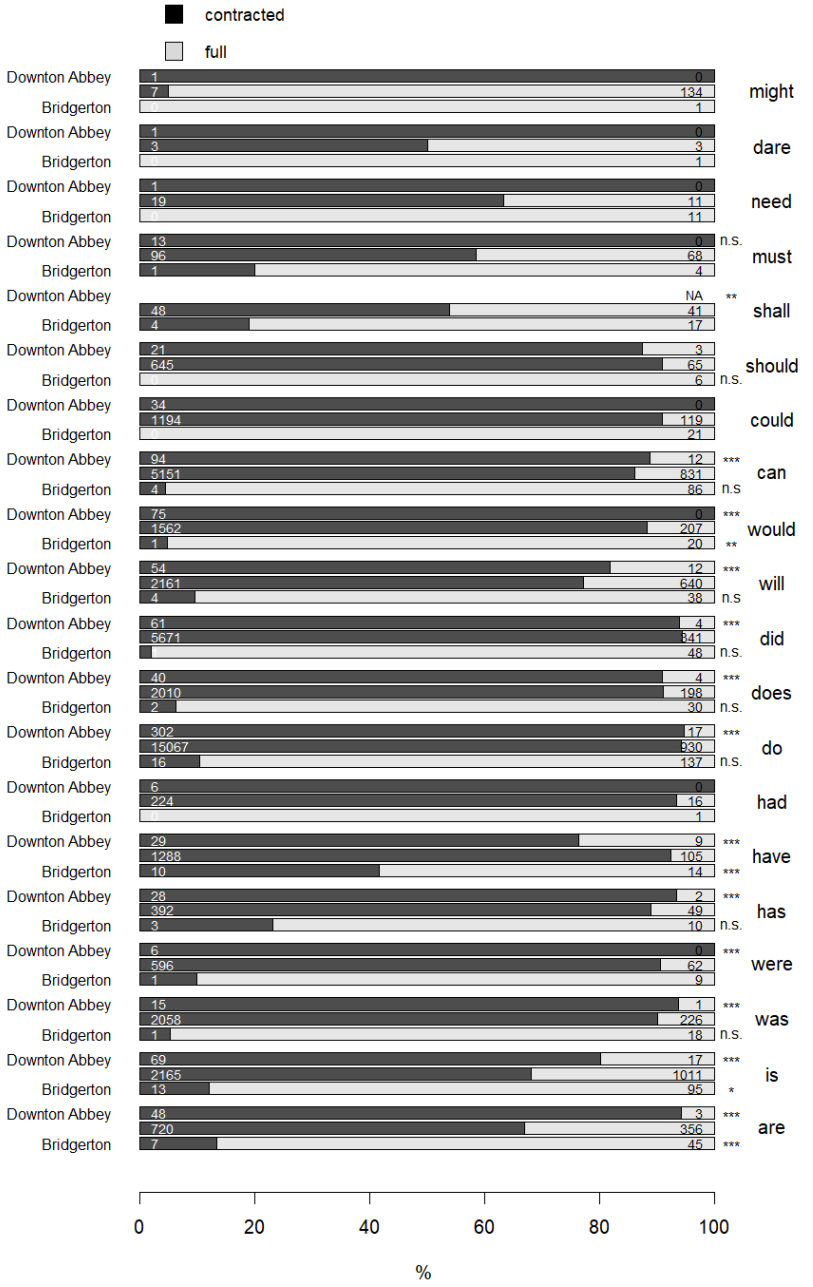

Figure 2: Rates of full and contracted *not* by verb in *Bridgerton*, The TV Corpus control data, and *Downton Abbey* (*Downton*).

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Figure 2 illustrates the proportion of full and contracted forms of *not* by verb (*weren't*, *can't*, etc.) in *Bridgerton* and *Downton Abbey* compared to the subset of The TV Corpus. As with affirmative contexts, *Bridgerton* presents proportionally far fewer contractions than the reference corpus – full forms occur categorically in some instances (*had*, *shall*, *could*, *need*, *dare* and *might*) and nearly categorically in all others. By contrast, contracted negation is overwhelmingly preferred in the control corpus, especially with *was*, *were*, *had* and forms of DO.

As with affirmative contexts (Figure 1), *Downton Abbey* exhibits low rates of full forms of *not* with all verbs. *Downton*'s contraction rate is again consistently higher than that found in the subset of The TV Corpus, except for *have not*. That said, we must once more point out that the frequencies shown for full forms in The TV Corpus are higher than the 'true' figures for the variant under study. Though token numbers are low, the comparatively high percentage of full forms of *not* with *shall*, *must*, *need*, *dare* and *might* in The TV Corpus stands out against *Downton*'s preference for contractions for all but *shall*. Taking a closer look at these five verbs, *shan't*, *mustn't*, *needn't*, *daren't* and *mightn't* occur overwhelmingly in programs that are also historical fiction, such as *Poldark* (2015-2019), *Doctor Thorne* (2016), *The White Princess* (2017) and *Father Brown* (2013-present). Specifically, 75% of all instances occurred in historical dramas, with *needn't* (95%) and *shan't* (85%) containing the largest proportion of tokens from historical dramas and the remaining three not far behind: *mightn't* (71%), *mustn't* (67%) and *daren't* (67%). The TV Corpus, if representative of contemporary British television drama, also contains historical fiction material of course, although it is unclear which proportion of the corpus it accounts for. It is tempting to interpret the pattern for these five verbs as being indicative of genre differences in the opposite direction of the expected, whereby some contractions are actually more conservative than their full forms (e.g., *'tis*, *mayn't*). It is possible that these clitics (e.g., *mightn't*), rather than the corresponding full form (*might not*), may be used to evoke conservative language. An important caveat to this interpretation of the data is the fact that s*hall*, *must*, *need*, *dare* and *might* are themselves declining in frequency in present-day English and may be used for effect in historical fiction regardless of polarity (as we argue for *must*, *need* and *shall* in this paper) so that the purpose of the clitic is difficult to isolate from that of the verb it is attached to. In any case, whereas the *Bridgerton* data reflect an all-encompassing, categorical approach to contractions, *Downton Abbey* differs from the control data only in very few statistically significant ways.

4.2 Modals and Semi-modals

Figure 3 visualizes the relative frequency of the semi-modals BE *going to*, HAVE *to* and NEED *to* and of the modals *must*, *need* and *shall* in the three corpora. In the comparison of *Bridgerton* and the reference corpus, the results correspond to the expected contrasts: *Bridgerton* uses the semi-modals less frequently and the modals (particularly *must* and *shall*) more frequently than television does generally. In *Downton Abbey*, BE *going to* and HAVE *to* are marginally more frequent than in The TV Corpus, while NEED *to* occurs less often and matches the frequency in *Bridgerton*. *Need* and *shall* are equally frequent in *Downton Abbey* and in the control corpus. *Must* is more frequent in *Downton Abbey*

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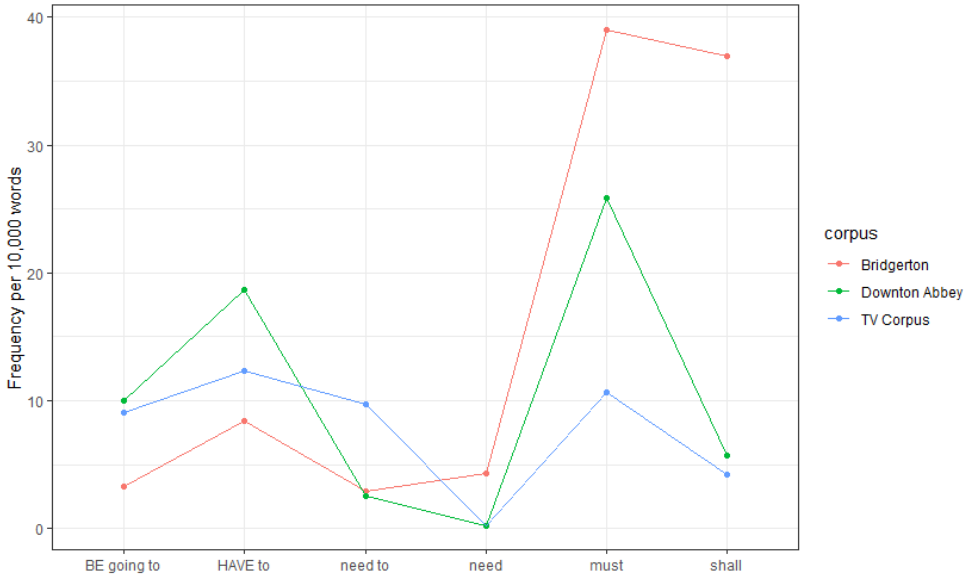
than in television generally – the frequency of *must* is the most striking difference between the two corpora where modals and semi-modals are concerned. Both series under consideration overuse *must*. It is noteworthy that in *Downton Abbey* and *Bridgerton*, *must* is far more frequent than HAVE *to*, whereas The TV Corpus shows that HAVE *to* is preferred to *must*.

Figure 3: Modal use in *Bridgerton*, *Downton Abbey* and the TV Corpus subset.



Given that the deontic (obligation) sense of *must* has been increasingly covered by HAVE *to* since at least the first half of the 20th century (e.g., Collins 2014; Krug 2000; Laliberté 2022; Leech et al. 2009), it is likely to be the specifically deontic use of *must*, rather than its epistemic (strong likelihood) use, which is overused in the historical fiction data. Table 1 breaks down all instances of *must* by meaning in the *Bridgerton* and *Downton Abbey* corpora, as well as in a random sample of 200 tokens from the control data. The results are consistent with our expectations: while deontic (necessity/obligation) and epistemic *must* are almost equally frequent in the control corpus, the deontic sense of *must* is dominant in *Bridgerton* and *Downton Abbey*. When looking at their relative frequency per 10,000 words, deontic *must* is also much more frequent in these two series than in the control corpus. By contrast, epistemic uses are equally frequent in all corpora. Note that the relative frequency calculated for the control corpus is based on the projection of the rates given by the sample of 200 tokens onto all 3,429 tokens of *must* in that corpus.

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	Bridgerton		*Downton Abbey*		UK dramas 2016-17	
	frequency	per 10,000	frequency	per 10,000	frequency	per 10,000 (projection)
deontic	152 (80.4%)	31.3	85 (74.6%)	19.3	110 (55.0%)	5.7
epistemic	31 (16.4%)	6.4	29 (25.4%)	6.6	86 (43.0%)	4.5
unclear	6 (3.2%)	1.2	0	0	4 (2.0%)	0.2

Table 1: Meanings of *must* in *Bridgerton*, *Downton Abbey* and the control corpus.

Modal verbs do not have straightforward envelopes of variation (i.e., they rarely have equivalent, mutually exclusive variants), which, in a quantitative framework, makes their study liable to latent confounding factors such as speaker intent and stance, and discourse content generally. It is not impossible, for example, that *Bridgerton* and *Downton Abbey*, which revolve around personal conflict and struggles with social expectations, should express obligation overall more than other dramas. Nonetheless, the fact that *Bridgerton* and *Downton Abbey* use *must* respectively 4 and 2.5 times more frequently than the reference corpus does points to the keyness of this modal in historical fiction.

4.3 Comparing *Bridgerton* and *Downton Abbey*

The previous sections have shown that *Bridgerton* avoids contractions in an almost dogmatic way, while *Downton Abbey* uses clitics about as frequently as the rest of UK dramas as a whole. Similarly, most modals and semi-modals behave as hypothesized in *Bridgerton*, but not in *Downton Abbey*. This indicates that despite their commonalities in medium, genre, geographical setting and popularity, these works differ from each other linguistically. Although one major difference between the two works is that *Bridgerton* was adapted from a novel and *Downton Abbey* was written for television, this does not necessarily explain the divergence in linguistic strategies we see in this study. A look at the same features in *The Duke and I*, from which the first season of *Bridgerton* is adapted, reveals that the series strongly deviates from its source material regarding contractions and modal use. Figures 4, 5 and 6 present the relevant frequencies for clitics, modals and semi-modals in the full text of *The Duke and I* (book) compared to *Bridgerton* (TV series). Note that for the book, which contains more text than the scripts, the frequencies for full forms include tokens outside of the variable context; this does not affect the argument made here.

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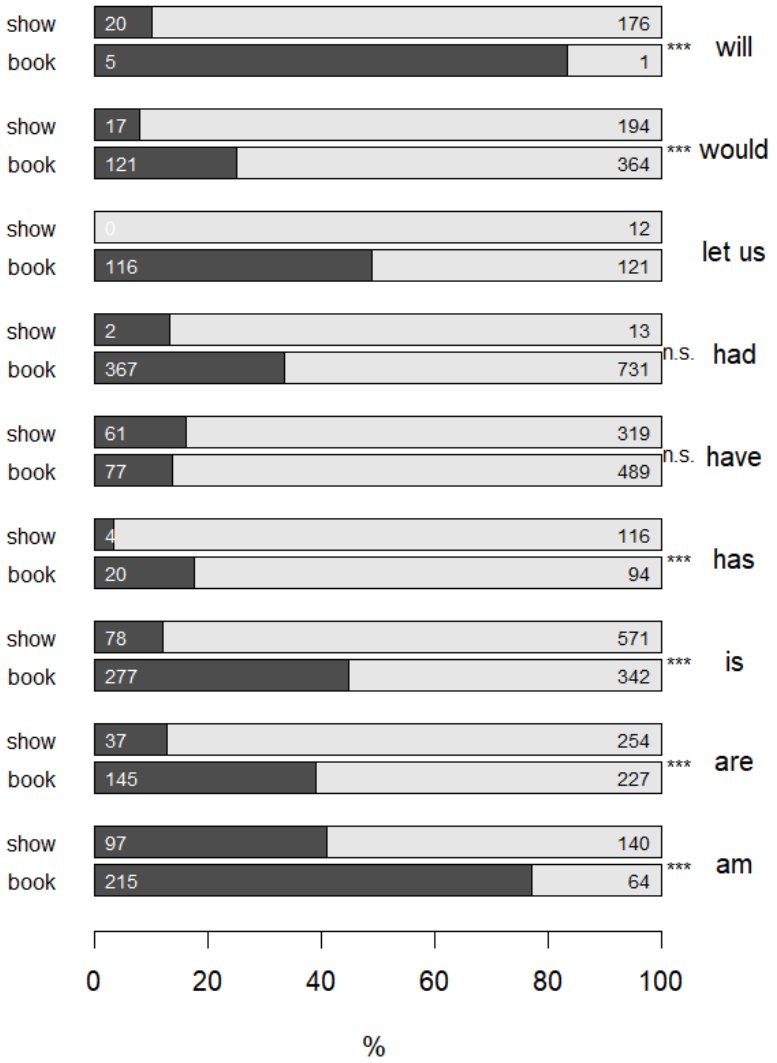

Figure 4: Rates of full and contracted forms by verb in affirmative contexts in *Bridgerton* (TV series) and *The Duke and I* (book).

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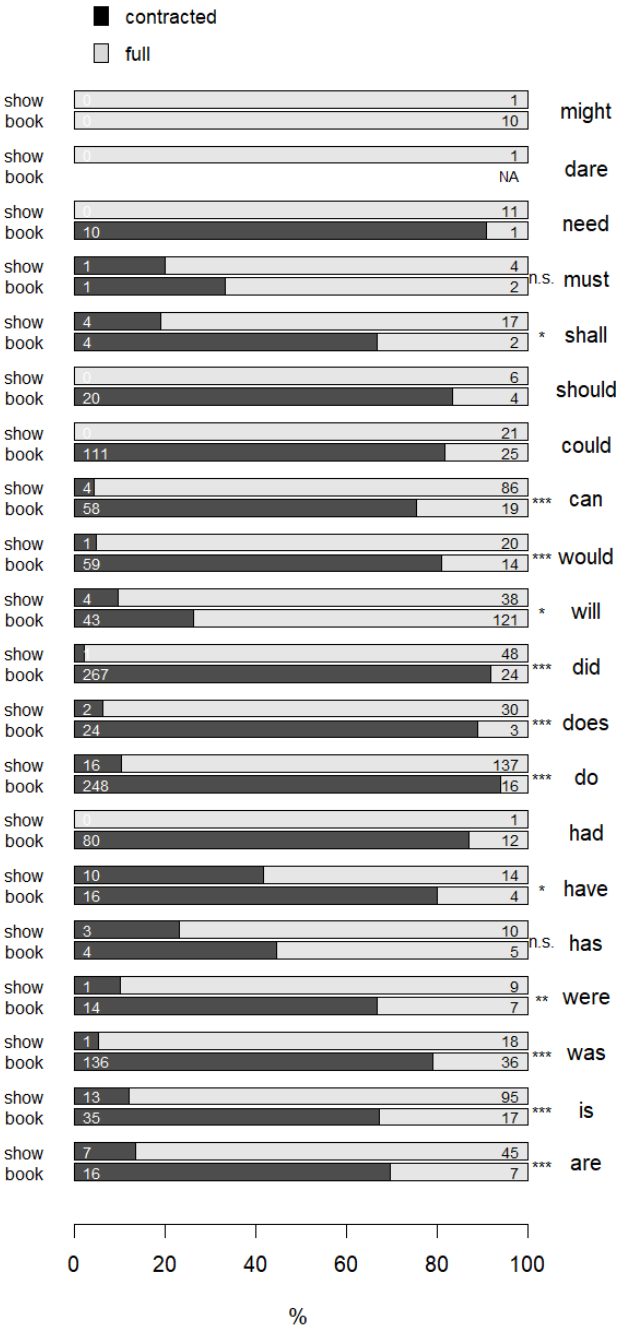

Figure 5: Rates of full and contracted *not* by verb in *Bridgerton* (TV series) and *The Duke and I* (book).

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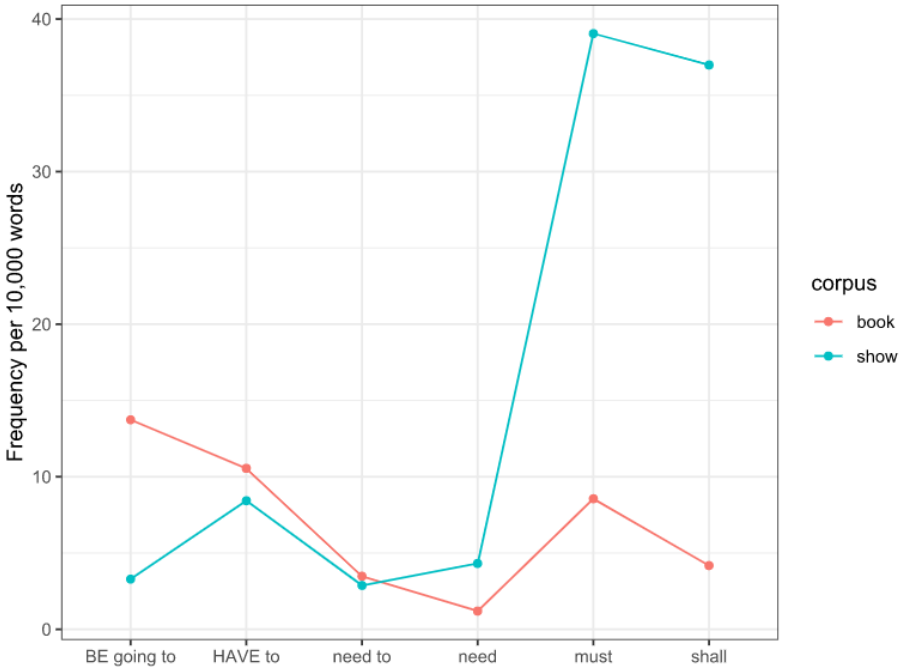

Figure 6: Modal usage in in *Bridgerton* (TV series) and *The Duke and I* (book).

Contrary to what is found in the television series, the printed source material for *Bridgerton* employs contractions far more often than full forms, and the frequency of individual modals and semi-modals is strikingly similar to The TV Corpus control (see Figure 4) – more similar than to the televisual adaptation of its own text. *Bridgerton*, it must be assumed, deliberately diverged from its source material in order to achieve some effect, potentially to match certain norms of the genre and audience expectations. In line with its purposely loose commitment to historical accuracy in terms of sartorial and musical aesthetics, *Bridgerton* uses language in a particularly stylized way. Importantly, these changes from the source material point towards the televisual medium operating under linguistic considerations that are distinct from those of literary historical fiction, at least in this case. The avoidance of contractions and the overuse of certain modals are distinct strategies of estrangement in this television series.

In contrast to *Bridgerton*'s playful style, *Downton Abbey* approaches historical fiction by prioritizing "the appearance of period accuracy" (Byrne 2014, 313). As argued by Byrne (2014), *Downton* is so-called heritage television, i.e., a vehicle for nationalist nostalgia and conservative values, despite broaching modern themes such as feminism and sexuality. The conservative message of *Downton* hinges on presenting a comforting and unchallenging version of the English past which harkens back to (fabricated) times of peaceful social order (Byrne 2014; see also de Groot 2015). This requires selling its representation of the past as accurate and authentic, which precludes the use of overly stylized elements in the vein of *Bridgerton*'s music, costumes and language. Our results show that with the exception of a heightened use of *must*,

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Downton Abbey does not employ the features we selected on the basis that they potentially serve to distance viewers from the real world of the present. Though it may well be that it simply employs features we do not cover here, in light of *Downton*'s political underpinnings we may posit that the series rather sought to avoid calling attention to its world as fictional and 'other' – that is, to avoid estrangement to a degree.

5. Conclusion

The premise of this study is that historical fiction, like all genres, can be characterized linguistically. Comments by authors and editors of historical fiction around linguistic matters (see section 2) suggest that authors consciously employ similar approaches in the creation of their characters' speech. Above all, writers are concerned with the strategic avoidance of forms deemed modern and the employment of more 'formal' or 'conservative' language instead. These choices have little to do with the actual history of English. Saxton distinguishes between *accuracy* as the true-to-the-record or evidence-based representation of the past and *authenticity*, which "refers to the *impression* of accuracy and the extent to which readers believe that a representation captures the past" (2020, 127; my emphasis). Writers can communicate pastness authentically by drawing on what they and their readers hold to be typical of formal and/or conservative language. This study sought to empirically observe and describe some of the specific linguistic means employed by writers of television by focusing on two well-established linguistic correlates of formality and conservativeness, namely clitics and the use of modal expressions. While uncontracted forms and declining modals are overrepresented in *Bridgerton*, *Downton Abbey* does not use these features to the same extent.

The study has shown that works of televisual historical fiction differ regarding how their 'Bygonese' is constructed and to which degree it is employed for estranging purposes. While *Bridgerton* unequivocally demonstrates that the features we explored can be used strategically for effect, the case of *Downton Abbey* provides a reminder that writers can choose to forgo, subvert or ignore them and the effects they create. That said, *Bridgerton* and *Downton Abbey*'s overuse of *must* stands out especially against their major differences. It suggests that *must* might constitute a core feature of historical fiction language more generally, hinting towards its role in the establishment of potential norms in televisual historical fiction.

The findings are also useful beyond the intrinsic value of describing the linguistic characteristics of a television genre. By showing that some variants are significantly over- or underrepresented in historical fiction, the study raises important points for corpus linguistics generally, whereby the indiscriminate inclusion of historical fiction texts in corpora can unintentionally skew data. The overrepresentation of historical fiction material among tokens of *shan't* and *needn't* in The TV Corpus, for example, constitutes a case in point. This is a concern also raised by Egan (2019) for the expression *not fail to*, found in older fictional texts set before the time of writing and written long after the idiom fell out of use: including these historical texts in historical corpora can be mistaken as exemplifying authentic language use contemporary to the text rather than stylized language. Given that the features we covered here are not

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archaisms but merely typify formal and conservative language, their effect on the make-up of corpora may be easily overlooked. Studies using The TV Corpus, presented as representative of "very informal language" (Davies 2019), for example, are particularly at risk for this confounder. Performed language is language and therefore fundamentally 'real' language, which, on the one hand, should speak for its inclusion in generalist corpora. On the other hand, its presence in most corpora will remain problematic for most researchers until the field better understands and anticipates its specificities. An obvious next step is for language researchers to continue making deliberate efforts towards theorizing and investigating diverse kinds of performed language. The linguistic description of individual works of fiction and what characterizes specific genres, as in the present study, advances and improves our knowledge of language generally.

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