

**“Really? You’re gonna say ‘tunes’?”:**  
The functions of register clashes in the television drama series  
*Gilmore Girls*

Essay in English  
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Spring 2009

## **Abstract**

Register clashes are a linguistic phenomenon that occurs in both real and fictional interaction. This study, based on the theory of register as developed by Halliday, examines the functions of register clashes in the television drama series *Gilmore Girls*. It was hypothesized that the function of register clashes is to create humor, to characterize some characters on the show as sophisticated and witty and some others as lacking in communicative competence, or what is popularly referred to as *geeky* or *nerdy*, as well as to characterize the show. A total of 1,306 cases of register clashes were identified, of which 761 cases (58.3 percent) were clear cases and 545 cases (41.7 percent) were somewhat more doubtful. Nearly all cases of register clashes found were considered to have been used to create humor. Eight out of the ten most productive characters with respect to the utterance of register clashes were found to be characterized as witty; the other two characters produced register clashes in a way that characterized them as geeky. Each of the six episodes examined in this study was found to contain many instances of register clashes, regardless of the fact that each was written by a different author. The results thus suggest that the function of register clashes in *Gilmore Girls* is indeed to create humor, to characterize the characters, and to characterize the show.

**Key words:** register clashes, Halliday, humor, television, fictional characters, *Gilmore Girls*.

I would like to thank my supervisor Thorsten Schröter for the many valuable comments and suggestions offered during the course of writing this essay.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In describing the different functions of language in human communication, the influential British-Australian linguist Michael Halliday succinctly sums these functions up as “people do different things with their language” (1989, p. 15).

People decide what type of language to use based on several factors, and, as Halliday explains, together these factors make up the context of situation. Discerning what kind of language is appropriate in which situations is part of sociolinguistic competence, defined by Yule as “the ability to use language appropriately according to the social context as part of communicative competence” (2006, p. 250). Communicative competence, in turn, is “the general ability to use language accurately, appropriately and flexibly” (Yule, 2006, p. 239).

Halliday explains that this relationship between language and situation is captured in the concept of register. In the words of Halliday, register is “a concept of the kind of variation in language that goes with variation in the context of situation” (1989, p. 38).

Biber, Conrad and Reppen write that

Control of a range of registers is crucially important for any competent speaker of a language. It is probably accurate to say that no one controls only a single register; rather, during the course of any day, we all speak and write a wide range of registers. (1998, p. 135)

Sometimes, however, more than one register is present in a certain linguistic output, in a way that is unexpected. Such instances constitute register clashes. Apart from real situations, register clashes can be encountered in fictional situations as well, such as in television series.

My research question for this study is: what is the function of register clashes in the television drama series *Gilmore Girls*? How often do scriptwriters use this strategy in this particular show? If the main function of register clashes is to create humor, do all instances of register clashes function in the same way?

My hypothesis is that register clashes are used to create humor, to characterize some characters on the show as sophisticated and witty and some others as lacking in communicative competence, or what is popularly referred to as *geeky* or *nerdy*, as well as to characterize the show in general.

I also expect that the majority of register clashes will occur in the utterances of the character Lorelai, who is one of the main characters in *Gilmore Girls*.

## **2. BACKGROUND**

### **2.1 REGISTER**

Register is a type of linguistic variation (Alexander, 1984, p. 53). In the *Collins Cobuild Advanced Dictionary*, register is defined as follows: “In linguistics, the register of a piece of speech or writing is its level and style of language, which is usually appropriate to the situation or circumstances in which it is used.”

The present study will be based on the theory of register as developed by Halliday (cf. 2.1.1, 2.1.2), but it is important to note that several other frameworks by other authors also exist. Lee (2001) points out that some authors use the terms *register* and *genre* “interchangeably, mainly because they overlap to some degree” (2001, p. 41). Other authors, such as Lee himself, emphasize the differences between these two and other similar terms. Atkinson and Biber represent yet another approach in using *register* as an umbrella term. In the introduction to their 1994 paper, the aim of which was to give an overview of the research on register, Atkinson and Biber write that they use *register* as an umbrella term that encompasses *register*, *genre*, *style*, and *text type*. The authors note that these four terms are “terms that can themselves be defined in multiple ways”, but that they are going to use *register* “to refer to any language variety associated with particular situational or use characteristics” (Atkinson & Biber, 1994, p. 351).

For the purposes of this study, only the concept of register will be used. It should also be noted that neither Halliday nor Alexander consider *dialect* to be part of register; both authors treat *dialect* as a separate concept. However, Halliday does state that “there is close interconnection between registers and dialects” (1989, p. 43). In this study, no attempt to distinguish dialect from register will be made.

### **2.1.1 Halliday's definition of register**

Halliday gives the following definition of register:

A register is a semantic concept. It can be defined as a configuration of meanings that are typically associated with a particular situational configuration of field, mode, and tenor. But since it is a configuration of meanings, a register must also, of course, include the expressions, the lexico-grammatical and phonological features, that typically accompany or REALISE these meanings. (1989, pp. 38-39; original emphasis)

In simplified form, my interpretation of this definition is to regard register as the relationship between a type of language and the situation that this type of language is typically used in. In discussing how register differs from dialect, Halliday gives a simpler definition of register:

A register we can define as a variety according to use. In other words, the register is what you are speaking at the time, depending on what you are doing and the nature of the activity in which the language is functioning. (1989, p. 41)

For the purposes of this study, a simplified version of Halliday's definition will be adopted. Register will thus be defined as an arrangement of words and phrases that is typically associated with a specific situational arrangement of field, tenor and mode of discourse.

### 2.1.2 Halliday's "context of situation" – field, tenor, and mode of discourse

Halliday's model of register is based on the idea that "the context of situation"<sup>1</sup> is made up of three elements: the field, tenor, and mode of discourse. Halliday explains the role of these elements as follows:

"The field of discourse" or "what is happening" could be thought of as the situation in general. As an aid to the analysis of this element, Halliday offers the following question: "What is it that the participants are engaged in, in which the language figures as some essential component?" (1989, p. 12). The description of language as technical or non-technical also belongs to the category of *field*. As Alexander explains, "specific subject matter requires specific terms" (1984, p. 59).

"The tenor of discourse" or "who is taking part" encompasses "the nature of the participants, their statuses and roles" (Halliday, 1989, p. 12). Halliday further explains that both "permanent and temporary relationships" need to be considered (1989, p. 12). Alexander writes that "indications and shifts of social role are possible by selecting certain lexical items" (1984, p. 60).

Finally, as far as the "mode of discourse" is concerned, Halliday explains that it "refers to what part the language is playing, what it is that the participants are expecting the language to do for them in that situation" (1989, p. 12). Halliday lists several components that together make up the mode of discourse. Of these components, *the channel* and *the rhetorical mode* are perhaps the most accessible concepts in that they offer two concrete ways of describing the role of language in a given situation. *Channel* describes the form of a text. The examples Halliday gives are: written, spoken, "some combination of the two" (p. 12) such as "written to be read aloud" (p. 14), monologue, dialogue, and spontaneous speech (p. 34). *Rhetorical mode* can best be understood by referring back to Halliday's initial explanation, namely "what it is that the participants are expecting the language to do for them in that situation". Halliday explains that the aim could be to persuade, to educate, or to specifically state what is being done, in which case the mode is performative. Thus, Halliday's approach to the context of situation as described above allows for a specific, systematic description of any situation.

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<sup>1</sup> Halliday points out that this term was pioneered in 1923 by the anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski (1989, pp. 5-6).

To illustrate how field, tenor and mode of discourse can be used to analyze the context of situation, let us consider a scene from a television drama about a hospital, *Grey's Anatomy* (season 3, episode 9). A doctor and a group of interns enter an emergency room:

Bailey: Grey, trauma room one. Yang, man that stretcher. Karev, come with me.

Derek: All right, talk to me.

Cristina: Larry Shane Dickerson, eighty-six. GCS eight, BP 100 over palp, pulse in the one-twenties.

Callie: Obvious deformities to the right tib/fib. Get X-rays. Let me know if there's anything surgical.

In this situation, the *field* of discourse consists of medical professionals collaborating to help a patient that has been in an accident and needs immediate attention. The language is technical.

The *tenor* consists of a team of medics who are colleagues. They share the same frame of reference and, to a large extent, the same medical knowledge; for example, everyone participating in this exchange knows what "GCS eight" means. Some people on the team are doctors who are established specialists in their field, while some are interns. Therefore, some people on the team have seniority and the role of a teacher, while others are students. The students know that presenting a patient's case and then carrying out their teachers' orders is part of their training.

The *mode* is spoken (*channel*) and concise, consisting largely of commands (*rhetorical mode*). The role of the language is to aid speedy communication so that the patient is helped as soon as possible.

### **2.1.3 The connection between Halliday's concept of register and Paul Grice's Cooperative Principle**

Halliday works with "the concept of 'register'" (p. 38) in order to explain why people in general communicate successfully (p. 9). His main claim is that people "can reconstruct a lot about the situation just by attending to [some] little bit of text" (p. 38). Conversely, "the situation in which linguistic interaction takes place gives the participants a great deal



of information about the meanings that are being exchanged, and the meanings that are likely to be exchanged” (p. 10). To illustrate, one of the examples Halliday gives is “30 please” (1989, p. 37). As he explains, just from this piece of language it is possible to imagine, or, in Halliday’s terms, “infer” or “reconstruct” the situation: someone buying a ticket for public transportation. This understanding is possible because of the language-situation connection that is encompassed in the concept of register.

Another influential scholar investigating why human communication works as well as it does is Paul Grice, who developed the Cooperative Principle theory. Grice claims that in situations where an utterance could be viewed as ambiguous, people understand what is meant (rather than taking what is said at its face value) because they (subconsciously) assume that their interlocutors are cooperative (1975).

Grice defines the Cooperative Principle as follows: “make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged” (2006, pp. 67-68). Observing the Cooperative Principle entails observing its four maxims. These maxims are: quantity, quality, relation (or relevance), and manner. Adhering to these maxims thus means giving the right amount of information, telling the truth, only saying what is relevant, and expressing oneself in a clear manner.

It could be argued that Halliday’s theory of register as a means of understanding a situation based on the language that is used (and vice versa) works precisely because of the subconscious assumption that the Cooperative Principle and its maxims are being followed. That is, people are able to orient themselves in a new situation based on the language they hear (and vice versa) because they subconsciously assume that their interlocutors are cooperative.

#### **2.1.4 Register clashes as breaking the maxim of manner**

In light of the ideas discussed in section 2.1.3, register clashes could be considered as a form of breaking the maxim of manner. The maxim of manner consists of a “supermaxim”, namely “be perspicuous”, and four additional maxims: “avoid obscurity of expression”, “avoid ambiguity”, “be brief (and avoid unnecessary prolixity)” and “be orderly” (Grice, 2006, p. 68).

When two registers clash, this does not mean that an utterance becomes very difficult to understand due to some ambiguity. Such clashes may, however, require the listener to take a few additional cognitive steps in order to understand what the other party wishes to communicate. I argue that, in the case of register clashes, the listener does take these additional steps (as opposed to slowing down the conversation to ask what exactly the other speaker means) because he or she subconsciously assumes that their interlocutor is cooperative. If they did not think that the other party is cooperating, they would not do this. In other words, when hearing a register clash, a listener (subconsciously) assumes that they are given the right amount of information, are told the truth, and are told something that is relevant, just not in the clearest possible manner. Since the conversational maxims can be broken in several different ways - maxims can be violated, flouted, or opted out of (Grice, 1975) – it could be assumed that the listener supposes that the maxim of manner is flouted, i.e. the listener recognizes that the register clash is not a deliberate attempt to hide the truth. The register clash is thus “recognized as fulfilling some ulterior, cooperatively communicative purpose such as the creation of humor” (Schröter, p. c., 2009).

## **2.2 REGISTER CLASHES**

In previous studies, register clashes have been examined as a mechanism that creates humor (Alexander, 1984; Attardo, 1994). It could be argued, however, that these descriptions of how register clashes create humor can be used to define register clashes in general, regardless of the functions of such clashes.

### **2.2.1 The form of register clashes**

Thus, register clashes can be defined as “mixing of style levels” or “selecting a lexeme or a phraseological unit from a different style level than the context would predict” (Alexander, 1984, p. 60).<sup>2</sup> Alexander discusses both of these descriptions in connection with the *tenor* aspect of register only, but Attardo (1994, p. 235) applies the latter definition to “register-based humor” in general. In this study, I extend Alexander’s definitions to all types of register clashes.

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that Alexander himself talks about “register differences”. It is Attardo who talks about “the clash between two registers” (Attardo, 1994, p. 230).

How can register clashes be identified? Alexander explains that when two registers clash, a contrast is created. He gives two examples of register clashes from Alan Coren texts:<sup>3</sup>

“Lot of them *humorous* clouds about.”

“Cumulus”, said the Warden

“Suddenly it’s coming down like a bleeding *mongoose*, am I right?”

“Monsoon, quite.” (1984, p. 59, original emphasis)

Alexander argues that “the juxtaposition of such [technical] words with the informal style brings out their specificity [sic] in a marked fashion” (1984, p. 59). Such contrasts are noticed because of the expectations an audience (perhaps subconsciously) brings to an encounter with a text. Alexander points out that by constructing a text in a certain way (i.e. by including a register clash), a writer can enforce and subsequently manipulate such expectations.

As Halliday argues (cf. 2.1.3), people have expectations about what kind of language will likely be used based on the context of situation. Any elements that do not match these expectations can therefore be assumed to draw attention to themselves. To sum up, register clashes can be identified by the contrast or incongruity they create based on our expectations (both expectations created by the co-text<sup>4</sup> itself as well as expectations created by a situational context).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Alexander notes that these examples are also examples of malapropisms.

<sup>4</sup> Yule (2006, p. 240) defines co-text as “the set of other words used in the same phrase or sentence, also called the linguistic context”. Halliday defines text as “any instance of living language that is playing some part in a context of situation” (1989, p. 10). In light of Halliday’s definition of text, I argue that Yule’s definition of co-text can be extended to include all surrounding text in a given situation.

<sup>5</sup> Register clashes could also be identified by looking for signals, a concept discussed by Schröter (2005, pp. 81-82). Schröter and Delabastita (quoted in Schröter) discuss signals in connection with language-play and wordplay respectively; however, the concept can also be applied to register clashes. There are two types of signals that would be relevant in detecting register clashes: diacritical and generic. Diacritical signals can be “any feature that directs special attention to the pun without being part of the pun itself. [...] Explanations of, and comments on, a pun count as diacritical signals, too” (Schröter, 2005, p. 82). Generic signals, on the other hand, could be defined as the overall expectations that the text itself creates “concerning the presence or absence of wordplay in that same text” (p. 82; Schröter bases this definition on Delabastita). I argue that the same claims apply to detecting register clashes with the help of signals. Both

It is possible to define a register clash even further by pinpointing where exactly such a clash occurs on the three dimensions of register as defined by Halliday. Alexander (1984) presents his analysis of register clashes in this way, discussing examples of clashes by identifying the source of incongruity. He also provides a model apparently based on Halliday’s definition of register. Shown in Figure 1 is a part of this model.

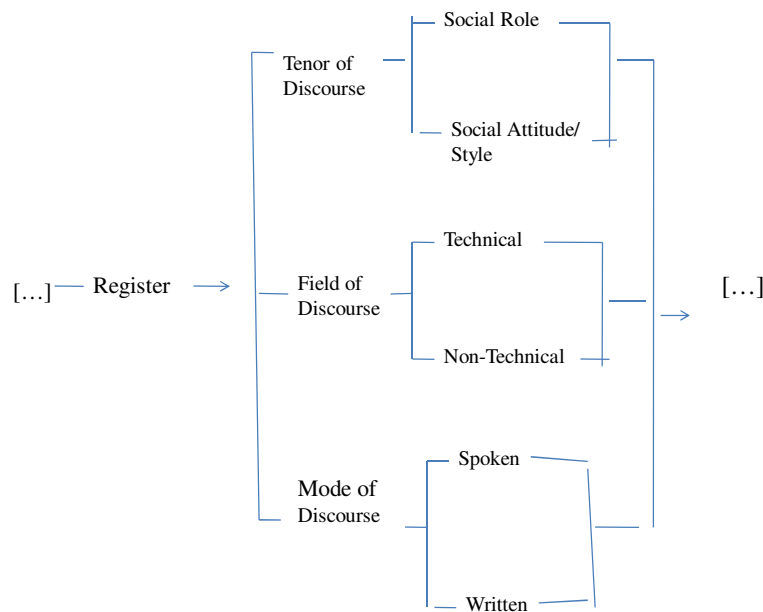


Figure 1. Alexander’s model.<sup>6</sup>

As can be seen in Figure 1, Alexander selects two key aspects of each of the three dimensions. In the *field of discourse* dimension, for example, he contrasts technical with non-technical language. For the *mode of discourse* dimension, Alexander selects *channel* only, omitting *rhetorical mode* and the other elements of *mode* suggested by Halliday (cf. 2.1.2). To see how Alexander’s model can be used to specify where a register clash

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Delabastita and Schröter conclude, however, that it is not always possible to rely on signals in order to detect wordplay or language-play. Yet this issue is relevant because focusing on signaling would eliminate the need for “intuitions about intentions” (Delabastita, quoted in Schröter, 2005, p. 82), i.e., intuitively assessing whether a particular element, such as a register clash, was created intentionally or not (cf. 2.2.2, Characterizing a character)

<sup>6</sup> Alexander’s original model illustrates all humor. Shown in Figure 1 is only the part that illustrates register-based humor.

occurs (i.e., which aspect of a text does not match an audience's expectations of what would likely be said or written in some situation), let us look at two concrete examples, of which the first is from the television comedy show *Little Britain*:

Lawyer: Vicky Pollard, you have been charged with shoplifting. On the 11<sup>th</sup> of April, it is alleged you went into the Erskine branch of Superdrug. Once there you attempted to steal an eyeliner pencil and a can of Red Bull by concealing them in your leggings. Now in the face of the overwhelming evidence we've heard today against you, do you stand by your plea of – 'Not guilty'?

Vicky: No but yeah but no because what happened was right this thing happened that I don't know nothing about shut up I wasn't meant to be anywhere even near there. Then Meredith came over and started stirring it all up started calling me all these things about this thing I didn't even know about.

(adapted from Coulthard & Johnson, 2007, p. 18)

In the above example, the character Vicky uses an informal register characterized by, among other features, interjections and expressions such as *right* and *shut up* as well as overall vagueness. This informal register clashes with the formality of the situation, emphasized by the lawyer's use of formal and technical language (*charged*, *alleged*, *stand by your plea*). In discussing the above example, Coulthard and Johnson specify which dimensions are involved in creating the register clash:

The 'tenor' of discourse selected for Vicky Pollard subverts the formal and distant relationship, which is expected between lawyer and witness, and converts it into something disconcertingly familiar. There also appears to be a mismatch of 'field' of discourse, with Vicky using

lexis and a style that is more appropriate for a casual conversation amongst peers than one in a legal context. (2007, p. 32)

As discussed in sections 2.1.3 and 2.1.4, register clashes can be viewed as breaking the Gricean maxim of manner. Coulthard and Johnson discuss the *Little Britain* example as breaking all of the Gricean maxims (2007, p. 28).

Register clashes can also occur in linguistic output by a single person, as the second example, another one from *Grey's Anatomy* (this time, from season 4, episode 6), will illustrate. In this scene, Cristina, an intern, tries to persuade her colleague Izzie to switch patients, using the fact that Izzie's patient would be a "skydiver whose 'chute didn't open" as an argument:

Izzie: Poor guy. He probably broke every bone in his body.

Cristina: No, the point is not poor guy. The point is amazing surgery.  
And it could be yours. For the low, low price of a humdrum,  
everyday cardiac cath."

In this example, a character uses a construction typical of television infomercials (*it could be yours for the low, low price of*) in order to persuade another character. In this case, the clash occurs in the *tenor of discourse* ("Who is taking part") dimension, and to specify it even further, it is a clash of social roles. Cristina's social role is that of a doctor, not of a salesperson trying to sell a product.

### **2.2.2 The functions of register clashes**

As a form of language variation, register clashes can have many different functions. In this study, which will focus on the functions of register clashes in the television series *Gilmore Girls*, the following three functions will be examined more closely: creating humor, characterizing characters, and characterizing the show.

#### **Creating humor**

One function of register clashes is the creation of humor. Where that is the case, register clashes are a type of verbalized humor or "jokes [...] that depend on [linguistic] variation

(either actual or implied) for their effect” (Alexander, 1984, p. 55). Salvatore Attardo, one of the leading authorities in humor research, defines “register humor” as “humor caused by an incongruity originating in the clash between two registers” (Attardo, 1994, p. 230). Incongruity, in turn, is one of the main underlying mechanisms of all humor (Schröter, 2005, p. 58). Schröter explains that “incongruity theories are the most concerned with the structure, or the mechanics, of humorous material such as jokes. They are thus the most linguistic in nature” (2005, p. 59).

Attardo discusses linguistically triggered activation of different scripts<sup>7</sup> which, in turn, activate more scripts and the process results in “register humor in script-based terms” (1994, p. 252). In simplified form, Attardo’s theory of register humor could be explained as different linguistic elements activating different scripts. When some of these scripts clash, the incongruity may be noticed and result in humor.

In summary, Alexander concludes that:

Register differences in the work of comic writers, parodies and jokes tend for the most part to be prominent on the dimensions of tenor or field; and for the most part lexical features are implicated. There would appear to be fewer cases where the medium or mode of discourse is involved in humor or jokes. (1984, p. 61)

### **Characterizing a character**

While register clashes can result in humor, they do not necessarily have to do so. A deliberately created register clash could serve another function, such as characterizing a speaker.

As sociolinguistic research has shown, language is a powerful marker of identity. Not only *what* is said (the ideational content), but also *how* something is said communicates information about the speaker. Yule explains that different people use language differently, and that “these differences may be used, implicitly or explicitly, as indications of membership in different social groups or speech communities” (2006, p.

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<sup>7</sup> Yule (2006, p. 249) defines script as “a conventional knowledge structure in memory for the series of actions involved in events such as ‘Going to the dentist’”.

205).<sup>8</sup> Therefore, when creating fictional characters, scriptwriters can use language (in addition to other aspects such as physical appearance, etc.) to characterize them. Delabastita, who studied puns in the works of Shakespeare, names “animating characters: individuals and interactions” as one of the functions of such puns (in Schröter, 2005, p. 89). Schröter suggests that the functions identified by Delabastita can be extended to apply to wordplay beyond the puns in Shakespeare, and to language-play in general. I argue that the function of animating characters can be extended to register clashes as well.

Schröter explains that this function of animating characters “contributes to ‘a characterization of the characters’ [...] and of the situations and interactions they find themselves in” (2005, p. 89). I argue that in *Gilmore Girls*, register clashes are used to characterize some characters as witty and sophisticated, and some others as comical and geeky. To explain how this is achieved, i.e. how the same mechanism (a register clash) can characterize someone as witty and someone else as geeky, another element needs to be introduced, namely intention.

Schröter explains that the so-called “character-puns have been intended by the characters, while author-puns, though uttered by a character, are intended by the author or script-writer alone” (2005, p. 94). Obviously, “these distinctions apply when we are dealing with fictional interaction” (p. 94), which is the topic of the present study. Thus, by having some characters “voluntarily” use register clashes, these characters can be portrayed as witty and sophisticated<sup>9</sup>. Meanwhile, “author-puns”, or, in this case, register clashes that have been intended by the authors only, serve to characterize some other characters as geeky and lacking in communicative (or social) competence.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Yule defines a speech community as “a group of people who share a set of norms and expectations regarding the use of language” (2006, p. 205).

<sup>9</sup> To clarify, all register clashes in fiction are, of course, created by the scriptwriters, regardless of whether such clashes are used by a witty or a geeky character.

<sup>10</sup> Although this function would not be directly related to the present study, register clashes can also be used to identify with the gay community. Harvey identifies “register-mixing” as a feature of camp talk, noting that:

Camp likes to expose the mechanisms at work in the choices speakers make with regard to appropriateness. Camp speakers, for example, will typically use levels of formality/informality that are incongruous in a particular context, or juxtapose different levels of formality in a way that creates linguistic incongruity. (2004, p. 407)



Discussing language-play rather than register clashes, Schröter points to the work of Grassegger, who suggests that language-play can be seen as a form of creativity. Schröter argues that “Grassegger is quite right in assuming that *playing* with language involves more creativity than, say, normal conversation” (p. 76, original emphasis). Extending this concept of creativity to register clashes would lend support to my claim that the characters that “voluntarily” use register clashes are more sophisticated.

### **Characterizing a show**

Finally, register clashes also serve another function which is more global. Besides creating humor and characterizing characters, register clashes can also characterize a show as a whole. Schröter points out that “a film, apart from being a work of art, is also a business enterprise and a commercial product” (p. 94). Drawing parallels with the function of language-play in advertising, Schröter argues that the “ultimate function” of such elements in advertising is “a change of behavior that benefits the business or the cause advertised” (p. 91). For films, this would mean that “in principle, nothing that repels the targeted group of viewers more than it is expected to please them should make it into the film” (p. 94). This idea focuses on the fact that including or not eliminating such linguistic elements as language-play or register clashes from a script is a deliberate decision, because it is expected that such elements “help render the film attractive” (p. 94).<sup>11</sup>

The present study will examine episodes from three different seasons of *Gilmore Girls*. Encountering register clashes in all of the episodes analyzed would lend support to the idea that register clashes are a deliberate strategy used to characterize the show.

It follows, then, that register clashes can serve several functions at once, as the example from *Little Britain* above indicates: Vicky’s behavior in court both creates

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Using such register clashes as described by Harvey could thus also function as a marker of a (real or fictional) person’s homosexual identity.

<sup>11</sup> Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who developed the theory of flow, writes that “[...] when words are well chosen, well arranged, they generate gratifying experiences for the listener” (1990, p. 130). Although he discusses this with reference to spoken conversation, this idea seems to be valid for writing for films and television series as well. Csikszentmihalyi encourages linguistic creativity, stating, for example, that “one way to teach children the potential of words is by starting to expose them to wordplay quite early” (1990, p. 130).

humor and characterizes her, while at the same time sustaining the idea of *Little Britain* as being a funny show.

### **3. MATERIAL AND METHODS**

The present study aims to find out what is the function of register clashes in TV drama series. More specifically, what is the function of register clashes in the television series *Gilmore Girls*? I chose to analyze this show because I was already very familiar with the series in terms of the plot and the characters.

#### **3.1 Material**

*Gilmore Girls* is an American television drama about the lives of Lorelai and Rory Gilmore, a mother and daughter. The show, produced by Warner Bros., was created by Amy Sherman-Palladino and produced by Patricia Fass Palmer. *Gilmore Girls* was first aired in the United States on 5 October 2000 and ran for seven seasons. The last episode was originally aired in the US on 15 May 2007 (*The Internet Movie Database*). Each episode is 40 minutes long. For a brief description of the show as well as a list of all the characters relevant to this study, see Appendix A.

Dyfverman Sverenius, who works with translation and subtitling, writes that “the series is inspired by the big comedies of the thirties, and the dialogue is fast-paced and witty” (2008, p. 79, my translation). The show is often given to translation and subtitling trainees to practice on, reflecting the fact that the show is linguistically rich and interesting. “The students soon realize how frustrating it is to be forced to omit jokes and to only translate the lines that are necessary in order to understand the plot” (Dyfverman Sverenius, 2008, p. 79, my translation).

#### **3.2 Methods**

In order to get to know the material, a pilot study was carried out: one arbitrarily chosen episode of *Gilmore Girls* was examined with respect to humorous sequences. I wanted to find out which linguistic mechanisms give the series its characteristic humor. As a result of the pilot study, register clashes emerged as one of the mechanisms of producing

humor. Moreover, it seemed as if the register clashes were also used to characterize different characters.

Using a research randomizer tool from Randomizer.org, nine random episodes of *Gilmore Girls* were initially chosen for analysis, three each from seasons three, four and seven. These seasons were chosen based on the assumption that, by season 3, the episodes would be good examples of what has become the show's signature style. Season 7 was chosen in order to be able to see whether register clashes continued to be present in the series. I bought the DVD boxes of the selected seasons at a video rental store in Sweden. A preliminary analysis of a few episodes revealed that each episode contained many instances of register clashes. Therefore, it was decided to limit the amount of material for this study, and a total of six episodes, two from each selected season, were eventually analyzed in detail. Each episode included in this study was written by a different author and directed by a different director (except for one director, Jamie Babbit, who has directed two of the selected episodes).

Transcripts of the episodes were obtained from *Twiztv.com*. The transcripts were then checked for accuracy by watching the selected episodes and comparing what was uttered by the characters with the transcript. Although the English subtitles were turned on to aid the comparison process, it is the actual utterances, and not the text in the subtitles, that are the subject of this study.

Initially, all possible instances of register clashes were identified intuitively and marked on the transcripts for me to get an overall view of the material. The analysis of register clashes was then restricted to lexical items, or "vocabulary unit[s]" (Finch 2000, p. 102), only. The focus was thus on individual words and phrases, with a non-technical definition adopted for the latter: "group of words forming a unit of meaning, esp. within a sentence; short effective expression" (*Collins Gem English Dictionary*).

To determine whether the use of a certain lexical item in *Gilmore Girls* could be classified as a register clash, in some cases the item was looked up in the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English (OALD)*. The dictionary definition and, in some cases, the examples provided, were considered with a view to the co-text

and the general nature of the scene<sup>12</sup> in which the item had occurred. The *OALD* also provides labels such as *formal*, *informal*, *slang*, and *old-fashioned* for some items. These labels were considered further evidence in the classification of a seemingly incongruous lexical item (with respect to the situational context) as a register clash.

In the absence of an *OALD* label for a lexical item that seemed to be an instance of a register clash, the co-text was considered. In some cases, other characters commented on the use of a particular item (cf. 4.3, 4.4). Yet in other cases, it was difficult to determine whether an utterance could indeed be classified as a register clash; such cases were marked as unclear cases.

The register clashes were then analyzed by classifying each example into one of six categories, based on the Hallidayan model of register as presented by Alexander (cf. section 2.2.1): technical, non-technical, social role, social attitude/style, spoken, and written.

The technical and non-technical categories represent the field of discourse (“what is happening”). The social role and social attitude/style categories represent the tenor of discourse (“who is taking part”). And, finally, the spoken and written categories represent the mode of discourse (“what part the language is playing”). To determine which category a register clash belongs to, the following questions (based on Alexander’s model) were asked:

- Technical: Is a technical word or phrase used out of its conventional context? (Instances of more formal language than what the situation would seem to call for were also classified as *technical*.)
- Non-technical: Is a casual word or phrase used in a context that calls for technical or formal vocabulary?
- Social role<sup>13</sup>: Does a character seem to act in accordance with a social role that is incongruent with their actual social role in the relationship in question?

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<sup>12</sup> *Scene* is defined in the *OALD* as “a part of a film/movie, play or book in which the action happens in one place or is of one particular type”. I have divided each episode into scenes according to my understanding of the term in order to aid the process of classification and analysis.

<sup>13</sup> A role is “a set of norms that defines how people in a given social position ought to behave” (Myers, 2005, p. 141). Myers, a social psychologist, writes that “(...) social roles outlast those who play them” (p. 177). Myers also notes that “roles often come in pairs defined by relationships – parent and child, husband and wife, teacher and student, doctor and patient, employer and employee, police and citizen” (p. 180).

- Social attitude/style<sup>14</sup>: Is a social attitude or style used that is not typical of this character's usual style? (No distinction between social attitude and social style was made in the classification.)
- Spoken: Is a word or phrase that is typically written or associated with some other mode (such as singing) spoken?
- Written: Is a word or phrase that is typically spoken used in writing?

In addition to classifying the register clashes into these categories, each example was also marked as either “voluntarily” uttered by a character or not. The classification of this variable was based on the situation, the co-text as well as other factors (e.g., does another character comment on the use of a certain lexical item, or is the lexical item part of a humorous sequence lasting throughout the scene or several scenes). A gradation of voluntary vs. involuntary was introduced, and it consisted of four categories: *voluntary* (coded in section 4.5 as *yes*), *almost voluntary* (*(yes)*), *almost involuntary* (*(no)*), and *involuntary* (*no*). This was done to allow for a more detailed classification (c.f. 4.5). However, a degree of subjectivity in classifying this variable remains (for a discussion, cf. section 5.1).

Finally, it was also noted whether anyone in the scene explicitly comments on the lexical item causing a register clash. A gradation of four steps (*yes*, *(yes)*, *(no)*, *no*) was applied to this variable as well (c.f. 4.3). If a character explicitly commented on the use of a certain lexical item, the comment variable was scored as a *yes*. If another character alluded to the lexical item in question or even used the item in their own utterance, the variable was scored as a *(yes)*. If another character alluded to a lexical item less directly, the variable was scored as a *(no)*. Finally, if no comment at all was made on the choice of a lexical item, the comment variable was scored as a *no*. The data was analyzed with the help of the statistics program SPSS.

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Another pair that could be added to this list is “business owner or clerk – customer”, to capture many service encounters.

<sup>14</sup> Myers defines attitude as “a favorable or unfavorable evaluative reaction toward something or someone, exhibited in one’s beliefs, feelings, or intended behavior” (2005, p. 134). Social style, in turn, could be interpreted as a style of a particular speech community (cf. 2.2.2), and, in some cases (for the purposes of this study), as idiolect, which is “the personal dialect of an individual speaker” (Yule, 2006, p. 243).

One factor that will no doubt have influenced the results of this study is the fact that my understanding of the six aspects of register and the material in general grew in the process of the analysis. An effort was made to return to material already classified if I discovered that a register clash might have been overlooked. Such cases were added to the results. In some cases, I realized that certain instances of register clashes should have been classified into a different category of register than I had originally thought. The ensuing re-classification sometimes affected more cases than the one in question, and an effort was made to re-classify all of the cases thus affected by a better understanding of a register category. An attempt was also made to cross-reference all such cases.

Another aspect that has also influenced the classification process is the intonation with which an instance of a register clash was uttered. I decided not to include intonation as a variable in the study, but having watched the selected episodes multiple times, I was not able to dismiss this background knowledge. In some cases, a character was clearly imitating a different style, and in such cases, a register clash could have been detected based on intonation alone.

## **4. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS**

### **4.1 Results**

In total, 1,306 cases of register clashes were identified, of which 761 (58.3 percent) were clear cases and 545 (41.7 percent) not so clear.

The surprisingly large number of register clashes found may be due to several factors. Firstly, it was decided that even the unclear cases should be included in the study. Secondly, the material chosen for this study is known for its focus on witty language (cf. 3.1), a fact that could explain the abundance of register clashes in the material. Thirdly, the number of register clashes found was directly influenced by the way the analysis was carried out: when an utterance included a longer phrase that seemed to be an instance of a register clash, in most cases, all of the elements in the phrase in question were considered separately. For instance, this utterance by Lorelai was classified as having three instances of register clashes, shown in italics:

- (1) Lorelai: *The very one*. She wrote him a letter – “*mea culpa, mea culpa*”. She’s *learned the error of her ways*. She wants to get back in touch with Gigi. (917; technical; voluntary; *OALD* label for “*mea culpa*”: *from Latin, often humorous*)<sup>15</sup>

I reasoned that each of the highlighted elements in phrases such as the one above could theoretically have been substituted with other, perhaps more informal, elements (e.g. by “*Yes, her*. She wrote him a letter *saying that it is all her fault* and that she *has realized how wrong it was to leave her little daughter Gigi*”). If, on the other hand, cases like this had been counted as only one instance of a register clash, the overall number of register clashes found would have been much smaller.

The many unclear cases result partly from the decision to include all instances that may contain a register clash. The material also had many instances of specific cultural references, uttered in a way that seemed to suggest a register clash. These cases were also marked as unclear cases.

Table 1 shows the distribution of register clashes per each analyzed episode with respect to all cases as well as clear cases only.

Table 1. Number of clashes per episode: all cases and clear cases only.

Episode <sup>16</sup>	All cases		Clear cases	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	% of all cases per episode
1	197	15.1	149	75.6
2	209	16.0	124	59.3
3	250	19.1	144	57.6
4	165	12.6	108	65.5
5	308	23.6	151	49.0
6	177	13.6	85	48.0
Total	1306	100.0	761	-

<sup>15</sup> Given in parenthesis is the clash identification number, the category of register dimensions the clash was assigned to (cf. Table 4), whether the register clash was produced voluntarily or not, and the *OALD* label where applicable.

<sup>16</sup> Each episode included in the analysis was given a number according to the chronological order of episodes in the show.

Register clashes were found in the utterances of 43 characters. Table 2 shows the number of register clashes found in the utterances of all characters, presenting all cases as well as clear cases. In this table, the characters are listed in chronological order with respect to when the clashes were produced in the six episodes examined. Note that in the case of four characters (Marty, Babette, Bobbi, Anna), none of the register clashes produced by these characters were classified as clear cases.

Table 2. The number of register clashes found in the utterances of all characters.

Character	All cases		Clear cases	
	Frequency	% of all clashes produced by all characters	Frequency	% of all cases by that character
Lorelai	394	30.2	233	59.1
Rory	213	16.3	122	57.3
Luke	83	6.4	51	61.4
Lane	93	7.1	71	76.3
Brian	1	0.1	1	100.0
Zach	3	0.2	1	33.3
Dave	2	0.2	1	50.0
Debbie	20	1.5	6	30.0
Mrs. Kim	5	0.4	5	100.0
Shane	3	0.2	3	100.0
Jess	27	2.1	19	70.4
Taylor	24	1.8	10	41.7
Kirk	30	2.3	30	100.0
Alex	3	0.2	2	66.7
Sookie	45	3.4	16	35.6
Paris	138	10.6	76	55.1
Marty	4	0.3	0	-
Michel	16	1.2	10	62.5
Heather	2	0.2	1	50.0
Trevor	5	0.4	3	60.0
Jackson	13	1.0	4	30.8
Emily	19	1.5	8	42.1
Natalie	2	0.2	2	100.0
Tanna	5	0.4	3	60.0
Janet	5	0.4	4	80.0
Joe	1	0.1	1	100.0
Gypsy	6	0.5	5	83.3



Liz	10	0.8	5	50.0
Carrie	2	0.2	1	50.0
Miss Patty	2	0.2	2	100.0
Babette	3	0.2	0	-
TJ	9	0.7	3	33.3
Richard	13	1.0	5	38.5
Jason	10	0.8	7	70.0
Speaker	1	0.1	1	100.0
Christopher	27	2.1	15	55.6
Logan	42	3.2	24	57.1
Bill	9	0.7	5	55.6
Nick	4	0.3	2	50.0
Phillip	7	0.5	2	28.6
Bobbi	2	0.2	0	-
Anna	2	0.2	0	-
Judge	1	0.1	1	100.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>1306</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>761</b>	<b>-</b>

The tables and Figure 2 presented below will show the distribution of register clashes only with respect to the ten characters that were found to clash registers the most.

Table 3 shows the ten most prolific characters with respect to the production of register clashes. This table presents all cases as well as clear cases by themselves.

Table3. The number of register clashes found in the utterances of the ten most productive characters.

Character	All cases		Clear cases	
	Frequency	% of all clashes produced by all characters	Frequency	% of all cases by that character
Lorelai	394	30.2	233	59.1
Rory	213	16.3	122	57.3
Paris	138	10.6	76	55.1
Lane	93	7.1	71	76.3
Luke	83	6.4	51	61.4
Sookie	45	3.4	16	35.6
Logan	42	3.2	24	57.1
Kirk	30	2.3	30	100.0
Jess	27	2.1	19	70.4
Christopher	27	2.1	15	55.6

As I expected, the character that clashes registers the most is Lorelai (although she does not utter the majority of all register clashes, as I thought would be the case).

With respect to the three dimensions of register – field, tenor, and mode - the register clashes were distributed as follows: 1,029 cases (78.8 percent) of clashes occurred in *field*, 262 cases (20.1 percent) occurred in *tenor*, and 15 cases (1.1 percent) occurred in *mode*. Of these results, the clear cases were distributed as follows: 569 clear cases of *field* (55.3 percent of all cases in the *field* dimension), 178 clear cases of *tenor* (67.9 percent of all cases of *tenor*), and 14 clear cases of *mode* (93.3 percent of all cases of *mode*). These results are consistent with Alexander’s observation that most register clashes occur in the field and tenor dimensions of register (cf.2.2.2).

With respect to the six categories that *field*, *tenor*, and *mode* were further divided into in order to specify where exactly a register clash occurs (cf. 2.2.1), Table 4 presents the distribution.

Table 4. The distribution of register clashes across the six categories of register dimensions.

Dimension/Category	All cases		Clear cases	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	% of all cases per category
Technical	955	73.1	537	56.2
Non-technical	74	5.7	32	43.2
Social Role	90	6.9	70	77.8
Social Attitude/Style	172	13.2	108	62.8
Spoken	15	1.1	14	93.3
Written	0	0	0	0
Total	1306	100.0	761	-

#### 4.2 The *OALD* labels

With respect to the labels that the *OALD* provides for some lexical items (cf. 3.2), for 10.2 percent (133 cases) of the register clashes I added such labels for the key words. Of these cases, 78.2 percent (104 cases) were classified as clear cases. However, not much weight can be given to this particular variable in the end, as the application of the *OALD* labels was not rigorously sustained. As noted in section 3.2, in some instances, where the surrounding co-text clearly indicated that a register clash has occurred, the *OALD* was not

consulted. Moreover, I mostly included the *OALD* labels for the more formal and technical lexical items. Thus, if a label such as *informal* was given, it was not always included in my data, based on the idea that most of the time, the action in the show centers on informal situations. In hindsight, however, this approach contributes to the subjective element in this study.

### 4.3 Comments on the register clashes

Table 5 shows the distribution of comments on register clashes, i.e. whether a character commented on a particular instance of a register clash.

Table 5. Comments on register clashes: all cases.

Comment	Frequency	Percent
Yes	71	5.4
(Yes)	137	10.5
(No)	87	6.7
No	1011	77.4
Total	1306	100.0

Since even the *(no)* category indicates that a register clash may have been acknowledged, the number of instances where there was a comment or something that could be interpreted as a comment is 295 (22.6 percent). Thus, most cases of register clashes were not commented on by the characters. However, as with the *OALD* labels, this variable must also be approached with the utmost caution. In many cases, I found it difficult to decide whether a reply following a register clash should be classified as a comment on the clash in question or not. In some cases, a lexical item that was first introduced as a register clash went on as a joke (i.e. was repeated by several characters several times) spanning many replies. In some instances, such jokes were sustained throughout several scenes. Often, characters also picked up on the register clashes uttered by other

characters. For instance, in example 2<sup>17</sup> below, Lorelai clashes registers by introducing “farming rutabagas”, which then becomes a joke that Rory repeats.

(2) Rory tells Lorelai that her boyfriend has suddenly arrived from London and soon has to leave again.

Lorelai: *Oh my God, what are you guys gonna do with your precious remaining hours? Or don't I wanna know?*

Rory: *Mom!*

Lorelai: *Well, because you might be **farming rutabagas** or something, and I wouldn't want to know, 'cause – boring!*

Rory: *Well, tonight I'm meeting him in Manhattan to celebrate.*

Lorelai: *Fancy restaurant?*

Rory: *Rutabaga farm, actually. [...] (940; technical; voluntary)*

In my classification, I considered this to be an instance when another character directly comments on the clash. Such explicit comments on register clashes as shown in example 3 below were very few.

(3) During a drive, Lorelai protests Christopher's choice of music.

Lorelai: *Oh, no. You know my rule about hair bands.*

Christopher: *My car, my **tunes**.*

Lorelai: *Really? You're gonna say “**tunes**”? (982; technical; involuntary)*

Moreover, in the course of analyzing the data, my understanding of the material developed - a fact that will no doubt have influenced my approach to classification.

#### 4.4 Creation of humor

It was hypothesized that one of the functions of register clashes in *Gilmore Girls* is to create humor. Since deciding whether a particular instance of a register clash is humorous or not would be, in the framework of the present study, more or less subjective, no detailed categories were created to measure this variable. Since register clashes were

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<sup>17</sup> For this and other examples discussed, please note that each example may contain more than one register clash. The register clash discussed (and corresponding to the clash identification number) is highlighted in bold. Cf. also footnote 15.

identified at the outset as one of the mechanisms that create humor in the show (cf. 3.2), it was assumed at the start of this study that most cases of register clashes had probably been included in the scripts in order to create humor. However, as the study yielded so many instances of register clashes, I do not claim that all of the register clashes create humor in a way that, for example, a more explicit joke would. On the other hand, I do claim that most of the register clashes added to the enjoyment of the show in the Csikszentmihalyian sense (cf. 2.2.2, Characterizing a show). Only a very small number of cases of register clashes in my material do not seem to create humor – these few instances occur during serious arguments.

In a few cases, characters themselves point out that a lexical item is in some way incongruous to the situation. One such case is when Lorelai mocks Christopher for using the word “tunes” (cf. example 3) Another instance is illustrated in example 4 below, when Lorelai’s mother Emily refers to Lorelai’s outfits as “your ‘Sex and the City’ ensembles”, and Lorelai expresses her surprise that Emily is familiar with this show:

- (4) Emily is upset that Rory asked a boy out on a date, and scolds Lorelai.

Emily: *It’s bad enough that you haven’t taught your daughter how to interact with the opposite sex. You will not dress her up in one of your “**Sex and the City**” ensembles and send her out to tell the entire campus, “Don’t worry. I’ll ask you.”*

Lorelai: *How do you know about “Sex and the City”? (485; technical; almost voluntary)*

Such comments following a register clash were interpreted as support for the claim that register clashes in *Gilmore Girls* create humor.

Furthermore, in a few cases, the *OALD* label *humorous* indicated that a lexical item may have been used to create humor. Lorelai’s use of the lexical items “mea culpa, mea culpa” (cf. example 1) and “she’s learned the error of her ways” and Phillip’s use of the word “ergo” (cf. example 5 below) are examples of such cases.

- (5) Phillip, an accountant, is being teased for having a big appetite. One of his colleagues jokingly asks Logan whether they can afford spending so much money on food for Phillip.

Logan: *Somebody's got to crunch the numbers.*  
Phillip: *It's true. The numbers do not crunch themselves.  
Ergo, the number cruncher must be fed. (976;  
technical; voluntary; OALD label for "ergo": from  
Latin, formal or humorous)*

#### **4.5 Characterization of the characters**

It was hypothesized that if a character “voluntarily” chooses to clash two registers, he or she is being characterized by the scriptwriters as witty. Conversely, if a character clashes two registers involuntarily, he or she is being characterized as geeky.

As noted (cf. 3.2), four types of labels with respect to the voluntary vs. involuntary cline were applied. Table 6 shows the distribution of voluntary vs. involuntary register clashes for the ten characters producing the most clashes. The frequencies and percentages of all cases are given in the first of the two rows for each character, and highlighted in bold. The bottom row for each character gives the amount of clear cases, with the right-hand column of the bottom row showing the percent of clear cases with respect to the category of *voluntary vs. involuntary* in question.

Table 6. The distribution of voluntary vs. involuntary register clashes for the ten most productive characters: all cases (in bold) and clear cases.

Character	Voluntary - Yes		Almost voluntary - (Yes)		Almost involuntary - (No)		Involuntary - No	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Lorelai	<b>367</b>	<b>93.1</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>6.9</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
	217	59.1	16	59.3	0	0	0	0
Rory	<b>173</b>	<b>81.2</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>14.1</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>4.7</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
	102	59.0	12	40.0	8	80.0	0	0
Paris	<b>8</b>	<b>5.8</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>15.2</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>27.5</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>51.4</b>
	3	37.5	10	47.6	16	42.1	47	66.2
Lane	<b>58</b>	<b>62.4</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>21.5</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>10.8</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>5.4</b>
	42	72.4	17	85.0	8	80.0	4	80.0
Luke	<b>63</b>	<b>75.9</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3.6</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>14.5</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6.0</b>
	38	60.3	2	66.7	6	50.0	5	100.0
Sookie	<b>24</b>	<b>53.3</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>33.3</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>13.3</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
	9	37.5	7	46.7	0	0	0	0
Logan	<b>35</b>	<b>83.3</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>16.7</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
	19	54.3	0	0	5	71.4	0	0
Kirk	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>6.7</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>93.3</b>
	0	0	0	0	2	100.0	28	100.0
Jess	<b>27</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
	19	70.4	0	0	0	0	0	0
Christopher	<b>18</b>	<b>66.7</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>14.8</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>14.8</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>3.7</b>
	9	50.0	3	75.0	2	50.0	1	100.0

Figure 2 shows the number of register clashes that are uttered voluntarily vs. involuntarily by the ten most productive characters.

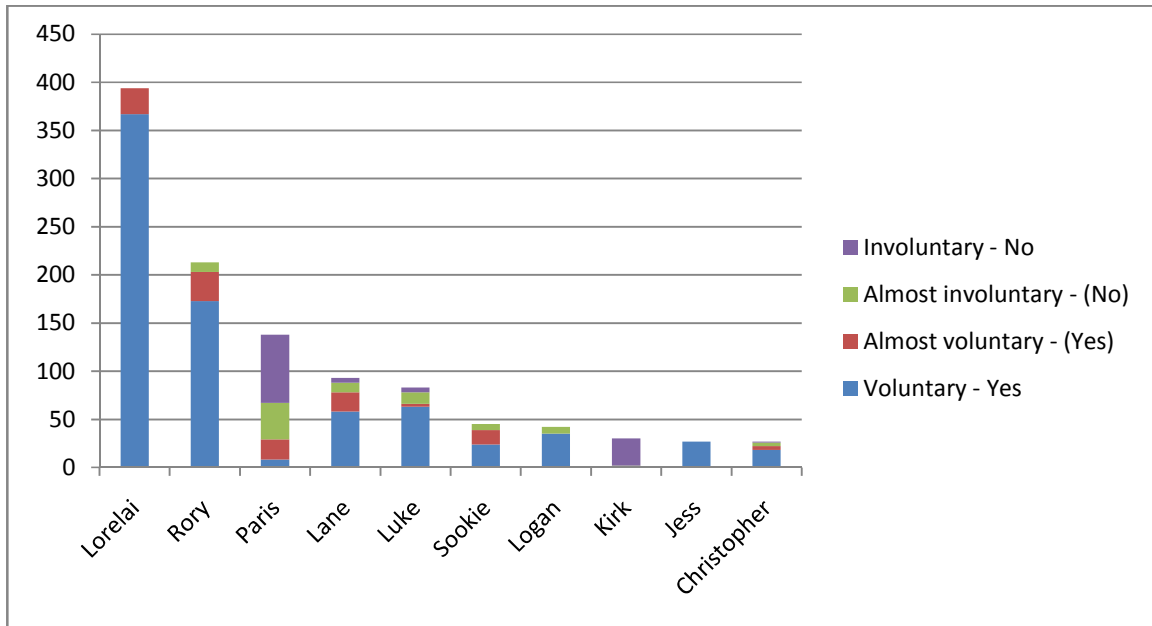


Figure 2. The number of register clashes that are uttered voluntarily vs. involuntarily by the ten most productive characters. The vertical axis of this diagram shows the number of register clashes uttered.

No distinction between clear and unclear cases is made in Figure 2, i.e. this figure shows all instances of presumed register clashes uttered by the ten most productive characters.

As can be seen from Figure 2, all but two of the ten most productive characters are characterized as witty, in that the majority of the register clashes uttered were deemed voluntarily or almost voluntarily produced by these characters. The two remaining characters are characterized as “geeky”, because the majority or, in the case of Kirk, all of the register clashes they uttered were deemed involuntarily or almost involuntarily produced. Thus, Lorelai, Rory, Lane, Luke, Sookie, Logan, Jess, and Christopher are characterized as witty, whereas Paris and Kirk are characterized as geeky.

#### 4.6 Characterization of the show

It was hypothesized that, besides creating humor and characterizing the different characters, one function of register clashes in *Gilmore Girls* is to characterize the show itself.

Both the number of clashes found in each analyzed episode as well as the fact that register clashes were found in the utterances of 43 different characters lend support to my



claim that register clashes serve to characterize the show. Apart from the utterances of the main characters, register clashes were also found in the utterances of characters that do not play a major part, as well as in the utterances of those characters that are newcomers to the show. Example 5 above is one such instance: this register clash is uttered by Phillip, a character who seems to appear in one episode only.

Moreover, not only register clashes but witty language in general is a defining characteristic of *Gilmore Girls* (cf. 3.1). In a way, language can be said to be one of the show's key themes. Two facts support this argument. Firstly, Rory's interest in language is reflected in the fact that she works at a school newspaper both at her high school and later at Yale (and the same is true for Paris). Secondly, explicit comments concerning language are made rather frequently. Considering the fact that the show is presumably intended for a general audience (as opposed to an audience of linguists), these comments are quite technical. For instance, although "gerunds" in example 6 below is uttered at the Yale newspaper office (where discussions about language are appropriate), it is still a technical term.

- (6) Paris explains why her colleague Bill should not be left in charge of the Yale newspaper.

Paris: *See how wordy he is? He overwrites. Plus, he's always been weak with **gerunds**. (884; technical; almost involuntary; OALD label for "gerund": grammar)*

Example 7 below is another instance of an explicit comment on language:

- (7) Lane explains how she persuaded her mother to consider the possibility of allowing Lane to go to her prom.

Lane: *[...] But then I went on to clarify that if she lets me go, she would get full dress approval, full chaperone approval, I promise not to actually dance at the prom, and whatever boy I go with will be required to attend at least four family dinners before she signs off on him being my **escort**.*

Rory: *Nice move on using the word "escort" instead of the word "date".*

Lane: *The subliminal is half the battle, Rory. (212; technical; almost voluntary)*

More such examples were found in the episodes analyzed: in one case, Luke states that his utterance had the “wrong inflection”; in another episode, Rory scolds her boyfriend, saying “you never use personal pronouns”.<sup>18</sup> Presented in Appendix B are 17 additional examples of register clashes.

## **5. SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

It was hypothesized that register clashes in *Gilmore Girls* serve three functions: the creation of humor, the characterization of some characters as sophisticated and witty and of others as geeky or nerdy, as well as the characterization of the show. The results of this study suggest that these are indeed the functions of register clashes in *Gilmore Girls*.

Each episode examined in this study was found to contain many instances of register clashes, regardless of the fact that the six episodes were all written by a different author. This fact lends support to the idea of register clashes as a consciously employed strategy, i.e. the scriptwriters of *Gilmore Girls* may have specifically aimed to include register clashes in each episode in order to contribute to the overall character of the show.

### **5.1 The witty vs. geeky continuum**

I realized during the classification process that many of the register clashes in themselves could characterize a character either way, i.e. as witty or nerdy. For instance, saying “all systems are go” (uttered by Rory and classified as voluntary, i.e. witty) to mean “everything is ready” might just as well have characterized another character as nerdy. I therefore argue that in part, beauty is in the eye of the beholder. More precisely, with shows such as *Gilmore Girls*, the audience (myself included) has background knowledge of the characters that no doubt influences how an utterance containing a register clash is

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<sup>18</sup> In Season 4, episode 14 (not included in this study), Paris’s roommate asks Paris: “Who do you have besides your poster of Noam Chomsky?” (there is indeed a poster of Chomsky in Paris and Rory’s dorm room). Later in the same episode, a character named Jason utters the following lines in a telephone conversation (presumably with his secretary): “No, it is okay to end a sentence with a preposition. Now, I read it in Safire’s column. [...] Safire, he came up with ‘nattering nabobs of negativism’ for Agnew. [...] Agnew was [former American president] Nixon’s Vice President”.

interpreted with respect to characterization<sup>19</sup>. Moreover, other, non-verbal elements (e.g., clothes) also signal whether a character is witty or nerdy.

In discussing language-play as a sign of creativity (cf. 2.2.2, Characterizing a character), Schröter points out that “creativity is a matter of degree rather than of ‘present’ versus ‘absent’” (2005, p. 76). I argue that this claim applies to such qualities as *witty* and *nerdy* as well. Therefore, it may be more meaningful to regard the witty vs. geeky distinction as a continuum. Thus, the witty characters may sometimes utter something geeky and vice versa.

However, I argue that ultimately, perhaps what distinguishes the witty characters from the geeky ones is the witty characters’ ability to discern when registers must absolutely not be clashed or, in other words, in which situations it is very important to use only language that is appropriate to that context. One example of a character making this distinction in my material is when Lorelai is asked to write a character reference for a custody case. In her letter, which is read out loud, no instances of register clashes were found. This fact characterizes Lorelai as someone who is aware of what is at stake. Therefore, she does not include her characteristic witticisms in this letter. This distinction has its weak points, exemplified by the fact that in the same court case, Luke uses more informal language when he should not have said anything at all; this happens even after the judge has repeatedly signaled for Luke to stop talking. This would signal that Luke is a geeky character, when, in fact, he is more witty than geeky (cf. Figure 2). However, in this particular case, it should also be noted that Luke speaks in order to persuade the judge to allow him to see his daughter, a situation in which an emotional reaction may be expected.

Another observation is that as certain characters (such as Rory) grow up throughout the series, certain lexical items that would have constituted register clashes in the earlier seasons of the show can no longer be considered clear cases of register clashes in the later episodes. For instance, when (in season 7) Rory’s boyfriend asks if she is free to have dinner, Rory replies: “I already cleared my schedule”. This utterance would most

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<sup>19</sup> I was no doubt influenced by my knowledge of the series as a whole, both in terms of the plot and the characters. Therefore, when making decisions about whether a particular utterance constitutes a register clash (and if it does, does it characterize someone as witty or geeky?), I was most likely also influenced by my picture of the character throughout the series.

definitely be a register clash in the show's earlier episodes, when Rory is in high school. By season 7, however, when Rory is about to graduate from Yale, this utterance may not be a register clash any more.

## **5.2 Conclusion and suggestions for further study**

In conclusion, the examples of register clashes found in this study presented above and in Appendix B are some of the clearest cases of register clashes found in my material. There are, of course, many other instances of register clashes that are not as clear. With regard to such cases, a corpus investigation would help determine whether a lexical item in a particular context constitutes a register clash or not.

In this study, register clashes were often found to occur in combination with other mechanisms of creating humor, such as longer jokes, puns, and alliteration. This connection could be studied in further research. Also, analyzing several other television shows with respect to the occurrence of register clashes would allow for a comparison with *Gilmore Girls*. Thus, a future study could aim to investigate whether *Gilmore Girls* contains more register clashes than other shows, or whether the use of register clashes is a routine strategy employed by scriptwriters.

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## Appendix A

### The television series *Gilmore Girls*

The show is set in quaint little Stars Hollow, a fictional town in Connecticut. Everyone knows everyone in Stars Hollow, and it is home to many quirky characters. Lorelai is a young woman who manages an inn. She is the daughter of an extremely wealthy couple, Richard and Emily Gilmore. Although they meet for dinner every Friday night, Lorelai's relationship with her parents has a long history of being strained due to the fact that she does not want to conform to her parents' way of life. Lorelai got pregnant when she was 16 years old, and has raised her daughter Rory by herself, with little help from her parents or Rory's father. Rory is a very intelligent girl and a good daughter. Lorelai and Rory's friendship is one of the show's central themes. Rory takes her studies very seriously and wants to become a journalist. In season 4, Rory starts studying at Yale University, from which she graduates in the final season of the show.

One of the settings of the show is *Luke's*, a simple diner. The owner Luke Danes, a good friend of Lorelai's and about her age, is always there to support her. He lives above his diner, drives a pickup truck and is teased by some of his friends for living a simple

life and being “a monk”. There are always some more or less romantic feelings between Luke and Lorelai, and at one point they are engaged. The other main characters are:

- Lane Kim, Rory’s best friend. Lane, a music enthusiast, is raised by an extremely strict mother. Lane tries to be a good daughter, which means that she often has to compromise and hide certain facts (such as being in a rock band, having an extensive music collection, etc.) from her mother.
- Mrs. Kim, Lane’s mother.
- Paris, a girl from Rory’s school and later a roommate at Yale. Aggressively intellectual, Paris often seeks to compete with Rory academically.
- Bill, a Yale student who also works at the Yale newspaper.
- Jess, Luke’s nephew. Becomes Rory’s boyfriend at one point. Jess is smart, but he has not had a sheltered life, which has made him a rebel.
- Sookie, Lorelai’s best friend. Sookie is a chef and works together with Lorelai.
- Jackson, Sookie’s husband. Jackson grows vegetables for a living.
- Michel, works as a concierge at the inn Lorelai manages. Speaks with a French accent.
- Emily Gilmore, Lorelai’s mother. Emily oversees the Gilmore mansion, serves on boards, organizes social events and is openly snobbish.
- Richard Gilmore, Lorelai’s father. Richard works hard, attends functions with Emily and at one point is invited to teach an economics course at Yale.
- Christopher, Rory’s father. Lorelai and Christopher have an on-again, off-again relationship that includes getting married and parting again.
- Kirk, a geeky but good-hearted Stars Hollow citizen. Kirk, who seems to be in his late twenties, lives with his mother and often does odd jobs around town, from postman to sales person at a beauty supply store to festival organizer.
- Taylor, the town mayor. Uses pompous language.
- Logan, Rory’s college boyfriend. Logan comes from a very wealthy family.
- Jason, a man about Lorelai’s age who becomes Richard’s business partner. At one point, Lorelai goes out with Jason, a fact that they initially hide from Richard and Emily.

- Dave, leader of the band Lane is in. Later becomes Lane's boyfriend.
- Zach, a member of Lane's band. He goes on to marry Lane.
- Brian, a member of Lane's band.
- Debbie, a mom involved in school activities at Rory's old high school.
- Shane, a girl Rory's age who goes out with Jess at one point.
- Alex, a man Lorelai dates at one point.
- Heather, a girl in Rory's Yale literature class.
- Trevor, a boy in Rory's Yale literature class. Rory goes on one date with Trevor.
- Marty, a boy from Yale.
- Natalie, an interior designer that Lorelai hires to decorate her inn.
- Tanna, one of Rory's roommates at Yale.
- Janet, one of Rory's roommates at Yale. Janet is always exercising.
- Gypsy, Stars Hollow's car mechanic.
- Babette, Lorelai's neighbor.
- Miss Patty, owner of Miss Patty's dance school in Stars Hollow. Likes to socialize with Babette and is present at all town happenings.
- Liz, Luke's sister and Jess' mom. Liz makes earrings and sells them at renaissance fairs.
- T.J., Liz's boyfriend.
- Carrie, an old school friend of Liz and Luke's.
- Anna, the mother of Luke's daughter.
- Joe, a man from Stars Hollow.
- Nick, a colleague of Logan's from London.
- Phillip, a colleague of Logan's from London.
- Bobbi, a colleague of Logan's from London.
- Speaker at a charity dinner.
- The judge in Luke's custody case.



## Appendix B

Presented below are additional examples of register clashes, which represent some of the clearest examples of register clashes found in the material with respect to each register category. Each example may include more than one register clash. The register clash corresponding to the clash identification number given in brackets is highlighted in bold. At the end of each example, I have indicated in the brackets whether I classified this particular instance of a register clash as “voluntarily” uttered by the character. I have also included an *OALD* label where applicable.

### Technical

(626) Kirk seems very excited about the opportunity to use a walkie-talkie while preparing for the festival.

Kirk: *I don't think so. Copy. **Roger**.*

Joe: *“Roger” means “I heard you”, Kirk. I was supposed to say “roger”.*

Kirk: *Negative. I am in charge here and I say “roger”. Roger! (Involuntary)*

(501) Rory is showing her roommate Tanna what she plans to wear for a date.

Rory: *What do you think?*

Tanna: ***Men respond subconsciously to a woman's pheromones.** You should run in place till he gets here. It'll give you a nice musk. (Involuntary; *OALD* label for “pheromone”: *biology*)*

(77) Lorelai wants Luke to dress up for giving a talk at his old high school. Luke insists on wearing what he always wears, a plaid flannel shirt.

Luke: *The whole point of this stupid class talk was for us to talk about our work and our success. This flannel shirt is my most successful outfit. I've closed many a deal in this outfit. It's my **power outfit**. (Almost involuntary)*

(1114) Lorelai comments on the fact that a new TV has been delivered to her home.

Lorelai: *Oh, my God, **the eagle has landed**. (Voluntary)*

- (1049) Rory is annoyed that her boyfriend Logan's beautiful, long-legged colleague has been the center of attention all night.  
 Logan: *Okay, so just to **clarify**, in the future, you would prefer I work only with girls who have no legs.* (Voluntary; OALD label for "clarify": *formal*)
- (1060) Rory has started an argument with her boyfriend, for which she has apologized explaining that she is upset because she misses him already.  
 Logan: *That is a hell of a long way to go just to say "I miss you".*  
 Rory: ***Any thoughts in response?***  
 Logan: *I miss you, too, Ace.*  
 Rory: *Five words. You only used five words.* (Almost voluntary)
- (511) Paris has called a roommates' meeting.  
 Paris: *[...] Now, I'd like to start this meeting by saying that no one here is on trial. This meeting is about healing, it is about **redemption**, it is about accepting responsibility and making amends.*  
 Janet: *I don't believe this.*  
 Paris: *This is a forum for all of us to air our grievances so we can resolve them and go on with our lives. [...]* (Involuntary; OALD label for "redemption": *formal*)

## Non-technical

- (327) Lorelai is going fishing for the first time and thinks that her date Alex does not know this. Alex asks Rory:  
 Alex: *Your mom's never been fishing before, has she?*  
 Rory: *Oh, no, she's a **well-seasoned fish killer**.* (Almost voluntary)
- (716) Jess tries to hurry Gypsy, a car mechanic, to finish fixing Jess' car, which Gypsy finds annoying.  
 Gypsy: *Just curious – have you noticed since you started standing there, there's been a lot less of the **clinking sounds**? And the clinking sounds are the sounds tools make when they fix things.* (Voluntary)

## Social Role

- (378) Rory talks to Lorelai:

Rory: *Okay, so the next time that Babette gives you a bag of bulbs to plant because you're lonely, you say ...*

Lorelai: *No, thank you.*

Rory: ***Class dismissed.*** (Voluntary)

(714) While drunk, Luke has cut his hand. Lorelai has put a band-aid with pictures of Barbie on the wound, and tells Luke that she will find "a real bandage".

Luke: *I like the Barbie ones.*

Lorelai: ***Yes, honey, but the other kids will beat you up if they see you with one of those.*** [...] (Voluntary)

(1) Lorelai and Rory are sitting in Luke's diner. Luke brings them each a plate of hamburger.

Luke: ***Dead cow, dead cow.*** (Voluntary)

(1158) Rory has come to see her grandfather at his Yale office.

Richard: [...] *Miss Gilmore, I believe you're next. **The visiting lecturer will see you now.*** (Voluntary)

## Social Attitude/Style

(312) Luke has come to teach Lorelai how to fish. Lorelai comes out of her house dressed in what seems to be an exaggerated fishing "outfit".

Lorelai: ***Hello, sailor, bait your hook for you?*** (Voluntary)

(736) Lorelai and Jason are hiding the fact that they are dating from Lorelai's parents. During a dinner which they all attend, Emily demands (for appearances' sake) that Lorelai and Jason pretend they are a couple.

Jason: *How far do you think we can push this?*

Lorelai: *I'm not sure.*

Jason: *Dancing?*

Lorelai: *Possibly.*

Jason: ***Stroll on the terrace?***

Lorelai: *Passable.*

Jason: ***Making out in the coat-check room?*** (Voluntary)

## Spoken

(7) Lorelai and Lane discuss whether Lane is lying to her mother or not.

Lane: *I'm fibbing, but a fib is not a lie.*

Lorelai: ***Hmm, I'd say it's a fib-slash-lie.*** (Voluntary)

(557) Lorelai reminds Luke of her “movie night rules”:

Lorelai: *Okay, um... A, um, no talking during the movie, and B, don't tell me you've never seen the FBI warning before. (Almost voluntary)*

## **Written**

No such register clashes were found.