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ATTITUDE and Identity Categorizations: A Corpus-based Study of Gender Representation

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Abstract

“Identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results” (Butler 1998: 25). This study examines verbal expressions of gender identities in online personal ads by Malaysian adults. This paper focuses on methodological issues that demonstrate the ways in which themes relating to gender are represented in a corpus of online personals collected from my.match.com. This concern is explored from a social semiotic perspective and aims to present a systematic and replicable linguistic analytical framework for analyzing identity construction in a corpus of texts, both quantitative and qualitatively, based on a combination of systemic functional linguistics frameworks (Halliday 1994; Martin & White 2005), social actor categorization (van Leeuwen 2008) and corpus linguistic tools (Scott 2004; O’Donnell 2008). Features of identity categorization and attitudinal expressions were identified and qualitatively analyzed in relation to femininity and masculinity. The systematic contrasts between identity categorizations and ATTITUDE types construe distinguishing semantic themes, which define one type of gender identity in opposition to another. As such this study is a contribution to scholars working in the area of gender, discourse analysis and social semiotics as it demonstrates the interaction of identity categorizations and attitudinal expressions through a corpus-based analysis of personal ad texts.

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1. Introduction

This study explores the construction of gender identity in online personal advertisements by single Malaysian adults. In examining the range of resources that are used in constructing identities, the data is examined from a social semiotic perspective and specifically focuses on how femininity and masculinity are discursively performed in their verbal description.

A personal advertisement (hereafter personal ad) constitutes a distinct generic form, which is related to the small ad family of genres. While small ads traditionally offer a thing (e.g. a car) or a service (e.g. plumbing), the personal ad ‘offers but, most essentially, seeks’ (Shalom 1997) a romantic partner. The identity or persona of the

advertiser thus becomes a commodified entity (e.g. Benwell & Stokoe 2006; Coupland 1996; Baker 2003). Each construed identity is an offer that is traded for what is sought after in the dating scene. Advertisers compete for the time and effort of the other members to read their profiles and eventually respond to them. With this aim in mind, advertisers are pushed into crafting a description that will showcase their identities and communicate their desires in ways that they believe will help them achieve this objective. Self-description thus becomes one of the tools of persuasion manipulated to incite a response and affiliate with potential partners. Linguistic resources, namely nominal groups, comprise a significant part of self-presentation strategies among these advertisers as they manage and classify their online personae. Coupled with the frequent deployment of first person pronouns, identity description becomes a complex intimate process of revealing personal attributes to strangers on the website. Given the self-promotional nature of the personal advertisement genre, personal attributes are also positively evaluated in written descriptions. Evaluative expressions are therefore common as one of the key resources used for promoting identity. Thus, in addition to analysing the resources that are used to categorize identity, I will also be examining the types of attitudinal resources used in tandem. This paper is concerned with the way language is used in Malaysian personal ads to construct feminine and masculine identities – to represent parts of their personal and social identities that consequently become an important part of affiliation strategies with other my.match.com members.

2. Feminine and Masculine identities

The identity that we develop based on our gender identification as a man or woman is termed ‘femininity’ and ‘masculinity’. In this study, following Stets and Burke (2000: 1), femininity and masculinity are defined as one’s gendered identity, which refers to the degree to which individuals see themselves as being masculine or feminine, given what it means to be a man or woman in a specific community. For example, being the breadwinner of the family, or fit, muscular and sporty are two common types of masculinity (Baker 2003, 2005), whereas being emotional, caring, slim and attractive is the typical displays of femininity (Williams 2007). Because these behaviours are culturally defined and constructed, masculinity and femininity are fluid and malleable concepts. The fact that these constructions are not innate means that what is represented as being masculine and feminine may well vary culturally and socially, as well as generationally (Baker 2003). More importantly, behaviours and attitudes associated with being masculine and feminine may be performed, embodied and embraced by both men and women. In other words, men can and do display feminine characteristics such as being emotionally expressive and sensitive, and some women may and do exhibit masculine traits such as being muscular, dominant and aggressive. In any community of practice, some forms of masculine and feminine acts tend to be more typical. These behaviours are thus perceived as the normative standards of masculinity and femininity (e.g. Connell & Messerschmidt 2005; Baker 2008). However, these typically represent only some members of the male and female communities. Diversity in personalities – in behaviour, beliefs and attitude – of each individual man and woman naturally creates competing ways of performing masculinity and femininity, leading to the concept of pluralized masculinities and femininities (e.g. Bordo 1999; Baker 2008). Gender forms the crux of this study, this will be explored in relation to the advertisers’ performances of feminine and masculine identities. The following section describes the resources for construing identities and the methods for analysing them.

2.1 Nouns and adjectives in personal ads

A densely packed description of the self forms one distinctive feature of a personal ad, brought about by word and spatial constraints imposed in both written and online personals. Identity description is characterized by strings of adjectives and nouns (Bruthiaux 1994) forming what is termed a nominal group, as illustrated by the two examples taken from my data.

*I am a **single lady, sensual, cool, attractive, romantic and a good looking girl...***
*I am a **friendly, understandable and straight forward person***

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