Virtual community and politeness: The use of female markers of identity and solidarity in a transvestites’ website*

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Abstract
Displaying a positive face when joining an online community, i.e., demonstrating the will that one’s face wants be desirable to fellow interlocutors (Brown and Levinson 1987), can be a key to success for integration. A new member will often have to comply with the appropriate behaviour (a set of specific rules and codes adopted by the community of practice that he or she is joining) if she wants to be included and not rejected. And acceptance is particularly important for a marginal population such as transvestites. The data that I am working with in this article is drawn from “texts of introduction” written by members of a virtual community of transvestites for a French-speaking website. The goal of the website is clearly to establish an international community for its members. I use these introductory texts to address linguistic ideology and representations, especially regarding gender. Expectations about feminine talk and politeness, such as cooperation and avoidance of rude language (Holmes 1995), which can be related to the notion of verbal hygiene that Cameron (1994: 383) defines as “ways of using language [which] are functionally, aesthetically, or morally preferable to others”, will be focused on in particular. Furthermore, I will show how, through this writing exercise, members participate in building a sense of community.

Keywords: gender performance, politeness and CMC, sense of community

1. Introduction
It seems obvious to say that when one wants to join a group for the first time, one should keep a low profile and test the water before drawing too much attention to oneself. Displaying a positive face, i.e., demonstrating the will that one’s face wants be desirable to fellow interlocutors (Brown and Levinson 1987), plays a part in the creation of a sense of
community. In this article, I propose to establish a link between joining a virtual community and using positive politeness strategies, i.e., showing that one has the same wants as the virtual audience of the message (Brown and Levinson 1987: 328). A new member will necessarily have to comply with the appropriate behaviour (a set of specific rules and codes adopted by the community of practice that he is joining), if he wants to be included and not rejected. And acceptance is particularly important for a marginal population such as transvestites. The data for this study is drawn from “texts of introduction” written by members of a virtual community of transvestites for a French-speaking website. It was first created by French-Canadian members but then developed with members from France, Belgium, Switzerland and other French-speaking countries. Today it counts more than 1.3 million visitors. For this article, I will study a section of the website called Le coin des copines — literally “girlfriends’ corner”. On these pages, members post presentations of self with an optional picture in order to introduce themselves to other members. Their goal is often to initiate correspondence or future meetings. More than 250 members posted their text of introduction on these pages. The data will be analyzed using a pragmatic as well as a discourse analytic methodology.

Analyzing this sort of stylistic exercise (i.e., the presentation of self to a community), which is written and involves minimal interaction, allows researchers to study the writer’s expectations of a group’s face wants or of fellow members’ rights and duties. This is the first point of contact for members of the website and a crucial moment in time, especially when one takes into account the fact that for such websites danger often comes from outsiders, who might not comply with the rules, and webmasters are wary of this. Moreover, with these texts, I will be able to work on linguistic ideology and representations, especially regarding gender. Expectations about feminine talk and politeness, such as cooperation and avoidance of rude language (Holmes 1995), stand in the forefront here. In this article, I wish to propose that transvestites use gender-coded politeness in order to construct a feminine identity. In the computer-mediated texts analyzed here, I argue that this feminine identity is essentially constructed through linguistic means.

In order to support this argument, I will first define relations between performance, appropriateness and gender in computer-mediated communication (Section 2). In Section 3, I will show how through this writing exercise and expressions of solidarity, transvestites participate in building a sense of community, defined by McMillan and Chavis (1986: 9) as “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together”. In
Section 4, in the data analysis, I will focus on pragmatic markers, specifically forms of address (feminine forms such as amie, copine, consœur — ‘friend’, ‘girlfriend, ‘fellow sister’, use of inclusive pronoun nous — ‘we’), as well as on linguistic means used by transvestites to express sameness, membership and mutual assistance. Finally, I will analyze the choice of vocabulary used to respect a netiquette (overuse of formulaic politeness) and to avoid rude messages.

2. Performance, appropriateness and gender in computer-mediated communication

Two seminal concepts from the work of the American sociologist Erving Goffman (1959) are those of face and performance. My article will bring together a couple of research fields where these two notions have been prominent in recent decades: Politeness Studies and Gender Studies. In *Presentation of Self in Every Day Life* (1959), Goffman shows that the presentation of self is a performance in which every individual adjusts his or her behaviour according to a social setting and in order to guide the impressions that others have of him/her. The ways a person presents himself/herself (i.e., one’s appearance, mannerisms or body language) as well as the setting of the interaction give the audience a lot of information about the speaker and serve to construct an image of him/her. Goffman (1967: 5) defines face as “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself [sic.]”.

In Gender Studies, Butler’s (1990) seminal work introduced the notion that gender should be seen as performativ, meaning that, rather than being the expression of a prior reality, it is constructed in interaction and is formed according to the context and through the enactments of appropriate behaviour, which are assumed by the interactants to be relevant to a particular context or Community of Practice. These assumptions are linked to cultural representations of gender roles and can be read clearly in transvestites’ interactions. For Butler (1990: 187), “[i]n imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself — as well as its contingency” (emphasis in original). Feminine behaviour is something that speakers achieve through the use of different cues, such as stylistic devices or behaviours which are coded as polite.

Regarding computer-mediated communication, Herring (2007: 8) underlines the fact that “[d]igital writing often takes on characteristics of artful, playful, stylized performance.” And for Danet (1998), in her article entitled “Text as mask”, interactants can play with gender identities in a carnivalesque way. This reminds us of Goffman’s (1967) argument, for whom “[f]ace is a mask that changes depending on the audience and
the social interaction”. But Goffman (1959) also claims that speakers give information about their gender unconsciously. And for Herring (2000), it is almost impossible to dissimulate one’s gender for very long in a computer-mediated interaction because there are always signs which betray the user. Moreover, it seems that internet users have a tendency to rely on stereotypes about online gender styles in their interaction (Herring 2000), in their own performance as well as in their interpretation of others’ behaviours.

In this article I will study what the implications of performing one’s identity are for politeness and gender on a particular transvestites’ internet platform. I will focus on notions of appropriateness. In particular I will analyze what behaviours are appropriate (gender and politeness-wise) for transvestites joining this web-based community. I will show the link between joining a virtual community (when new members have to comply with the appropriate behaviour set by this community), female-coded politeness and displays of positive politeness, bearing in mind that feelings involved in positive politeness should be seen as specific to a certain community of practice: in the case of this particular community of transvestites this involves respect, empathy and mutual assistance.

2.1. Politeness and appropriateness

Brown and Levinson’s model of politeness (1987) has been very influential in the field of politeness studies. It has been applied without modification by numerous researchers, but has been re-evaluated many times by others (Culpeper 1996; Mills 2003; Watts 2003; Locher and Watts 2005). One main source of critique concerns the fact that the model aims at being universal and restricts politeness to being nice or considerate, mainly a matter of avoiding what Brown and Levinson coined face-threatening acts (FTAs). Moreover, the bipolar model has been reproached because in daily interactions positive and negative politeness strategies are often used conjointly and cannot be kept apart. For some critics, it is necessary that politeness finds its place in a larger frame that has to do with relations and interactions. Arundale (2006), Locher and Watts (2005), and Locher and Bousfield (2008) have underlined the fact that politeness is only a part of facework or relational work, i.e., the negotiation of relationships with others. Going further than the classical dual notion of face (positive/negative), such as presented by Brown and Levinson (1987), and going back to Goffman’s view of the concept, Watts (2003) and Locher and Watts (2005) propose that research should focus on the discursive struggle in which interlocutors engage. Cross-cultural studies on politeness have shown how elusive and culture-bound the term itself can be, and therefore highlighted the need for new termi-
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ology. Watts (2003: 257) chooses to talk about politic behaviour: “Politic behaviour is that behaviour, linguistic and non-linguistic, which the participants construct as being appropriate to the ongoing social interaction”. The central place of the term appropriate is noticeable here. Locher and Watts (2005) propose that appropriateness be used for polite behaviours as well as politic behaviours that will not be conventionally judged as polite, and inappropriateness for impolite or overpolite behaviours. Watts (2003: 258) had previously argued that “[i]ndividuals have acquired fairly similar forms of habitus [permitting] a high degree of consensus in agreeing on what is and what is not politic behaviour.” This shows that there are representations — which are common to communities of practice — about what politeness or positive politeness is. The latter concept was defined by Brown and Levinson (1987: 70) as “approach-based; it “anoints” the face of the addressee by indicating that in some respects, S wants H’s wants (e.g., by treating him as a member of an in-group, a friend, a person whose wants and personality traits are known and liked)”. Or, according to Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003: 135), performing positive politeness is “showing that you like or empathize with someone, that you include them in your ‘we’, your ‘in-group’”. These are the two definitions of positive politeness that I will use in this article, particularly when analyzing expressions of sameness, empathy and inclusion in an in-group.

Finally, if face is relational and interactional, it might not seem so obvious to consider these two dimensions when working with asynchronous types of communication. (This format does not make use of the usual rules involved in the appropriate pursuit of a conversation, such as turns, interruptions, overlapping, floor management, etc. — interestingly elements which have often been studied as gender-coded). However, with regard to Brown and Levinson’s model and the community of transvestites’ writings analyzed for the purpose of this article, it seems that the use of positive politeness is less for the hearer to feel good or respected but more for the speaker to look good. With this idea in mind I argue that a gender-coded politeness display takes place in the form of a performance of feminine identity and plays a role in the construction of a new persona for transvestites.

2.2. Gender and politeness

During the last two decades, scholars have started to speak about gender in terms of something that one does (West and Zimmerman 1987) or performs (Butler 1990), a “routine accomplishment embedded in everyday interactions” (West and Zimmerman 1987: 125), and co-constructed through interactional work:
Gender is not part of one’s essence, what one is, but an achievement, what one does. Gender is a set of practices through which people construct and claim identities, not simply a system for categorizing people. And gender practices are not only about establishing identities but also about managing social relations. (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003: 305)

Going beyond this notion of performance, I would like to link the performance that one achieves in interactions to notions of appropriateness and representations on gendered politeness. Gender identities are constructed according to assumptions of what is or is not appropriate for men and women in different communities of practice or cultures, seen in more or less monolithic fashions (i.e., French, American, Occidental cultures, etc.). These beliefs on suitable gendered roles are reinforced during interactions, but can sometimes be questioned. For Mills (2005):

The notion of appropriateness is not ideologically neutral […]. But this process is informed by wider societal norms of what behaviour is considered to be gender-appropriate. Thus when individuals hypothesize what the Community of Practice would consider appropriate behaviour for them, they necessarily also invoke these social norms, whether to contest or affirm them. (Mills 2005: 277)

One would argue that common beliefs about social norms verge on stereotypes. For example, stereotypical representations of appropriate feminine identity and communication in Western cultures involve notions of being nice, supportive and cooperative (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003; Mills 2005), while male speech is often described by researchers as being more competitive and aggressive. According to Holmes (1995), women use more positive politeness, apologize and compliment more often than men. Her study has often been criticized for dealing with a stereotypical vision of feminine behaviour. But Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003) claim that stereotypes should not be perceived as fake representations of people’s behaviours:

[They] constitute norms […] that we do not obey but that we orient to. They serve as a kind of organizing device in society, an ideological map, setting out the range of possibility within which we place ourselves and assess others. (McConnell-Ginet 2003: 87)

In the following part, I try to see how these norms and orientations are displayed in CMC and gendered speech.
2.3. Computer-mediated communication, politeness and gender

Politeness in CMC has to do with how users construct norms of what they judge as being polite interactions within their own Community of Practice, creating therein a specific set of expectations (i.e., a netiquette), to the extent that deviations from these norms could result in what are perceived as rude or aggressive messages to members. Regarding gender, authors agree on the fact that there are differences between female and male CMC patterns or communicative styles on the internet (Herring 1999, 2000; de Oliveira 2007; Panayametheekul and Herring 2007). Herring (1999: 241) goes as far as to claim that “[w]omen and men appeal to different, partially incompatible systems of values with respect to their own behaviour on-line”. As for differences between genders in matters of politeness and appropriateness, what is appropriate or acceptable conduct on the internet seems to vary between men and women (Herring 1999). In her review of literature, Herring (2000) concludes that research has shown that “[m]ales are more likely to […] use crude language (including insults and profanity) and in general manifest an adversarial orientation towards their interlocutors”. Reminding us of Holmes’ (1995) findings, Herring (2000) adds: “In contrast, females […] are more likely to […] apologize, express support of others, and in general, manifest an ’aligned’ orientation towards their interlocutors”. Furthermore, women appear to seek polite exchanges (de Oliveira 2007) and react averssively to aggression in online interaction (Herring 2000).

As for CMC and gender dissimulation, Danet (1998: 129) notes a general tendency on the internet for “textual cross-dressing” (most of the time male members pretending to be women for the fun of it), stating that “the typed text provides the mask”. However, I argue that this is not the case in my study since it is clear for every user that members are male-to-female cross-dressers. Despite the fact that on the website studied for this article, it is not necessary for transvestites to pass (i.e., have other people believe that one is a woman, as the virtual audience will automatically assume that one is male), I will, however, keep the concept of textual cross-dressing in mind, and show that it is even more evident in French due to the use of grammatical gender to index a female identity.

In the next section, I will argue that, on the website, transvestites perform female-indexed behaviours. One such behaviour is a shared representation of what feminine politeness is and this representation is displayed through empathy, support and solidarity.

3. Sense of community on the transvestites’ website

As mentioned before, I argue that a sense of community is established on the website through a feminine display of positive politeness and
solidarity. Gusfield (1975) distinguishes between two major uses of the term community. The first is the territorial or geographical notion of the word (i.e., a neighbourhood or a city). The second is relational. Some communities have no geographical demarcation, as is obviously the case with internet communities. It is important to note that physical proximity or shared territory can be absent among members of a community, but that the relational dimension is indispensable. As for Sense of Community (referred to as SoC from now on), the psychologists McMillan and Chavis' (1986) descriptive framework has been widely accepted. In its definition it includes the crucial concept of membership in that community: “Membership is a feeling that one has invested part of oneself to become a member and therefore has a right to belong [...]. It is a feeling of belonging, of being a part” (McMillan and Chavis 1986: 9). Furthermore, reviewing the literature on dimensions of membership, the authors identify five attributes: “boundaries”, “emotional safety”, “a sense of belonging and identification”, “personal investment” and “a common symbol system” (1986: 9—10). I will briefly develop the dimensions of boundaries and the common symbol system, as they will be of importance in this article. Boundaries are marked by factors such as language and dress codes indicating who belongs to a community and who does not and, as for a common symbol system, communities use symbols such as rituals, ceremonies, forms of speech (and forms of politeness) to indicate boundaries between who is and who is not a member. It reminds us of the Labovian notion of speech community which involves participation in a set of shared norms (Labov 1972).

According to McMillan and Chavis (1986), another side of membership is involved in the development of SoC: “Fulfilment of needs, exchange of support among members”. Bringing this aspect together with the definition of positive politeness quoted previously (“showing that you like or empathize with someone, that you include them in your ‘we’, your ‘in-group’” — Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003: 135), it now seems obvious that the two can be linked. The third element that comes into play is solidarity. In this article, I will be analyzing what I call markers of solidarity. I argue that the expression of solidarity plays a part in the construction of a SoC. The word solidarity has two definitions in the Concise Oxford Dictionary: the first definition highlights concepts such as unity and similarity between individuals “united around a common goal or against a common enemy” (1999: 1366). The second definition puts a stress on the interactive side of the notion with the fact that individuals demonstrate “a willingness to give psychological and/or material support” (1999: 1366). To summarize, solidarity encompasses a feeling of commonality; a sense of being part of a group and a desire to exchange support. One will note the similarity between the above defini-
tions and SoC’s descriptive framework, especially when concepts such as membership, boundaries and fulfilment of needs are taken into account. It is now generally acknowledged that solidarity is not a given, but has to be jointly constructed in the interaction through the use of specific markers.

For Baym (1995, 1998), computer-mediated communities are created under the influence of factors such as external context (e.g., pre-existing speech communities, in which members interact), as well as system infrastructures or group purposes; the medium creating new forms of speech and new ways to express identity and relationships. But how is a Sense of virtual Community (cf. Blanchard and Markus 2004) built and how does it apply to the group of transvestites that I am studying for the purpose of this article? Regarding membership and boundaries, it seems obvious that the feeling of belonging to a group is critical for transvestites, who often feel lonely in their surroundings since quite often people around them are not aware of this other aspect of their personality. A lot of these men have not come out of the closet and, if they have, they have a feeling of being judged as strange or deviant. Therefore they are looking for people who are similar, share the same problems and make them feel that they are definitely not abnormal. They have a need to be part of a stable and dependable structure (McKenna and Bargh 1998).

As for the common symbol system, I will show in the analysis that the shared norms are expressed through the use of feminine forms of address, adjectives and participles.

4. Data

4.1. Presentation of data

This current paper is part of a larger research endeavour on the discourse of a virtual community of transvestites in a French-speaking website whose goal is clearly to establish an international community. It was first created by Quebecois members but then developed when members from France, Belgium, Switzerland, and other French-speaking transvestites from around the world joined the virtual community. Today it counts more than 1.3 millions visitors. It is unquestionably a very successful website. For this article, I focus on a section of the website called *Le coin des copines* (literally “girlfriends’ corner”). On these pages, members are able to post a short text with an optional picture in order to introduce themselves to other members. Through this presentation of self they want to initiate correspondence or future meetings. More than 250 French-speaking members from France, Québec, Switzerland, and Belgium as well as Germany, Australia, the United States, etc. have posted
their letter of introduction on these pages. For the analysis I focus on two groups of members: the copines from France (144 members) and the copines from Quebec (74 members). In these two groups, I noted a wide range of social backgrounds and ages (from 18 to 60). In the collected data, it is important to emphasize that the members’ texts of introduction are not isolated pieces of work. Some members published their presentation of self on the website and were soon followed by other members. A few members commented that they found the courage to post their own text after reading presentations from other copines. Solidarity involves expressions of similarity and membership in the community and implies a desire to help, consideration (i.e., the display of positive politeness strategies) and a strong stand to avoid flaming or aggressive messages. The norms for appropriate behaviour on the website are enunciated by the webmistress in a page written for newcomers and entitled “Quelques précisions de M.” ['A few clarifications from M.']. In the article a superscript “f” will be used to signal the use of the feminine form of the adjective or participle in French:

(1) Page to Newcomers

a. Chères amies qui venez chez nous pour la première fois, un peu surprises, sans doute, d’avoir trouvé asile ici, un peu déroutées peut-être devant sa richesse inattendue et inespérée, et très certainement séduites par son ambiance feutrée, douce et amicale, c’est à vous que j’ai pensé en écrivant ce court texte de présentation, moi qui ai eu la chance de le découvrir dès sa naissance, voilà un peu plus de deux ans.

‘Dear friendsf who come here for the first time, a bit surprisedf no doubt, to have found a sanctuary here, a bit confusedf maybe to find this unexpected wealth, but surely seducedf by its refined, soft and amiable atmosphere, I thought of you when I wrote this short message of presentation, me who had the chance to discover it from its birth, that is two years ago now.’

b. Et si vous êtes un homme … quelques conseils indispensables: Je pense qu’il est inutile de vous recommander de marcher sur des œufs, et notamment d’abandonner cette ‘male assurance’ qui se confond souvent avec la muflerie.

‘If you are a man … some vital advice: I think that it is not necessary to remind you to be extremely careful, and most of all to leave this “male confidence” behind because it is too often mixed with boorishness.’

In these excerpts, one can note the use of feminine forms of adjectives, the term of address (chères amies — ‘dear friendsf’), the amicable mood
and the firm stand against rudeness or aggressive messages. Another welcome page defines the website as a support group created with the aim to help a community.

4.2. Data analysis

In the transvestites’ texts of introduction, a few elements will be analyzed. I want to show how these elements relate to a stereotypical idea of feminine speech and identity and build a display of positive politeness through a demonstration of solidarity and a sense of community. The following will be analyzed:

- Markers of feminine identity: words used to talk about self and to address others
- Markers of solidarity: utterances expressing similarity, membership in the community and mutual assistance
- Formulaic politeness and utterances expressing the desire to avoid rudeness and aggressive messages

4.2.1. Markers of feminine identity: Presentation of self and forms of address

Although most transvestites present themselves as such (Je suis un travesti(e) / Je suis trav / Je suis tv), some do not hesitate to call themselves femme (woman) or fille (girl). Similarly, the near majority uses feminine forms of adjectives or participles (here are a few examples among hundreds: Je suis blonde ‘I am a blond’; Je suis française ‘I am French’; Je suis sexie ‘I am sexy’). In her article on transsexuals, Livia (1997) has shown that the French grammatical gender permits gender-bending possibilities and that speakers can play with gender to present themselves sometimes as male, sometimes as female (or both as in these two examples collected from our data: Je suis une jolie travesti blonde – ‘I am a pretty blond transvestite’; Je suis maintenant un homme très heureuse – ‘I am now a very happy man’). With reference to Brazilian transsexuals, Borba and Osterman (2007: 143–144) show that the use of both grammatical genders when referring to oneself allows for “ambiguity perpetuated socially and linguistically” as well as for expression of “specific places in [one’s] identity market”. For the latter case, some transsexuals use masculine gender to refer to a more or less distant past before the transformation (i.e., the operation) took place. In this way, linguistic devices allow for the creation of “complex multilayered identities” (Borba and Osterman 2008: 135). Livia (1997) also finds this use of both grammatical genders in her analysis of the autobiography of
the French transsexual Georgine Noël. However, when the transsexual switches to the feminine grammatical gender, it is not to adopt a female identity:

[i]t is important to note that this linguistic strategy is not intended to reflect a feminine persona so much as to dissociate the speaker from the heterosexual alliance […] Speakers thereby underline their own alliance with the sissy, the nelly, the drag queen, and in fact create this alliance by their use of the feminine gender.

(Livia 1997: 359)

However, I argue that this is not the case with transvestites who, for the most part, feel that they are expressing a feminine alter ego when cross-dressing. On the website, because of the fact that photographic constituents are limited, linguistic cues are essential. Livia (1997: 363) further adds that “[s]peakers are not passive with regard to language and the possibilities its system of distinctions and similarities sets up.” This linguistic exercise contributes to the performance of a feminine identity: the sort of textual cross-dressing (Danet 1998) mentioned earlier.

The performance of feminine identity is not only to be found in the presentation of self but also in the chosen forms of address used on the website. Gay men use feminine terms to address fellows in the community (Livia 1997). In the data, I found forms such as copines (girlfriends); amies (friendsf); filles (girls); consœurs; sœurs; (sisters) cousines (cousinsf) emphasizing a feminine friendship and sisterhood. I noted a similarity in the forms of address used by the transvestites in France and in Québec. The word copines (a favoured word in the gay community – cf. Livia 1997) was an obvious choice since the section is called Le coin des copines.

4.2.2. Markers of solidarity: similarity, membership in community and mutual assistance

I would like to repeat Eckert and McConnell-Ginet’s (2003: 135) definition of positive politeness as “showing that you like or empathize with someone, that you include them in your ‘we’, your ‘in-group’” as, for this part of the analysis, I focus on these two sides of positive politeness: empathy (one can keep in mind the etymology of the word: “to suffer with”) and the use of the pronoun “we” in the French texts. Excerpts (2) and (3) present two examples from the data.
As shown in Excerpts (2) and (3), similarity and membership in the community are expressed through the expression of a feeling of not being alone and not feeling different anymore, as well as a feeling of sharing similarities and like-mindedness. In the data, I noted varied ways of expressing feelings of not being alone and of claiming similarity, in the French group as well as in the Quebecois group:

The French group:

\textit{Je croyais être seule} ‘I thought I was alone’; \textit{Je suis loin d’être seule} ‘I am far from being alone’; \textit{en découvrant que je n’étais pas seule} ‘discovering that I was not alone’; \textit{Mon histoire est classique} ‘My story is classic’; \textit{être parmi vous} ‘being among you’; \textit{entre filles} ‘between girls’; \textit{Quel bonheur de se retrouver entre nous qui ne sommes pas tout à fait comme les autres} ‘What a joy to be among us who are not really like others’ — \textit{comme moi}; \textit{comme beaucoup}; \textit{comme beaucoup d’entre nous}; \textit{d’entre vous}; \textit{comme toutes les filles}; \textit{comme beaucoup de femmes}; \textit{comme vous toutes} ‘like me; like a lot; like a lot of us, of you; like all the girls; like a lot of women; like all of you’

The Quebecois group:

\textit{Je ne serai plus jamais seule} ‘I will never be alone anymore’; \textit{On se sent moins seule} ‘we feel less lonely’; \textit{J’ai longtemps pensé que j’étais une espèce rare} ‘I felt for a long time I was from a rare species’; \textit{Plusieurs vivaient la même chose que moi} ‘Several lived the same way’
that I did'; *qui ont les mêmes affinités que moi* 'who have the same affinities as me'; *les mêmes désirs que les miens* 'the same desires as mine'; *les mêmes craintes et les mêmes rêves* 'the same fears and the same dreams'; *Mon histoire est semblable à* 'my story is similar to'; *avoir une place avec vous* 'to have a place among you'; *faire partie du groupe* 'to belong to the group'; *me joindre au groupe* 'to join the group' — *comme moi; comme nous; comme plusieurs d’entre nous* 'like me; like us; like several among us'

It is interesting to note that the same sentences are used — nearly word for word — by members of the two different groups. The expression of similarity clearly serves to give a feeling of belonging to a group and to sustain a sense of community. As for the “we/in-group” category (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003), I analyzed the transvestites’ use of the inclusive *nous* (i.e., the use of the pronoun ‘we’ as including the speaker as well as the addressee). When reading the letters of introduction for the first time, I noticed the important presence of the inclusive *nous* and its correlated possessive forms used by the members. In (4), excerpts are presented that contain the form:

(4) a. *Il faut vivre pleinement ce que nous sommes.*
   ‘It’s essential to live fully what we are.’

b. *J’espère qu’un jour nous pourrons toutes vivre au grand jour sans que nous soyions qualifiées des pires choses, comme c’est encore le cas.*
   ‘I hope that one day we will all be able to live in the open without being called awful names, as it’s still the case today.’

c. *La France n’est pas un pays où nous avons le droit de citer. Nous sommes trop souvent obligés de vivre nos rêves dans une semi-clandestinité.*
   ‘France is not a country where we can live. We are too often forced to live our dreams in semi-clandestineness.’

d. *Il faut être fière d’être ce que nous sommes car nous sommes toutes des personnes ouvertes et il faut d’abord apprendre à se respecter si on veut que le société nous respecte.*
   ‘It is essential to be proud of what we are because all of us are open people and it is necessary firstly to learn to respect oneself if we want the society to respect us.’

In (4), the inclusive “we” appears as another linguistic device used by members in order to reinforce the “boundaries” of the community (“we”
as opposed to “they”) and to give a “sense of belonging and identification” (McMillan and Chavis 1986) through the ongoing participation in Le coin des copines’ pages.

Another way of expressing empathy and solidarity is to display a willingness to help. In the French and Quebecois groups, I noted expressions promoting support among members:

French group:

J’encourage ‘I give encouragement’; Je souhaiterais en faire profiter / donner quelques conseils / venir en aide / pouvoir partager mon expérience avec d’autres ‘I would like people to benefit from my experience / give some advice / come to your assistance / share my experience with others’; Je suis disposée à aider ‘I’m willing to help’; Je serais heureuse de donner un petit bout de bonheur à l’une d’entre nous ‘I will be happy to give some happiness to one of you’

Quebecois group:

j’ai senti le besoin de me rapprocher de la communauté car je vois qu’il y a beaucoup de copines qui ont besoin d’aide à différents niveaux ‘I felt the need to get closer to the community as I see that a lot of girlfriends need help at different levels’; Il me fera plaisir de vous initier ‘It will please me to initiate you …’; J’ai mon avis à donner sur l’utilisation des hormones ‘I have my opinion to give on the use of hormones’

This linguistic practice reminds us of Herring’s (2000) finding that, in CMC, women tend to “express support of others, and in general, manifest an ‘aligned’ orientation towards their interlocutors”.

As mentioned previously, the Quebecois part of the website predates the French one. This is noticeable in the greater number of thanks for help, as exemplified by the following collection:

grâce à ton site ‘thanks to your website’; grâce à ton site, je peux me définir comme réellement travesti ‘thanks to your website, I can really define myself as a transvestite’; Quel plaisir de se savoir moins seule et c’est grâce à toi, Isabelle ‘It is a pleasure to feel less lonely and it’s thanks to you Isabelle’; J’ai appris à maturer et à devenir une adulte plus accomplie et tout ça en revient grâce à ton site qui m’a donné un point de référence ‘I learnt to mature and to become a more accomplished adult and it is all thanks to your website which gave me a base point’; Heureusement que vous êtes là! ‘Fortunately you’re here!’
Finally, it is important to note that in the 250 texts of presentation of self published on this part of the website, not one text of aggression or exclusion was found. I will propose an explanation for this absence in the following section.

4.2.3. Formulaic politeness and avoiding rudeness

Formulaic politeness encompasses “prefabricated linguistic expressions” (Coulmas 1981: 1) and verbal routines such as ritualised greetings and thanks. It is true to say that, since Fraser and Nolan (1981), it has been argued that no utterance is inherently polite and formulaic politeness is not necessarily used to demonstrate polite behaviour (note, for example, the ironic use of expressions such as “thank you very much”). However, I argue that in the case of the data analyzed here formulaic politeness is used as a means of displaying polite behaviour, since it allows individuals to express respect to interlocutors and “anoints the face of the addressee” (Brown and Levinson 1987: 70).

On the website and in pages where formulaic politeness is not an essential part of the written exercise (such as Le coin des copines, where the goal is mainly to introduce oneself and not to interact with other members or with the webmistress), I noticed a significant number of instances of such forms. Two thirds of the French members (92 copines) used formulaic politeness, mainly for greetings (bonjour ‘hello’; heureuse de vous rejoindre ‘happy to join you’; à bientôt ‘see you soon’); thanks and congratulations (merci; bravo; félicitations; bon courage); closure and demonstration of affection (tendresse; amicalement; amitiés; je vous aime; bons baisers; bises; bisous; je vous embrasse; kiss). Three quarters of the Quebecois (55 copines) used them for greetings (bonjour; salut; allo; je daigne me présenter ‘I deign to introduce myself’; permettez-moi de me présenter ‘let me introduce myself’; à bientôt; bye; à plus; je vous laisse; salutation; au plaisir; à vous lire prochainement); thanks and congratulations (merci; bravo; félicitations; chapeau); closure and demonstration of affection (bises; bisous; kisses; xxx; tendresse). Interestingly, there were more formulaic politeness markers in the Quebecois texts of introduction (used by three quarters of the members) than in the French ones (used by two thirds of the members), especially regarding greetings. On the other hand, I noticed more expressions of feelings on the French side and more written kisses (one may question whether this is due to a cultural habitus linked to the writing of letters, or to a stronger necessity for the transvestites from France to display positive politeness in order to see themselves as included in a community that was originally created by Quebecois). Excerpt (5) presents an example of formulaic politeness:
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(5) M83 France

Bonjour à vous toutes, je suis très émue à la pensée de me trouver parmi vous et d’être la copine de la semaine je ne l’aurais jamais imaginé. […] Merci de vos témoignages à toutes qui me donnent aussi la force d’être et un merci tout particulier à Isabelle pour son site.

‘Hello to all of you, I am very moved to be among you and to be the girlfriend of the week. I would never have expected it. […] Thanks to all of you for your life stories; they give me the strength to be myself and a special thank to Isabelle for her website.’

Regarding rudeness and aggressive messages, one can imagine why a transvestites’ website would be so concerned with the need to avoid flaming or abuse from members or intruders since they are particularly vulnerable to such attacks. For the French group, I noted expressions showing the will to avoid adversarial or rude attacks: Merci de m’avoir lue courtoisement ‘Thanks for reading me with courtesy’; Merci d’accepter ces gens différents que nous sommes ‘Thanks to accept these other kind of people that we are’; Ce que je n’aime pas: les machos, les gens bêtes, l’intolérance, les extrémistes, l’ignorance, la vulgarité, la stupidité, le sectarisme, la grossièreté ‘What I don’t like: machos, idiots, intolerance, extremists, ignorance, vulgarity, stupidity, sectarianism and rudeness’; Envoyez une petite lettre émaillée de jolis mots ‘Send me a nice letter peppered with pretty words’. And for the Quebecois: Dans une atmosphère de respect ‘In an atmosphere of respect’; Ce qui m’horripile: les esprits obtus ‘I find closed-minded people exasperating’; Ce qui me déplait: l’intolérance ‘I dislike intolerance’; Je n’apprécie pas la vulgarité ‘I don’t appreciate vulgarity’; Je demande aux hommes de s’abstenir et encore plus de faire des propositions ‘I ask men to abstain, even more so to make propositions’.

To bring this section to a close, I should add that I did not come across blatantly face-attacking messages or occurrences of flaming in any part of the website. However, it is worth noting that there is no active chat room (the place where flaming would most probably occur). Furthermore, even in a section dedicated to letters to the webmistress, no adverse or challenging comments were found, but it could be the case that the webmistress moderated them and/or did not publish inflammatory messages.

5. Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that on the internet, when presenting oneself to a group and in order to gain membership or kinship, it is necessary
to adopt what is considered by other members of the website to be appropriate behaviour. The set of behaviours generally used on the web are gender-coded but also based on a stereotypical vision of what a gender-based behaviour should be, as traits are often exaggerated because of the medium (Herring 1999, 2000, 2001). Moreover, the specific system infrastructure and form of the texts analyzed (i.e., the presentation of self in asynchronous communication) certainly affects the contents and ways that writers choose to display politeness (Herring 2007); since they do not see their interlocutor(s), they are likely to adopt a positive face in order to avoid any misunderstanding or misinterpretation of their words. In my study it seems therefore that the medium reinforces the use of formulaic politeness and the effort to prevent rude messages. Regarding CMC and feminine politeness, stereotypes involve notions of nice, supportive and co-operative behaviour (Mills 2005), in contrast with aggressive and face-threatening masculine forms of behaviour. In this article, I have tried to demonstrate that for transvestites, displaying a feminine politeness stance contributes to a broader performance and to the construction of a new identity as a woman. Female-coded politeness, essentially positive politeness, is one among many props used to perform a feminine identity. Markers of identity, solidarity and formulaic politeness are stylistic practices used in the construction of a female persona and a sense of community. In exercises of discourse analysis, classical bipolarities (male/female — positive/negative politeness — politeness/impoliteness) have to be critically examined. As Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003) advocate:

If gender stereotypes are part of our sociolinguistic life, they need to be examined — not simply as possible facts about language use, but as components of gender ideology. Our linguistic behaviour is intertwined with ideology, our stereotypes are not simply “lies” about language, but exaggerations with a purpose. And that purpose is what makes a language tick.

(Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003: 85)

Finally, I believe it is important to work on gender ideologies in computer-mediated texts in order to highlight the constructions of male/female/transgendered performances and to study the common-sense representations of gendered discourses, appropriate behaviours and politeness.

Bionote

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**Notes**

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1. According to Herring (2001: 614), “[a]synchronous CMD systems do not require that users be logged on at the same time in order to send and receive messages; rather, messages are stored at the addressee's site until they can be read.”

2. The data used for this article has been anonymized in order to protect the individuals quoted in the analysis. However, the author is aware that using such data is ethically problematic, especially when dealing with sensitive issues (Ess and AoIR 2002; Eysenbach and Till 2001). The website and pages used for analysis are freely accessible to all and the webmasters do not mention in their pages of introduction any restriction to the access of these texts. Finally, the website has been officially inactive since November 2008.

3. It is interesting to note that this form is very unconventional since the French do not usually use a feminine form for words of English origin.

4. It actually happened to a similar website that had to close a couple of years ago since it fell victim to the harassment of a virulent outsider.

**References**


