Cosmopolitan Man: Discussion and Analysis of Gender in Male Writing for *Cosmopolitan* Magazine

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Introduction

This paper will examine a short article produced for the online version of *Cosmopolitan* magazine (given in Appendix A). The article appeared in the weekly 'Mars and Venus' column which features a male and female columnist, responding to a question posed, with the aim of offering readers distinct male and female perspectives. This essay will focus on the column produced by the male author with a view to discovering whether or not it conforms to traditional notions of 'masculinity' in its language use or whether it deviates from these notions. If the language is found to differ from a perceived norm the effects of this will be examined. The further reaching purpose of the analysis is to study the text using the framework of feminist Critical Discourse Analysis to examine how columns such as this function within the wider discourse on gender and its continuing consequences for the position of women in society, in terms of their subordination within a system dominated by heterosexual males.

Background

Traditionally gender has been viewed as a simple binary category with certain dichotomies that exist between the masculine and the feminine. This categorisation is borne from the belief that because men and women are biologically different i.e. different *sexes,* there will be a natural difference in the way they behave within society (language use being an important aspect of this behaviour). There is little evidence that this belief is based on anything other than stereotyping, which Mary Talbot defines as 'simplification, reduction and *naturalization'* (my emphasis). (Talbot, 2003, p.470) This naturalisation of the alleged differences between masculine and feminine behaviour allows for the 'maintenance of social and symbolic order' (Talbot, 2003, p.471), an order predicated on heterosexual male dominance. In order to maintain this order certain 'norms' are extrapolated to prescribe what constitutes masculine and feminine behaviour; feminine behaviour is viewed negatively measured against a masculine norm. Any intragender deviation from these norms also receives negative evaluation.

The proliferation of the 'gender as natural' approach led sociolinguists in the 1970s and 80s to attempt to identify the characteristics of male and female speech. The main approaches can be simplified into the following three views: Deficit, Dominance and Difference. The Deficit approach was put forward by Lakoff in her influential paper 'Language and Woman's Place' (1975) which highlighted the fact that women's language lacked when compared with an assumed male norm. The Dominance framework suggests that language acts are a response to a patriarchal order, that perceived differences between the speech of men and women are 'enactments of male privilege' (Talbot, 1998, p.131). In Dale Spender's 'Man Made Language' (1980) she argues that men produce meaning and therefore any language use by women is governed by a system designed by men. The Difference model relies upon the idea that men and women are socialised differently and what ensues are two

separate language cultures whereby miss-communications appear as a result of different expectations (Tannen, 1990).

These approaches, which all focus on spoken rather than written language, have produced a set of features that prescribes different attributes to male and female usage. These features are summarised in the table below:

Feminine	Masculine
• Indirect	• Direct
• conciliatory	• confrontational
• facilitative	• competitive
• collaborative	• autonomous
• minor contribution in public	• dominates (public) talking time
• supportive feedback	• aggressive interruptions
• person/process oriented	• task/ outcome oriented
• affectively oriented	• referentially oriented

(Holmes and Stubbe, 2003, p.574)

Although these features provide a useful starting point for analysis they are limited.

In the former approaches gender is viewed as influencing our behaviour independently of other social factors. Language and gender must be seen to interact with (and therefore influence) *one another* and also be viewed alongside other aspects of our social identities, 'Gender…intersects with, and is shot through by, other categories of social identity such as sexuality, ethnicity, social position and geography.' (Lazar, 2005, p.1) These approaches perpetuate stereotypes which are both socially damaging and may encourage biased analysis, causing 'some things to leap out of the record as "significant" while other things [go] unremarked'. (Cameron, 1998, p.270) However, arguably the most significant failure of the approach is the failure to question the notion of gender itself. Postmodernist sociolinguistic approaches are heavily influenced by the work of Judith Butler, which feeds into Critical Discourse Analysis.

Butler critiques the notion that gender and biological sex are equivalent, denying the naturalness of what we understand as masculinity and femininity. She instead discusses the concept of performativity, whereby gender is constructed through learned behaviour governed by the cultural norms that function within a wider discourse, thus 'gender has constantly to be reaffirmed and publicly displayed by repeatedly performing particular acts in accordance with the cultural norms'. (Cameron, 1998, p.271) Any language act is viewed as a performance by the speaker or author who is both working to function as an effective subject within the wider discourse which shapes the expectations of gender, and within the specific context of the utterance or text. For Butler, the relationship between how gender is enacted and how it is perceived is a circular one, 'the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts there would be no gender at all'. (Butler, 1990, p.178)

This idea of performativity allows for two key developments in the study of language and texts and particularly for the *feminist* study of language and text. Firstly it allows for gender to be performed differently in language depending on the context and the community in which the speaker or author is practicing. A Community of Practice (CoP) is defined as a group of people linked by a common purpose whereby 'Ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations – in short, practices – emerge in the course of their

joint endeavour.' (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1998, p.490) Furthermore both the endeavour and the members of the community contribute to each member's social identity; therefore the participants' performance of gender is influenced by the CoP. An individual may belong to several CoPs which all function in relation to wider discourses of society. An individual's performance of gender can be examined in terms of why certain features may be appropriately adopted due to the endeavour around which he (or she) is practicing. Where these features may previously have been considered deviant we can now study them in relation to the CoP and the context. Secondly the gender as performative concept allows for transgressions in the language, showing the instability and variability of gender identities. Individuals can engage in acts of 'transgression, subversion and resistance', (Cameron, 1998, p.272) a concept that feeds into the purpose of a feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA).

Wodak (2001) has identified two main versions of the nature of discourse. There is discourse as social practice, something people do, and discourse in the sense of how Foucault defined it, a way of representing social practices, and a form of knowledge. CDA studies discourse from both these perspectives. It is a method of analysing text in context looking at history, power and ideology. For the analysis to be critical it should be 'understood as having distance to the data, embedding the data in the social, taking a political stance explicitly, and a focus on self-reflection as scholars doing research.' (Wodak, 2001, p.9) A feminist CDA should study how 'power and dominance are discursively produced and/or resisted in a variety of ways through textual representations of gendered social practices' (Lazar, 2005, p.10) with the purpose of examining the analyst's own position in relation to those practices and critiquing a discourse that perpetuates a social order based upon 'relations of power that systematically privilege men as a social group and disadvantage, exclude and disempower women as a social group'. (Lazar, p.5) This is linked to the concern in critical theories about agency and action, intending to 'create awareness in agents of how they are deceived about their own needs and interests' (Wodak, p.10) the point being to make subjects aware of any limiting factors. In relation to language and feminism, this can be used to make people conscious of how, through language acts, women may be denied agency within the discourse of heterosexual male dominance.

The same notions of power and dominance that disadvantage women also subordinate homosexual men. In performance of masculinity the importance of asserting heterosexuality is imperative as homosexuality can be perceived as a threat to the power of masculinity. Homosexuals are subordinate men and therefore 'Homophobia…not only keeps all men in line while oppressing gay men; in its contempt for the "feminine" in men it simultaneously expresses contempt for women.' (Segal, 1990, p.158) This serves as a reminder that analysis that looks at gender and power relations, should be conscious that one cannot assume a 'monolithic notion of male dominance' rather 'specific locations of male power and privilege' should be studied. (Talbot, 1998, p.134)

Critical Discourse Analysis is premised by the fact that texts form a part of discourse that produces, and is produced by, ideology. Thus concepts of gender ideology are continuously repeated in texts. A key element of feminist analysis is to show how 'the text draws the reader into its ideological framework' with the intended purpose of providing readers with the tools to resist how the ideology is presented. (Bucholtz, 2003, p.56) CDA also looks at how a text may differ from what it purports to do. In terms of a feminist CDA an aim would be to discover whether a text that purports to be overtly feminist actually is found to support the ideology of heterosexual male power and dominance.

Textual Analysis
The text I am studying is the male authored 'Mars' section of a 'Mars and Venus' column for *Cosmopolitan* magazine's e-zine. *Cosmopolitan* forms part of the genre of

women's magazines. These magazines appear to take a feminist tone, discussing such things as women in the workplace. However, it is an individualistic feminism with little focus on social change and is aimed predominantly at upwardly mobile, white women. Furthermore the magazines often present women by looking at their bodies to find the site of femininity where heterosexual sex is the key to pleasing men and one's own fulfilment. Hence embedded in the magazines is the concept that women need to please men to please themselves. (Gill, 2007)

The question posed to this columnist is 'How do you deal with your partner's ex?' The sub-heading that accompanies every week's column contains the phrase 'See where the his 'n' hers views clash, collide and occasionally complement each other'. This neatly defines the attitude towards the relationship between men and women adopted by the magazine. The use of 'his 'n' hers' presupposes a heterosexual relation of opposites reflecting the perceived '"naturalness" of the "two sex only idea"..and [how] of necessity the two …must be inherently contrasting' (Lazar, p.7), furthermore this contrast, noted by Cameron (1996) is seen in popular culture as desirable. 'Clash, collide and occasionally complement' reinforces this concept of opposites by assuming more conflict than agreement.

Throughout the article it is possible to see the author employing linguistic features that embody both 'typical' masculine *and* feminine styles. In terms of lexical fields there is an interesting mixing of stereotypically masculine and feminine genres. The author employs military language, traditionally a profession associated with men, such as 'army' and the abbreviation 'oppo'. Both of these terms are employed to describe how the author is allegedly dealing with the other man in the situation. This use of military language can be seen as the author's attempt to assert his masculinity through reference to institutions licensed to violence which 'gain much of their legitimacy through appeals to heightened gender ideologies: strong, active, "protective" males must defend weak, passive, vulnerable females.' (Segal, p.98)

Firstly he wishes he could humiliate the other man with an 'army of press hounds'. Interestingly, although the military term is used, the phrase is referring to an indirect action against the other man actually removing the author from any direct confrontation. Secondly he described the other man as the 'oppo'. Whilst the abbreviation of the word opposition implies a familiarity and comfort in the world of competition, opposition being used not only in military terms but in a whole array of competitive situations, the word is embedded within a metaphor about shopping, whereby the author is the new shop opened trying to tempt new customers or 'dazzle the oppo out of existence'.

The shopping metaphor immediately follows a driving metaphor, once again mixing masculine and feminine genres (or what should be more accurately termed, stereotypically masculine and feminine genres.) What is particularly noteworthy in this case is that the driving metaphor to 'perform an immaculate 180 degree U turn' is employed to describe an attitude change in the woman in the piece, the author's current partner, and the shopping metaphor is used to explain the perceived difficulties the male author may have in convincing his partner he is better for her than her ex. This appears to be quite progressive in terms of allowing both sexes to be associated with activities traditionally linked with the other gender. A man talking about shopping could be vulnerable to accusations of homosexuality. Shopping can be a domestic or aesthetic activity, often both, and is therefore associated with the less powerful areas of the home and personal life. It is directly opposed with the image of male power through money earning by being a spending activity that is not associated with necessity. However embedded within this metaphor is negative evaluation of women, as his partner is described as formally having 'lousy taste' with the metaphor describing her ex-partner as 'House of Tat'. Thus within a metaphor that seems to support the newer image of a

'metrosexual' man, comfortable in areas formerly considered feminine, the author asserts his dominance by insulting women, emphasising a difference from them.

The columnist describes his own actions as having 'variable degrees of success' and asserts that 'Clearly I had some work to do'. This self-deprecating attitude contradicts the stereotypes of masculine confidence and competitiveness. It is a facilitative approach which performs the function of treating the readers like friends by diminishing oneself in order to seem less threatening to others. This is enhanced through a comparison between his own actions towards his partner's ex, and the ex's actions towards him. The author 'poked fun at him down the phone a bit and sent him some cheeky texts' whereas the ex's actions were more decisive and threatening; he 'returned, smashed up everything I'd given her, burnt my head out of a picture of the pair of us and dumped all my vinyl in a skip'. While the ex behaves in a more competitive way, reacting to 'losing' the girlfriend in a manner that is fairly violent, the author works to gain the reader's sympathy by highlighting his failure to do this, presenting himself in the weaker position.

However, this self-deprecating attitude is later contrasted with seemingly confident self-expression. Contained within a shopping metaphor describing how to convince your new partner you are better for them than their ex, the author presents what is a question as a statement, 'how to get that new potentially valued customer properly onside.' Turning the phrase into a statement the author demonstrates confidence that the answer is already known by him, which he then goes on to offer.

The expression 'did an (alleged) Angelina' also functions to gain the reader's trust and familiarity. It belongs to the realm of celebrity gossip, commonly thought of as a female-centric activity. The use of a celebrity name as a noun for an action implies shared knowledge of the celebrity, and a shared script for discussing famous people, creating a sense of community around this knowledge. The use of gossip contributes to magazines' informal style that assumes a like-minded reader. Therefore the use of gossip in this article can be explained by the CoP. It is an appropriate form of communication when considering the genre and the perceived readership of the text. As Talbot points out this creation of a magazine's friendly persona is related to writer-reader interaction and the 'establishment of a shared common sense' (1998, p.188). However, in this instance the shared common sense interacts with a different objective, that being to discover how someone understood as 'other' (the man) is thinking. This is a method well established in teen magazines whereby many of the articles appear to offer knowledge about boys. (Gill, 2007) Therefore although the male author appears to be identifying himself with the readers and using language to emphasise their similarities, there remains the assumed notion of gender difference. A man writing for a woman's magazine about his opinions and actions is thus offering the readers insight into another, masculine, world. As male dominance is the hegemonic power structure, this is presented as privileged information. The woman needs to be invited into the man's world and her understanding of it is dependent upon men willing to share their views, putting women in a subordinate position. The readers are therefore doubly objects rather than subjects in the discourse. As they are consumers and not producers of the magazine they are objects in that they passively receive the text, and in this case they are objects in the knowledge is power paradigm. The man holds the knowledge and therefore the power and is the subject in the relationship. Women are lucky to be invited to learn what he 'naturally' knows.

In contrast to the self-expression of a level of weakness in comparison with the other male referenced in the text, the author also describes him with the mild expletives 'wanker' and 'sorry ass'. The use of expletives can be seen as masculine as it is confrontational. It thus asserts the author's maleness and can be perceived as a kind of linguistic aggression compensating for his lack of actual aggression with the ex. In fact all of his actions towards the other man are language based (poked fun at him down the phone, sent him some cheeky

texts), while the swearing hints towards traditional masculine aggression, the use of language can be seen to refer to the stereotype that women talk more and their language is more person-oriented, whereas men act more, and any language they may use is more task or outcome oriented.

Conclusion

It can be seen in the analysis of this article that older approaches towards language and gender study are not sufficient as their prescriptive nature does not allow for variation in relation to context, how the language functions in relation to history, power and ideology or address the wider social implications of the text. In many places the columnist seems to mix stereotypically masculine and feminine styles. Often this can be explained in terms of the community of practice, as was seen when the author employs a gossip style to approximate himself with his readers and form a coherent part of the entire magazine, which will adopt a fairly uniform style. However, although the text seems to imply more similarity than difference between men and women in both style and subject matter, it is also important to consider its wider consequences. Forming a part of a 'Mars and Venus' column it is based on a presupposition of male-female difference. It supports the naturalisation of gender and the two sex only concept. The 'Mars and Venus' idea, borne from the Difference approach, is based upon the idea that women can be given certain information about how men think and behave in order to improve their relationships. This places the responsibility to change on the shoulders of the woman and subtly implies that the differences are straightforward and negative. In placing the responsibility for change with women it supports the concept that the woman's goal should be pleasing men. This reinforces the masculine/feminine dichotomies of the two sex only concept, maintaining women in a subordinate position.

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Appendix A:

URL: http://www.cosmopolitan.co.uk/love-&-sex/Men-versus-women-how-do-you-deal-with-your-partner's-ex/v1

How do you deal with your partner's ex?
Every week Cosmopolitan.co.uk's very own Venus & Mars give their take on the most talked about love, sex and relationships stories. See where the his 'n' hers views clash, collide and occasionally complement each other
By Cosmopolitan 19.11.2009
A new unofficial biography of Angelina suggests that she spread rumours that Jennifer Aniston was putting her career before kids to blot her copybook in Brad's eyes. So do tricks like that work?
MARS
I'd have to say the answer in my case is only with very variable degrees of success.

I got rid of him, he returned. I got rid of him again, he returned, smashed up everything I'd given her, burnt my head out of a picture of the pair of us and dumped all my vinyl in a skip. Clearly I had some work to do.
I'd love to say that at this point I simply did an (alleged) Angelina, clicked my fingers and a whole army of press hounds smeared his sorry ass through nine degrees of heinous public humiliation. I didn't. I poked fun at him down the phone a bit and sent him some cheeky texts.
But the honest truth is, when it comes to partners and their exes when you're the new kid in town you pretty much have to stand back and helplessly watch it all play out.

All you can cling to is the evidence before you: she's chosen you, not him. Any attempts to get this caste in stone though – 'I being of sound mind do solemnly declare that my ex is, and always was a wanker' – should be avoided.
They can slag their ex off till the cows come home but you join in the fun and watch your other half perform an immaculate 180 degree U turn.

Rival shops must have a similar problem: how to get that new potentially valued customer properly onside.
You can't just tell them they had lousy taste before when they went to that place up the road because there was a time when that House of Tat meant a great deal to them. All you can do is jujj up your own shop window and pray that bright, shiny things and your unparalleled customer service will dazzle the oppo out of existence.
Either that or wait till your partner's ex becomes so disillusioned and disgusted with her hideous new choice of partner (ie me) that he vows never to speak to her again. Yup, that worked a treat.