

James G. Mitchell

Watching in Tongues

A Case Study Based on the Changing Surnames of Women

SERIES IN LANGUAGE AND LINGUISTICS

About the author

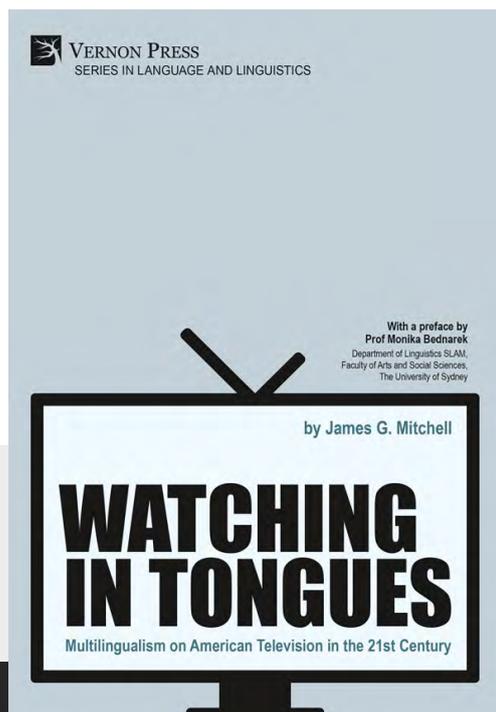
James G. Mitchell, Ph.D. graduated from Goucher College (Towson, MD) in 1996 with degrees in biochemistry and French. He went on to earn his Ph.D. in Romance Studies with a specialization in Second Language Acquisition from Cornell University (Ithaca, NY) in 2001. Since 2001, he has been employed as a professor at a variety of institutions from large state universities to small liberal arts colleges. Since 2006, he has been at Salve Regina University (Newport RI) where he is currently Professor of French, Italian, and Linguistics. His overarching research specialization is second language acquisition, specifically aspects of classroom acquisition and second language pedagogy.

Summary

This book explores ideas and issues related to second language (L2) speakers and L2 use as portrayed on American television. It examines many examples of television depictions of L2 speakers and L2 use collected in the first decades of the 21st century. The book is divided into four three-chapter sections.

“Humor and Homicide” looks at two aspects of the inclusion of L2 speakers and L2 use on television: L2 use or speakers depicted to create humor in various ways, especially through miscommunication or misunderstanding, and L2 knowledge used to solve crimes in the detective/police procedural genre. The section describes the reasons behind these phenomena, how they work, and the messages they convey to viewers. “Language Learning” explores how both adult and child language acquisition is represented and misrepresented on American television, with analysis of realistic vs. non-realistic depictions. “Subtitles and Stereotypes” explores the ways in which L2 speakers are often negatively depicted on television, their portrayal based on stereotypes. This work specifically investigates the role that subtitles play in leading viewers to such conclusions, employing the idea of language subordination, a process that devalues non-standard language while validating the norms and beliefs of the dominant group. Also considered are ways in which stereotypes are sometimes used to undermine negative perspectives on L2 speakers. “Language Attitudes and Mediation” evaluates depictions of second languages used as tools of mediation in both historical and satirical terms as well as the feelings these portrayals engender in viewers.

In short, this work asks questions that have not previously been posed about L2 use on television, and it provides answers that not only shed light on issues of the representation of language learning and language use, but also constitute a lens through which American society as a whole might be understood.



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