

## **Speaking of the gendered body: The performative construction of commercial femininities and masculinities via body-part vocabulary**

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This article explores mechanisms of linguistically constructed gender via body-part vocabulary. Ad texts in two magazines, *Cosmopolitan* and *Men's Health*, are gathered as data for this research.

Postmodernism treats the gendered body as a continuum instead of a binary entity (female vs. male). Gender research in Germany defines 2 types of body: as object and as subjective body experience. This article deals mainly with the former and tries to link it with the latter. Linguistically gender construction can be narrowed down to 3 types of gender (Hellinger & Bussmann, 2001):

- 1) Lexical gender – nouns that carry the semantic feature [male] or [female]; about two macro-categories – “male” and “female”. E.g. woman, man, girl, boy; in the area of body-part lexical items: vagina, penis. It is a direct gender indexing.
- 2) Social gender – entities expressing social stereotypes that ascribe/link certain roles to women and men. Such gender connotations have words like *nurse* and *farmer* – the first being associated with female and the second with male. Under same principle certain body parts are socially linked to male – *muscles*, or to female – *eyelash*. Social gender is indirect gender indexing.
- 3) Referential gender – depends on who is talking about in a given context. Lexically gendered nouns as *sister* or *girl*, for instance, can be used to refer to a man which is not unusual in a gay context. In this sense socially gendered items like *doctor* and *nurse* can refer to female and male in a specific context. As to body parts nouns like *breast* (re: a man) and *beard* (re: a woman) can be found as well, albeit as taboo.

After outlining these types the author goes onto some theoretical considerations about the poststructuralist approach to gender. Gender is seen as a “performative ritualized practice” (p. 4); the binary M/F opposition is questioned; the hegemony of identity categories is undermined. Author takes a more deconstructionist approach: i) the notion of pre-discursively determined F and M body is questioned; ii) similarity rather than differences between F/M bodies serves as a basic assumption. This is in great contrast with the mainstream advertising where a clear-cut distinction in the gender norms is demonstrated.

### **Gender, discourse and linguistic performativity**

In post-structuralism, the exploring area of a linguistic gender is not varieties defined by dialect (socio- and idiolects) but the area of registers and styles. This automatically leads to gender being constructed in the moment of language use. Masculinities, femininities and androgynies are taken into their plurality and not as referring to a specific person/speaker.

Linguistic identity constructions rely heavily on discourse. Those are “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (Foucault, 1972:49). Linguistically constructed gender identities are a result of multiple individual performances that have been cited throughout history and this way gaining the status of hegemonic discourses

(Butler, 1990, 1993). The importance is the performative indexicality of linguistic signs, and they might be influenced by the context.

### **Methodology**

Corpus of 2,000 advertising texts (1999 – 2001) with 175,000 words taken from two magazines with high gender salience: *Cosmopolitan* and *Men's Health*. Their target group are young people (25-35) and middle class. The items were grouped in different lexical fields: body tissue, limbs, hair, skin, hormones, head, muscles, inner organs, trunk, skeleton, ligaments/sinews/nerves/blood vessels. In building these the author introduces the terms hyponymy and meronymy. Hyponym corresponds to "kind of" and meronym "part of". Following that distinction *biceps* would be treated as hyponyms, kind of muscles, and *thumb* would be meronym, part of the hand.

### **Body-part vocabulary and advertising texts**

The femininities and masculinities in those 2 magazines are highly stereotypical for the target group and they shouldn't be taken as representative as representations per se. Referring to body shape, the word *figure* would be used in *Cosmo*, but *physique* in *Men's Health*. Women are supposed to beautify their bodies and males to exercise them. Looking at the lexical fields the following findings occur:

Limbs – hands parts are dominantly linked to women, leg parts to men.

Hair – long head hair – female connotation, body hair – male, especially chest hair.

Skin – highly associated with female body.

Head – equal distribution. The sub-field "face" though is strongly linked to female beauty.

Muscles – associated with the ideal male body.

Trunk – primary physical gender characteristics are ascribed to male or female – vagina to women, testicle to man. The common parts that women and man share:

back – associated predominantly with men, hip – women, butt – women.

### **Conclusion**

The dominant gender discourses are determining the linguistic representation of the body in advertising texts. This is achieved predominantly through social gendering of body-part terms. The female body is highly objectified, the male one is perceived as utilitarian.

### **REFERENCES**

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