

Linguistic Choices for the Representation of Women in Discourse

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ABSTRACT

Starting from the assumption that advertising discourse has the ideological function of enacting and perpetuating power relations and processes of discrimination between social groups, this paper is an attempt to examine the representation of women in adverts. It analyses the female stereotypes which the adverts actualize and help to perpetuate, the linguistic choices which construe these stereotypes, and the ideological system that these stereotypes reflect. The analysis provides relevant information about the power relation between men and women in society, since it reveals that the traditional stereotypes by means of which women have for long been described are still vigent, helping to perpetuate the traditional social roles of women in the social structure.

Introduction

A recent concern of discourse analysis is the system of values and beliefs reflected in discourse. Discourse has an ideological nature, it is an instrument that enacts and perpetuates power relations and processes of discrimination (by gender, race, social class, etc) and categorization. Advertising discourse is highly important for this social function, given that it is a discourse which reaches a broad audience. In this paper, I intend to analyse the representation of women in adverts, in order to answer the following questions: (i) which are the female stereotypes which the audience shares, drawn on and perpetuated by adverts?; (ii) which are the attributes of these stereotypes?; (iii) which ideological system do they reflect?; and, (iv) what do they reveal about the power relation between men and women in society?

Discourse and ideology

A social theory of discourse implies the consideration of discourse as a “form of social practice” (Fairclough, 1992: 63), as an element of the social structure. Discourse is a “mode of talking” shared by the members of a group who structure their social life according to certain principles and values. The consideration of discourse as a mode of talking accounts for expressions like “racist discourse”,

“feminist discourse”, “sexist discourse”, or “scientific discourse”. Certain syntactic and lexical forms articulate certain discourses (Kress and Hodge, 1978; Kress, 1985). That is, each discourse has characteristic linguistic features which focalise on and express the kinds of relations that structure that discourse (agency, causality, power and so on) and reflect a specific ideology. Fairclough (1992: 87) defines ideologies in the following way:

(They are) significations/ constructions of reality (the physical world, social relations, social identities) which are built into various dimensions of the forms/meanings of discursive practices, and which contribute to the production, reproduction, or transformation of relations of domination.

The ideological structure underlying a text is reflected in the linguistic features of the text, not only at the lexical level, but also at the grammatical-syntactic, and at the rhetorical level. Linguistic choices at any level have ideological significance.

Language and representation

One of the basic tenets of a social theory of discourse is that discourse is both a mode of representation and a mode of action (Fairclough, 1992: 63). This implies that there is a complex relationship between discourse and the social structure it represents. On the one hand, the norms and conventions of the social structure constrain the discourses that are generated. Discourse is a reflection of the ideological system, since the linguistic choices in discourse are socially and ideologically determined. On the other hand, discourse is constructive. It contributes to constructing, perpetuating or transforming the dimensions of the social structure where it has been generated. In this process of constructive representation writers take into account the schemata that help the reader decode discourse (Carrell, 1983; Cook, 1994). Schemata, a basic concept in cognitive psychology, are packets of unconscious knowledge about objects, situations, actions or events, stored in memory. They are shared by a group of people and used to make sense of the world and to process language, helping the reader to find a text coherent. Schemata are prior knowledge that readers draw upon in perception and interpretation.

Stereotypes are a type of schema, mental categories which help us interpret reality. They are “socially-constructed mental pigeon-holes into which events and individuals can be sorted, thereby making such events and individuals comprehensible” (Fowler, 1991), e.g. “housewife”, “priest”, “clerk”, “hooligan”. Since stereotypes are social constructs the attributes that make up each stereotype

are part of the background knowledge of the intended readers. Stereotypes are associated with specific ideologies, since they imply choices and values that may only be accepted by a social group.

Stereotypes make for the structuring and interpretation of discourse: a linguistic choice associated with a stereotype helps the reader predict and anticipate other linguistic choices and discover the precise meaning that every term or linguistic element has in the text. On the other hand, the occurrence of a stereotype in a text will contribute to reinforcing it. Focalising on the attributes of a stereotype helps to the perception of this stereotype as a reality, a fact that has important ideological implications.

Women have for long been described in adverts in terms of a set of stereotypes, like "housewife", "wife", "mother". This helps to perpetuate the traditional social roles of women, since these roles are presented as the natural ones. As Fairclough (1989: 77) remarks: "conventions routinely drawn upon in discourse embody ideological assumptions which come to be taken as mere 'common sense' and which contribute to sustaining existing power relations". Some feminists have put forward that language is man-made (Spender, 1980) and therefore sexist. This is a very strong claim, but there is no doubt that discursive practice has been used to discriminate women.

The linguistic encoding of genre

The encoding of gender in discourse is a topic which has been paid a great deal of attention recently. Studies on this general topic focus on two aspects: the differences in language use related to gender and the way discourse is used to represent men and women. Anthropological linguistics has long remarked that in some communities men and women speak varieties of language that are not used by the other sex (e.g. Haas, 1944). Variations in any aspect of language (pronunciation, grammar, lexis) have been studied as gender-related. Lakoff (1975) claimed that women had a special register, the so-called female register. Some linguistic features were considered to be used exclusively or predominantly by women. Empirical research is still required to substantiate some of these claims and to reveal the real significance of these variations. Similarly, the studies of cross-sex conversations (e.g. Fishman, 1983; Coates, 1993) have produced results regarding differences in topic-controlling which should be submitted to careful interpretation.

In this paper we do not concentrate on how men and women use language but on the second aspect of the relation between discourse and gender. However, the results of both types of studies are closely related, since both the way women

speak and the way they are represented in discourse are conditioned by a stereotypical image of women having features like powerlessness, femininity, delicacy, etc. Linguists and feminists have shown that there exists a sexist discourse, that the discourse used to talk about women encodes meanings which construct them as a special group with specific features. In this section I will summarise briefly the results of the research concerned with the representation of women in discourse.

Language has devices to ignore women and to refer to them by means of their relation to men, in this way depriving them of their autonomous status. In English the masculine pronoun "he" is used as a generic pronoun to refer both to men and women (Huber, 1976; Martyna, 1978). In Spanish, the male pronouns ("nosotros", "vosotros", "ellos") are also considered to be generic. Male expressions, such as "man" or "spokesman" conceptualise women as part of men. Titles and address forms make the marital status of women explicit, but not that of men (e.g. "Mrs" and "Miss"; "senorita" and "señora"; "Frau" and "Fraulein"). In some languages, like English, women take the men's name when they marry (Stannard, 1977). Diminutives are often used to refer to and address women (e.g. "Maggie", "Winnie"). While the terms for some occupational titles used for females are morphologically marked (e.g. "actress", "woman doctor"), marked forms for men are very rare (e.g. "male secretary"). There are a high number of terms used to refer to women which are pejorative ("whore"), which dehumanise them ("piece", "skirt") or trivialise them ("pet", "chick") (Fowler, 1991).

Michard-Marchal and Ribéry (1982) studied the ideological implications of the linguistic representations of gender and found that there were semantic dysimmetries. From their analysis of a text of the social sciences they conclude that discourse displays the following oppositions related to gender: women tend to be constructed as non-animate and men as animate; while men are usually presented as the agents of actions, women rarely have this role; men are generally described as involved in processes of doing, while women are usually represented in relation to states like motherhood or wifehood.

Fowler (1991) focuses on the representation of women in news discourse. He agrees with other researchers that there are stereotypical representations of women which categorise them as a marked group. Some of the attributes of women in these descriptions are: irrationality, familial dependence, powerlessness, and "sexual and physical excess". Fowler's analysis draws attention to several facts: women are represented by means of stereotypes that undermine their claims to be able to cope in domains of public life traditionally restricted to men, like politics; family relationships are very frequently used to characterise women in the news;

the stereotype of women as sexual objects is promoted by descriptions of women from a sexual point of view with a high number of terms naming women's attributes; finally, news discourse displays a high number of expressions designating powerful occupational or social roles, such as "managing director", which, although considered as possible terms both for men and women do not designate women. As Fowler (1991) rightly remarks, the association of these terms to men, seems to suggest that "this is the natural order of things". This finding is in agreement with Caldas-Coulthard's (1993, 1994) claim that women are part of the unaccessed voice group. Given that the accessed voice (Hartley, 1982) represents the hegemonic group women are categorised as the dominated group in the power relation between men and women and this representation contributes to reinforcing and strengthening the values and attitudes on which they are built. Caldas-Coulthard points out that the speech of men and women tend to be represented by means of different descriptive verbs (i.e. verbs that indicate the speaker's manner and attitude regarding what is being said). Verbs like "scream", "yell", "nag", "gossip" or "chatter", used to report women's speech, are associated with negative features of female stereotypes like "housewife" or "mother-in-law".

One of the main approaches to gender differences in language is the *dominance* approach. It regards women as a marginalised group dominated by men, which accounts for the linguistic differences between women's and men's speech (Coates, 1993). The pieces of research reviewed above reveal that this is a relevant approach not only to gender differences in language, but also to the way of talking about the two sexes. The linguistic choices for women's representation in discourse enact and perpetuate male dominance.

Data and method

To investigate the different ways in which women are represented in advertising and the ideological significance of these representations we have collected a sample of adverts both in English and Spanish. Advertising is a strategic discourse which has a persuasive purpose. It is a type of discourse which constructs not only the product, but also "subject positions for the consumers", that is, it builds an image of the consumer, which implies conveying a particular ideology (Fairclough, 1989). Adverts are cultural and ideological products which reflect the values and attitudes of the dominant group. As ideological products they have an important role in the construction and transformation of the social reality, including gender identities and relations. As Barrett states (1982: 35), the definitions of "femininity and masculinity", "the social meaning of family life" and "the sexual division of labour" are constructed on the ground of ideology,

imagery and symbolism.

Vestergaard and Schröder (1994) analysed the commodity profile of three magazines (*Cosmopolitan*, *Woman* and *Playboy*) in order to find out what constitutes a female and a male identity. The higher number of adverts in the female magazines were for beauty and hygiene products (55% in *Cosmopolitan* and 28% in *Woman*) and for household implements, food and detergents (49% in *Woman* and 7% in *Cosmopolitan*). By contrast, in *Playboy* the higher number of adverts corresponded to tobacco, beer and spirits (40%) and to technological toys, i.e. vehicles, cameras, radios (38%). Caldas-Coulthard's (1993) analysis of *The Times* revealed that most of the adverts were for cars, building societies, banks, xerox machines, hotels for businessmen and so on. The discourse is clearly addressed to men.

In the following section we will analyse a sample of adverts to show how the ideological processes function in discourse to perpetuate power relations. For that purpose we adopt the methodology proposed by Fairclough (1989) for Critical Discourse Analysis, consisting of three stages: *description* of the linguistic features of the text; *interpretation*, or analysis of the interaction between participants; and *explanation*, concerned with the social effects of the processes of production and interpretation.

Women's representation in advertising discourse

We will examine several adverts where diverse linguistic and textual choices contribute to a representation of women which could be considered related to the discourse of control. These adverts are based on assumptions which rely on men-dominated gender relations. We will analyse the female stereotypes that the linguistic features which cue these relations help to construct and perpetuate. The stereotypes found in the adverts, which have overlapping features, are the following: the ideal of beauty, the image of women as a passive object, the ideal of domesticity, the stereotype of the liberated women.

The ideal of beauty

One of the ideals of femininity in advertising is that of beauty (Vestergaard and Schröder, 1994). The following advert focuses on this ideal of beauty.

- (1) Fenjal Creme Bath is made from an exclusive blend of natural oils extracted from previous plants. Just one capful of fenjal transforms a bathful of water into a fine moisturiser. So while you bathe, fenjal helps replace your skin's essential oils, leaving it soft, supple and sensuously smooth.

(HELLO, October 1993)

A high number of adverts are based on the ideal of the woman as a sexual object, who must transform herself in order to appeal to men. Women are not presented as being beautiful, but as having to become beautiful for men. The main advantage of the product advertised is that it leaves the skin "soft, supple and sensuously smooth". The response to the question *what for?* should be looked for in the adverb "sensuously", used to convey the meaning of "strong sensory appeal".

Representation of women as passive objects.

It has been found that while there is a tendency to represent men as agents of processes, women tend to be represented in relation to states (Michard-Marchal and Ribéry, 1982). The passive status of women is seen in the following advert:

- (2) When your head moves, shouldn't your hair? Our new range gives you long lasting hold, but keeps your hair looking natural. Adding shine and softness too, without leaving it stiff or sticky. Use Alberto VO5 Flexible Hold. No one else will know you are.

(HELLO, October 1993)

In this advert the woman does not have any active role. Ironically, it is her head and her hair that perform actions, not her. She only has the role of Recipient of the action *give*. The last sentence, "No one else will know you are", draws on the stereotyped sub-culture of women, which includes elements such as gossiping, secretiveness and so on. Another example of the representation of women as passive objects is provided by the following advert:

- (3) Once upon a time Sherezade, a beautiful and gentle princess set out to seduce her prince with spellbinding stories recounted over a thousand and one night. He was captivated and gave her his eternal love. This legend from the East has passed from generation to generation and has become a symbol of love and feminine imagination. Byzance plays the role of Sherezade recounting a thousand facets of this legend. Allow yourself to be transported by the enchanting fragrance of rose from Kazanlik, jasmin from Alexandria and tuberose from Ispahan and become a mystical princess for one, two or a thousand and one night...Surprise them all by playing Sherezade.

(HELLO, October 1993)

In this advert, the woman plays the weak semantic role of Affected of the process. This is quite significant, given that characteristically people with less

power do not have the semantic role of Agent, but that of Affected or Beneficiary. Additionally, as in example (1) the woman is compelled to transform herself, to play a role, in order to appeal to men. As a reward she will get the man's love. The advert makes a clear reference to the genre of love romance, which is stereotypically considered to be part of the female sub-culture.

The passive nature of women is set against the active character of men and is specially emphasised in the description of the reproduction process and of family life. The stereotypical image of women as the passive part in sexual relations and in the reproduction process is used in the following advert as a common ground assumption. Men are the agents in the reproduction process:

- (4) Papa pone una semillita en mama y por eso su tripita es tan grande
(*Papa lays a seed in mummy and for this reason her belly is so big*)
(TV advert)

This advert enacts the old sexist image of the woman as a field which gets the man's "seed". The image of the woman as the passive part in the couple, who delegates all the decisions to the male, is still vigent. The main feature of this female stereotype is weakness: the woman is happy to have a man to protect her. Through marriage, the woman becomes a male property (Cameron, 1990: 16). The following example makes use of this stereotype:

- (5) "I bought a Stannah and it changed my wife"
"My wife's always been a lively kind of person. But then she began to change. The problem was that she had started to find the stairs difficult to climb. It was terrible to see her like this and the threat of having to move to a bungalow just added to her depression. Action was clearly needed. One of my friends had recently had a Stannah Stairlift fitted and I thought this could be the answer. So I came up with a covert operation to get Jean round to my friend's to have a look and see what she felt (...). Well, we decided to place an order. We were even able to choose the colour of the fabric so that it would match our hall (...) Jean's back to her old self again and has even taken a new hobby: amateur dramatics. I can honestly say that Stannah has turned my old wife into a new woman"

The man is the one who takes decisions and cares about family comfort, while the woman is a passive object represented as such from the beginning, as the Affected of the processes ("I bought a Stannah and it changed my wife", "I came with a cover operation to get Jean round to...", "Stannah has turned my old

wife into a new woman"). The advert promises to fulfil men's dream: to have a new woman.

The ideal of domesticity

Traditionally, women have been presented as being responsible for the home, the children, daily meals, and so on. A high number of adverts appeal to this ideal of women as wives and mothers. The following two adverts focus on the image of women as mothers. The father's figure is not present in either of the adverts. The mother is described as the only one who should care for the children.

- (6) ¿Cuántas veces una madre no ha tenido que montar una sala de curas en casa? Menos mal que tengo BETADINE en el botiquín.
*(How many times has a mother had to put up a first-aid post at home?
It is just as well that I have BETADINE in the medicine chest)*
(PRONTO, May 1996)

The following stretch of text is part of an advert which has a dialogical format, with questions and answers.

- (7) "Hero Baby.
Inquietudes naturales. Sobre tarritos infantiles.
¿No sería mejor hacerlo yo misma con los ingredientes del tarrito?
Sería exactamente igual. Y bastante más complicado para ti. Ten en cuenta que los tarritos Hero Baby están elaborados con el mismo cuidado y exigencia que tu mismo tendrías. Para que tu tranquilidad sea más cómoda.
*(Hero Baby,
Natural worries. About children's pots.
Wouldn't it be better to do it myself with the ingredient sof the pot?
It would be exactly the same. And quite more difficult. You should take into account that the Hero Baby pots have been prepared with the same care and exigence that you yourself would have. So that your tranquillity can be more easy)*
(Teleindiscreta, October 1996)

This advert draws on a type of discourse with which mothers are familiar: the talk with the paediatrician. The mother's questions are labelled "natural worries". The word "natural" has the connotation of "inborn", "instinctive", which conveys the assumption that it is the mother, and not the father, who must be the child-carer, since this is her natural role.

The stereotype of the wife is also present in a great deal of adverts. Nowadays, the ideal of the perfect wife is not so explicitly represented in adverts as it used to be some decades ago. In adverts in the mid-1950s, like those of OXO cubes, housewives were offered instruments to appeal to their husbands (Vestergaard and Schröder, 1994: 80). However, as the following example shows, the ideal of the wife who must appeal to her husband with her domestic “skills” is not so old-fashioned.

- (8) Knorr soups of the world.

Experience authentic taste with “Knorr soups of the world”. Malaysian Chicken and Sweetcorn soup is only one of the tempting array of exotic flavours from regional recipes, including Japanese Noodles and Prawn and Austrian Cream of Herb. So be a little different tonight and get passionate over dinner.

(*HELLO*, October 1993)

The stereotype of domesticity draws on the representation of women as men’s servants, further illustrated in the following example:

- (9) She makes one of the world’s most advanced aircrafts feel like home.

The airbus A340 flies further than most other passenger aircrafts. It even boasts the latest in aviation technology. But yet the feature that makes you feel most at home is a lot more down to earth. Your Air Lanka stewardess. Warm, friendly and ever so welcoming. Just what you’d expect of Sri Lankan hospitality.

It is a taste of paradise.

(*TIME*, July 1995)

Women are counted among the “commodities” offered by Airlanka: its planes fly further than the others, they have a high technology, and what is more, they have warm stewardesses. The image of the serving welcoming wife waiting for her husband at home is mapped onto the stewardess. The man feels “at home” with the additional advantage that the serving woman is placed within a semantic context which brings about exotic connotations: “Sri Lankan Hospitality”, “A taste of paradise”.

The adverts which present the stereotype of domesticity contribute to perpetuating the division of labour according to genre. As Dant (1991: 179) remarks:

Women (...) have a different territory or place which is outside or subservient to this male, ruling culture. Their place as a matter of tradition and occupational practice is at home, a world dependent on the other and subordinate to it.

The stereotype of the liberated woman

Some adverts draw on the image of the liberated woman who has a full paid-job. However, in most cases the ideal of domesticity underlies that of the liberated woman, as the following example shows:

- (10) Algunos días los empiezo de forma especialmente agitada. Con tanta ansiedad mis nervios están a flor de piel. Por eso entre el agobio del trabajo, la casa, mis hijos y la hipoteca tengo demasiada excitación...y encima duermo mal. Necesito recuperarme para continuar mi actividad tranquilamente.

Valdispert 45mg puede hacer mucho por ti.

Valdispert 45mg te ayudará a tener un día tranquilo y dormirás tranquila
(I begin some days in a specially agitated way. With so much anxiety my nerves are ready to break out. That is why with the stress of the work, the house, my children, and the mortgage I have I am so excited...and additionally I can't sleep well. I need to recover to go on with my activity calmly.

Valdispert 45mg can do a lot for you.

Valdispert 45mg will help you to have a quiet day and you'll sleep without worries)

(MIA, January 1996)

The advert presents a woman who works outside the house, but she still has the responsibilities of a housewife: the house and the children. She is responsible for the unpaid labour at home. To make things worst, being accepted in the labour market has not "liberated" women of the prototypical features of their weakness, such as getting anxious or nervous. The interactional conventions of the text also contribute to a traditional image of women. They need a confidant to tell him/ her about their problems and help them solve it.

Conclusion

In this paper I have examined the female stereotypes used in adverts which help to perpetuate the idea that each gender has specific social roles. The attributes that these stereotypes have make for the construction of women as a

social group whose world is dependent on that of men. The ideal of beauty presents women as sexual objects who must transform themselves in order to be attractive to men. Women are also described as being passive elements, both in the reproduction process, and in the taking of decisions. Their “natural” role is to be wives and mothers, even when they work outside the house.

The linguistic choices made in the adverts create and reflect the unequal power relations between the two genders. The type of discourse which is associated with women’s speech, reflecting their “presumed” worries and their linguistic features, the selection of adjectives to describe women, the semantic and syntactic roles that they have, the processes they perform, among many other factors, contribute to actualising stereotypical images of women in the receiver’s mind. These stereotypes reflect an ideological system where men and women are considered different social groups with clearly delimited social roles.

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