



REVIEW

Helen Ringrow: *The Language of Cosmetics Advertising*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. ISBN 978-1-137-55797-1, xiii + 118 pp.

The volume under review focuses on the discursive construction of femininity in French and English cosmetics advertisements. It aims at providing an account of a cross-cultural comparison performed within the framework of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) with regard to how femininity is conceived of in the media. The monograph develops the claim that cosmetics advertisements are a blatant way of discriminating against women in the contemporary world. The volume fits squarely within the FCDA area of studies by proposing another account of the way femininity is constructed and perceived nowadays. It also offers quite novel observations concerning, for instance, the differentiation between sensual and sexual kinds of discourse, as well as the observation that advertisements frequently resort to a “scientised discourse” (p. 85) in order to justify their claims. The book consists of six chapters, each constructed in such a way as to form a separate constituent – more as a journal article than a chapter in a monograph. Each of them begins with an abstract followed by a list of keywords and ends with endnotes and references. The volume therefore resembles a collection of journal articles, while, at the same time, constituting a short but coherent monograph. The book owes its integrity mainly to the thematic unity of its chapters. Each of them draws on Ringrow’s analysis of English and French cosmetics advertisements in order to examine several different aspects of the main theme (e.g., ideas about femininity implied by the advertisements; gender ideals omnipresent in the media; the questions of language and power detected in the analysed sample). Another means of preserving the book’s coherence that Ringrow has applied is cross-referencing between the chapters. The author frequently reminds the reader what has already been discussed and indicates what is still going to be examined.

In addition to introducing the context for the book’s themes and ideas, the first chapter (Beauty Advertising in a Cross-Cultural Context), also explains the reasons for writing the book. These are, for example, the rather sparse literature concerned with the analysis of cosmetics advertisements and the fact that the beauty business merits attention due to the extremely widespread use of cosmetics around the world (p. 5). In addition to that, ideological reasons seem to provide another motivation for writing the book: at the very beginning of the chapter, we find one of the volume’s core statements, which underlies the subsequent analysis and deliberations, namely, that in today’s media, femininity is frequently equated with attractive looks, and that “female appearance [...] tends to be foregrounded in a way that male appearance is not” (p. 1). What reinforces the impression that the volume was written partly for ideological reasons is that, as Ringrow puts it, she “hope[s] that feminist linguistic studies may help the analyst to discover and challenge naturalised gendered assumptions in female-targeted media discourse” (p. 5).

Chapter one contains essential information about the analytical framework and methodology adopted in this study. The author's ideas underlying the analysis are those of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis, which she defines as follows: "FCDA critically approaches texts using linguistic methods with an overarching feminist impetus" (p. 6). This, in turn, implies that the book is ideologically marked, because, as Ringrow states, "feminist linguists hold a non-neutral stance" (p. 108). Thus, the author purposely takes for granted the assumptions developed in the field of FCDA. One of them is that women are discriminated against through language and that FCDA may be an effective tool in "furthering the cause of gender equality" (p. 107). In chapter two (Language, Gender, and Advertising) there is, however, one fragment devoted to the FCDA framework where it is difficult to grasp what the author means. Ringrow mentions Tannen's book *You Just don't Understand: Men and Women in Conversation* (1991) as an example of a publication sustaining the "myth that men and women speak *totally* different languages" (p. 15; emphasis added). However, Tannen does not seem to declare in her book that the language of men is completely different from the language of women, but only that there exist several gender-based differences in the way people speak. Thus, such a radical critique of Tannen's observations, which are based on real-life situations, seems to be too strong. Even though, in the next sentence, Ringrow moderates her critique, stating that none of the early feminist linguistics frameworks is sufficient to "represent the whole picture of language and gender" (p. 15), the reader is left with the impression that she rejects the mere possibility that gender-based differences in speech might exist. What is more, the reader might be left with contradictory messages, wondering whether FCDA rejects the entire idea of gender-based differences in language as a myth, or if it just points at the insufficiency of this approach to the study of language and gender.

As for the results of the analysis, Ringrow distinguishes three main characteristics of the discourse of cosmetics advertising. Each of these three fields is the subject of a separate chapter. Chapter three (Problems and Solutions: Pursuing the Youthful, Ideal Body), elaborates upon the first characteristic feature of the discourse discussed, namely, compliance with Hoey's Problem-Solution pattern (2001), which is based on two complementary structures: the diagnosed problem and the response to it (solution). Thus, in the case of cosmetics advertisements, the aforementioned problems that the potential consumer might face involve the assumption that "the female body is in some way inadequate" (p. 32). This inadequacy may be caused by, for example, obesity, effects of ageing, or dull hair (p. 32). Once the difficulty has been implied or even explicitly stated, the advertisement goes on to propose a solution adequate for this very problem – a particular cosmetic product. Finally, the advertisement shows the result of using a given cosmetic product, which is rendered by the disappearance of the initial problem.

As far as the Problem-Solution pattern is concerned, the book is quite innovative. By drawing on Hoey's patterning (2001), it introduces a new Problem-Solution model, devised specifically for the analysis of cosmetics advertising discourse (pp. 34–40). The classic problem-solution pattern is quite general and is frequently referred to in the analyses of various kinds of advertisements (cf. Benwell and Stokoe 2006, Lirola and Chovanec 2012). However, it may sometimes exhibit some insufficiency, due to its generality. Based on the detailed analysis of cosmetics advertisements, the new model proposed by Ringrow may, by contrast, prove very helpful in conducting detailed examinations of advertisements, as it involves two additional levels of analysis: the division of problems into more specific ones and the subcategorization of response. On the other hand, the fact that her model is so specific limits its application to a very narrow field, namely, the analysis of cosmetics advertisements.

Returning to the characteristics of the cosmetics advertising discourse, the second feature distinguished by Ringrow is discussed in great detail in chapter four (Femininity as a Sensual Identity). It is the idea that, in cosmetics advertisements, femininity is frequently treated as "a sensual identity" (p. 59). What is particularly interesting about this idea is the choice of terminology: it is rather the word *sexual*, and not *sensual*, that is typically used in gender studies. However, Ringrow quite originally proposes to distinguish the sensual discourse from the "explicitly *sexual* one" (p. 60; emphasis in the original). She admits that the difference is not big, but claims that, still, it is es-

sential in the analysis of cosmetics advertisements. Sensual discourse is frequently accompanied by certain sensualised images, such as parted lips or suggestive nudity. It is mostly verbs (sometimes also adjectives and adverbs) that make cosmetic advertisements appear to be sensual. Ringrow enumerates several instances of such words in context, among which are, for example, “embraces your lips”, “provocatively radiant”, “leaves hair *sensationally soft and shiny*” (p. 64–5; emphasis in the original). The author suggests that the use of sensual words and images in cosmetics advertisements entices potential consumers with a promise of pleasure which is one of the main reasons why women use cosmetics. The author also cites an interesting observation that in the beauty business there exists a controversial tendency to attribute femininity only to these women who use cosmetics in order to improve their appearance (Gauntlett 2008: 11). This seems not to be the case with masculinity which is widely thought of as an inherent feature of men, not necessarily increased by using cosmetics or diminished by not using them.

The third main feature of cosmetics advertisements, elaborated upon in chapter five (Scientised Beauty Advertising Discourse: *With Peptides or Paraben-Free?*), is the frequent use of scientific language supporting claims made in advertisements. This is to give the impression of some scientific authority standing behind the advertisement. An interesting claim is made about a difficulty arising when differentiating between scientific and scientific-sounding language. Because of this difficulty, the author resorts to the term “scientised” (p. 85) when describing “a register associated with science” (p. 85). What is equally thought-provoking is an observation the author makes that “there is not always necessarily a clear level of congruence between the scientific register and the cosmetic being promoted” (p. 82). The instances of scientised discourse that Ringrow enumerates can be found in, for example, descriptions of ingredients (“*anti-pollution and anti-oxidant ingredients*”), product names (“*AQUAporin Active moisturizing cream*”), measures of effectiveness (“*80% more colour radiance protection*”), and product features (“*ultra-wide micro-diffusion spray*”) (p. 86–93; emphasis in the original). Having provided several examples illustrating the phenomenon under discussion, Ringrow goes on to link this discursive strategy with the Problem-Solution pattern. She proves that these two techniques are very frequently used together in the same advertisement. The last thing that the author focuses on in chapter five is the phenomenon of so-called green products. Ringrow describes the discourse of natural cosmetics advertising as contrary to the scientised discourse of cosmetics advertising (p. 96). However, if we take a closer look at the examples of the “‘natural’ discourse” (p. 97), one may come to the conclusion that it is yet another subcategory of scientised discourse (consider, for instance, “*paraben-free*”, or “*gingko biloba*” (p. 97–8; emphasis in the original)).

The last chapter (The Case for Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis) reflects upon the claims made in the volume from the point of view of the FCDA approach. It elaborates on the theoretical basis of the book, provided in chapter one, from a more practical angle, thus serving as a framing device for the whole volume. This technique helps to preserve the book’s coherence, which is crucial especially in a publication composed of individual articles.

The volume under review is closely related to other FCDA studies. What Ringrow claims in her book is congruent with other works on gender-biased advertisements (cf. Lirola and Chovanec 2012, Plakoyiannaki et al. 2008). The similarities include the choice of analytical framework, as well as a significant part of the results of Ringrow’s analysis. She has observed that advertisements frequently operate on stereotypical and idealised images of women. What is more, her study provides evidence of the fact that the discursive construction of femininity in the media is largely based on women’s need to improve their bodies and on male expectations and beliefs. However, the volume under review also contains several novel ideas, such as the observation concerning the presence of scientised discourse in a large sample of the analysed advertisements, or the differentiation between sensual and sexual discourse. Apart from the originality of the book, its strength lies in the very thorough examination of the collected data. However, what is lacking in this book is an analysis of visual elements which almost universally accompany the linguistic structures in the advertisements. Even though Ringrow mentions them when discussing sensual discourse, her analysis lacks a deeper engagement with the issue of visual semiotics. Images are, after all, an indispensable

element of most of the advertisements, as they not only complement the linguistic layer, but they largely influence the perception of the advertisements. Nevertheless, this does not overshadow the fact that Ringrow's book constitutes a noteworthy and original account of a detailed analysis of cosmetics advertising discourse. It may therefore be of interest not only to linguists involved in discourse studies, but also to anyone who would like to deepen his or her knowledge in the area of feminist studies.

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