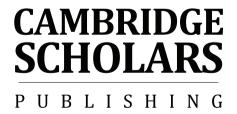# Femininity, Feminism and Gendered Discourse

Femininity, Feminism and Gendered Discourse:
A Selected and Edited Collection of Papers from the Fifth International Language and Gender Association Conference (IGALA5)

Edited by

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**CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS**

P U B L I S H I N G

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

FEMININITY, FEMINISM
AND GENDERED DISCOURSE

JANET HOLMES AND MEREDITH MARRA

Introduction[1]

Language and gender research has been consistently innovative since its inception, drawing on theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches from diverse disciplines, and productively integrating them to produce insightful analysis. This volume illustrates this trend in relation to three themes which have emerged as important in gender and language research, namely, femininity, feminism and gendered discourse.

In the last two decades, language and gender research has moved from essentialist approaches which treat male and female as discrete social categories to social constructionist and performative approaches (Butler 1990) which emphasise the diverse, flexible, and context-responsive ways in which people 'do gender' (among other identities) in different situations, and even from moment to moment within a situation (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003; Mills 2003). Gender is conceptualised as a dynamic performance; 'gendering' is a process, the product of social practice:

> gender doesn't just exist, but is continually produced, reproduced, and indeed changed through people's performance of gendered acts, as they project their own claimed gendered identities, ratify or challenge others' identities, and in various ways support or challenge systems of gender relations and privilege (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003: 4).

This process of gendering or gender performance takes place within specific communities of practice, such as the family or the workplace, and within particular speech events, such as a dinner party or a meeting. It involves particular speech activities, such as singing to a child, telling a joke to friends, and negotiating a decision in a meeting. In different social contexts, and even at different points within the same interaction, participants emphasise specific facets of their social identities and different

dimensions of social meaning, including their gender identity and gendered meanings (Cameron 2009; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2007; Meyerhoff 1996; Meyerhoff and Niedzielski 1994).

Researchers have documented, for instance, a wide range of contexts in which women as well as men draw on the discourse of power and authority in constructing their social and professional identities (e.g. Baxter 2008a; Holmes 2006; Kendall and Tannen 1997; Mullany 2007; Wodak 1995), and, where they judge it important, adopt discourse styles and strategies which have been normatively associated with masculinity (e.g. McElhinny 1995) or femininity (eg. Holmes 2006: 74ff, Mullany 2007). In a range of contexts, then, people draw on their knowledge of norms and stereotypes to enact their social identities, including their gender identities. In doing so they operate with an awareness of the wider social and political sphere, and of institutional pressures and societal expectations. In enacting parenting, for instance, or leadership, people draw on gendered discursive resources which are to some extent shaped by wider societal constraints and expectations. Butler (1990: 36) described these constraints as "a highly rigid regulatory frame".

These wider societal constraints include "the gender order" (Connell 1987; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003: 32), the repressive ideology which ensures that deviation from gender norms (by women or men) entails penalties. Power is obviously a very relevant consideration in this context, requiring careful analysis as a dynamic and systemic aspect of interaction, though not always a very overt one (Fairclough 1992; Fletcher 1999; Koller 2008; Wodak 2005). Both power and gender relations may be constructed unobtrusively, through taken-for-granted, "naturalised" conversational strategies, and reinforced in everyday, unremarkable, interaction. The effects of the gender order are especially apparent, for example, in many institutions and organisations where lip-service is paid to equality of opportunity, while the reality is that women are grossly under-represented at senior levels (Baxter 2003; McConnell-Ginet 2000; Mullany 2007; Neal and Özkanlı 2010 Olsson 1996).

Language plays an important part in constructing the gender order. Feminist linguists have the knowledge and skills not only to identify, describe and critique discourses of femininity and masculinity, but also to highlight discursive behaviours which penalise women in many social contexts, and to document active discursive resistance to sexist behaviours. This book provides examples of the diverse ways in which this broad agenda is being accomplished in the twenty-first century, including research being carried out across the globe and drawing on a range of traditions. The varied contributions illustrate the importance of taking

explicit account of power in the analysis of the relationship between language and gender, and of the subtle and not so subtle ways in which issues of power impact on gender performance.

In the next section, we briefly discuss each of the three themes which are the focus of the research in the following chapters.

Femininity

We are all continually performing aspects of femininity and masculinity in flexible, dynamic, ambiguous, predictable and unpredictable ways, a process whose precise realisation varies in interesting ways across different cultures and different communities of practice. A good deal of research has accumulated exploring what it means to discursively 'do masculinity' in a range of different contexts and in diverse ways (eg. Bucholtz 1999; Cameron 1997; Coates 2003; Edley and Wetherell 1997; Holmes 2009; Johnson and Meinhof 1997; Kiesling 1998; Meân, 2001; Preece 2009). And there is some research exploring how women, in particular, may enact and negotiate femininity in dynamic and varied ways in different social contexts (eg. Cameron and Kulick 2003; Coates 1997, 1999a, 1999b; Holmes and Schnurr 2006; Livia and Hall 1997; Mills 2003). Nevertheless, this is undoubtedly an area which merits further research.

For many people, the words 'femininity' and 'feminine' have associations with politically incorrect 'frilly pink party dresses', with demureness, deference, and lack of power and influence (see Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003). 'Femininity' invokes a stereotype, and it is a negative one for many feminists, and a problematic and uncomfortable one for many academic women. In the media, as Mills (2003: 187) notes, 'the representation of stereotypically feminine women is rarely presented… without mockery or ridicule'.[2]   Nonetheless, however it is evaluated, the concept of 'femininity' undoubtedly comprises a central aspect of gender performance and it cannot be ignored.

Assumptions about what constitute more feminine as opposed to more masculine ways of talking are constantly being reinforced in everyday interaction, and the process of "gendering" individuals is on-going and dynamic. Denying this is misleading and potentially damaging to the feminist enterprise, as we elaborate below. In the early nineteenth century, for instance, normatively feminine ways of talking entailed being largely silent in public spheres (Cameron 2006: 5). And even after women gained the right to be heard in public contexts, they faced the consequences of a "gendered division of linguistic labour" which ensured they often found it

difficult to participate on equal terms with men (Cameron 2006: 8). Women's voices were considered by the BBC, for instance, to be "unsuitable for 'serious or symbolic occasion[s]', though acceptable in more 'frivolous' contexts" (Kramarae 1981: 98 cited in Cameron 2006: 8). The same arguments were produced in New Zealand, where women broadcasters were excluded from news-reading for many years, and before they were permitted to front the news they were given lessons to assist them in using a deeper and less feminine pitch (Gordon 2010: 73-74).

Humour is another area where gendered stereotypes of appropriate feminine and masculine behaviour can be readily found. In western societies, at least, there is research indicating that women are widely regarded as lacking a sense of humour, and supporting the suggestion that telling jokes, in particular, is regarded as unfeminine behaviour (see Crawford 1995; Cox, Read and Van Auken 1990; Crawford and Gressley 1991; Decker and Rotondo 2001; Tannen 1994). The stereotypical role for a woman in a humour scenario is as appreciative audience; normatively feminine behaviour includes smiling at male jokes, and giggling, a disparaging word to describe women's laughter. The then New Zealand Labour Party Prime Minister, Helen Clark, was repeatedly described by commentators as "giggling" at remarks made by her opponent in the lead-up to the 2002 General Election. People speculated she had been advised by her spin-doctors to smile and laugh more because her image was too stern and serious (and thus gender deviant).

Unsurprisingly, such stereotypes are effectively challenged by research exploring humour (eg. Holmes, Marra and Burns 2001; Kotthoff 2006). And, in general, research on discourse and femininity also demonstrates the diversity we have come to regard as normal in any detailed examination of gendered discourse. The varied ways in which femininity is enacted in different contexts is the focus of the first section of this book.

Feminism

Language and gender research has a long tradition of engagement with the political, and specifically with feminism and feminist goals. Since its beginnings in the 1970s, this research has "challenged conventional wisdom about the social uses of language and posed important questions about how to integrate intellectual inquiry and political action aimed at social change" (McElhinny and Mills 2007: 1). Another leading gender and language researcher, Cameron (2007: 16) concurs: "one legitimate goal for language and gender scholarship is political: to contribute to the wider struggle against unjust and oppressive gender relations, by revealing

and challenging the ideological propositions which support and naturalize those relations". Susan Philips (2003: 271-272) goes further, advocating active engagement in activities which will benefit women, and arguing that we should "enhance, elaborate, and build on the gender ideologies that are most enabling of women".

There is a considerable amount of language and gender research which has been explicitly undertaken with the goal of contributing to the struggle against structured oppression and gender inequality. There is feminist research, for example, examining reasons for gender differences in educational achievement (eg. Carr and Pauwels 2006; Swann 2003, 2009), and focussing on power inequalities in organisational contexts (eg. Baxter 2003, 2006; Mullany 2007), as well as research on the inequities apparent in a range of institutional contexts, including the way that the legal system deals with issues such as harassment and rape (eg. Ehrlich 2001, 2003).

There is extensive research on sexist language, also stretching back to the 1970s, addressing the myriad of ways in which linguistic usages can reify, reinforce and render invisible a range of inequitable assumptions about what is appropriate and normal. These assumptions serve, of course, to further bolster the gender order. (See Hellinger and Bussman 2001; McConnell-Ginet 2003; Mills 2008; Pauwels 2000, 2003).

As noted in Holmes (2007: 56), "political efficacy may entail the formulation of generalisations, and the identification of salient social categories in the interests of strategic essentialism". While we struggle with good reason to avoid essentialist assumptions, there is a risk that discursive patterns which disadvantage particular women in specific social contexts may disappear from public view. Focussing on the diversity, complexity, and richness of particular interactions means we risk erasing systemic sexism from social consciousness. It is important that we continue to highlight discursive behaviours which penalise women, that we expose sexist assumptions and challenge covert patterns of male domination, and that we document women's discursive resistance to domination (Holmes 2006; Philips 2003). Describing the discursive patterns which instantiate gender relations in different contexts provides a useful starting point. The papers in the second section of this book demonstrate the value of identifying gendered patterns in order to challenge their potentially repressive effects in social interaction in a range of spheres.   Feminist linguists continue to contribute to social transformation through research which focuses on effective ways of contesting the repressive norms and restrictive stereotypes reified and reinforced by linguistic usages in a range of contexts, including the

internet, the media, and in legal settings (Lillian 2007; Winter and Pauwels 2007; and see also Baxter 2008b).

Gendered Discourse

As outlined above, current approaches to the study of language and gender focus on the dynamic ways in which people draw on discursive resources to construct their social identities, and especially their gender identities in different social contexts. Researchers have argued strongly for the importance of examining the relation between language and gender *locally*, in specific communities of practice (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992, 1995). But, of course, all this is accomplished within the macro-level constraints of the broader socio-cultural context within which identities are constructed. Participants do not operate in a social vacuum. We bring to any interaction our knowledge of the broader societal constraints on appropriate and expected ways of behaving, our familiarity with societal norms, as well as our accumulated experience from previous interactions. As Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003: 87) point out, we orient to norms "as a kind of organizing device in society, an ideological map, setting out the range of the possible within which we place ourselves and assess others". Cameron (2009: 15) makes the same point: the construction of social identity "takes place within parameters which those engaged in it did not set, and to which in most cases they offer no radical challenge. To make sense of what they are doing as creative, agentive language-users, we also have to consider the inherited structures (of belief, of opportunity or lack of it, of desire and of power) which both enable and constrain their performance". Examining gendered discourse thus entails consideration of the interaction between individual agency and the larger constraining social structures within which that agency is enacted.

Lemke (2008: 17) notes that "the concept of identity functions in contemporary discourses as a mediating term between social-structural approaches and views of lived, interactional experience". We negotiate our way through everyday interaction using the dynamic process of social identity construction, and taking account of broader societal norms (whether to confirm or contest them). Language is an important resource in this enterprise; we exploit ways of talking which are associated with particular roles and stances, and which are "culturally coded as gendered" (Cameron and Kulick 2003: 57). Gender is just one component of social meaning, an aspect of social identity conveyed indirectly through stances indexed by the choice of particular linguistic and discursive features, which may of course be multi-functional (Holmes 1997, 2006).

In sum, identity construction is a dynamic process which involves active linguistic choices from a range of resources, some of which are indexed for gender (Ochs 1992). Researching the many ways in which gender identity construction is accomplished through language thus entails paying careful attention to the many and diverse linguistic and discursive resources which are drawn on in this enterprise. In the third section of this book, the contributions provide some examples of this diversity.

Overview of chapters

The first section of this book illustrates a range of current research issues centring around the concept of femininity. Carmen Caldas-Coulthard's chapter, "*Women of a certain age" – life styles, the female body and ageism*, adopts an innovative multi-modal approach to analyse the interaction between age and gender. Linguistic, corpus and semiotic tools are used to demonstrate how images and texts can produce evaluative effects which influence behaviour, attitudes and social practices in relation to ageing. As Caldas-Coulthard points out, age has attracted little scholarly attention to date in language and gender research, and the relationship between age and gender has not been examined systematically in semiotic terms. Adopting a Critical Discourse approach, she discusses how semiotic resources communicate a range of meanings of 'getting old'. She argues that women are particularly affected by social and cultural changes in post modern consumerist societies, and that their bodies and images are the main loci of "commoditisation" in the discourses of body care, dieting, keeping fit and ageing. In a consumer culture, she demonstrates, bodies are the focus of normative discourses ('be slim', 'be young', 'be good looking'). Using media reports, multi-modal representations and personal narratives of "women of a certain age", Caldas-Coulthard illustrates how the female body continues, even in this post-feminist period, to be the focus of discourses of power and domination.

In his chapter on the construction of hegemonic femininity, Justin Charlebois also takes a critical approach, namely Critical Discursive Psychology. Using data collected in a group interview with Japanese women, he illustrates the ways in which these women are constrained in their construction of gender identity. Their interpretive repertoires emphasise the significance of a woman's role in the home, thus limiting ways to construct a feminine identity which is outside this context. The result is an ideological dilemma, and the women must balance their own positive self-presentation as the socially sanctioned "good wife and wise mother" with a non-hegemonic identity (in the case of these women, a

career professional). As he argues, to ignore the hegemonic femininity provided by the wife and mother role exposes the women to the unappealing risk of constructing pariah femininities. By investigating the discursive construction of the theoretical construct of hegemonic femininity, Charlebois demonstrates that the disempowered status of these women is signalled by the limited options available to them

In the next chapter Don Kulick takes a rather different approach to analyzing the interaction of femininity and discourse, examining reasons why the "constructedness of femininity makes it easy fodder for humor". He begins by discussing the widespread perception that lesbians are humorless. As a basis for throwing light on this issue, he reviews a range of research on lesbian humour, and also considers how stereotypes of humorless Germans, Jews, and currently Muslims, have developed at different periods, and how they are maintained. Kulick also notes the influence of the gender hierarchy which normalises men's behaviour so that masculinity is fundamentally unproblematic and nonperformative while femininity is unavoidably performative. He points out that lesbians devoted to challenging stereotypical femininity have actively cultivated particular forms of masculinity as a way of staking claims to public life. But in doing so they have been perceived (in contrast to gay queens) as taking themselves too seriously, and thus as laughable. In Kulick's words "they didn't put their gender performances in big fat quotation marks"; they were seen as too earnest and lacking in irony. Thus Kulick's analysis suggests that the conscious, artificially constructed femininity of gay queens, as well as the earnest "failed masculinity" of butch lesbians, both provide sources of humour. His serious conclusion returns to the issue of the social costs of being defined as humourless. This chapter thus produces some unexpected insights into the ways in which masculinity and femininity are perceived and produced in different types of discourse.

The fourth and final chapter within the section builds on Kulick's focus on humour, this time in the form of formulaic jokes. Christy Bird's chapter considers the ramifications of the claim cited in her title that "*Women can't tell jokes*". In her chapter, Bird examines the ideology of this stereotype and the ways in which it is "interactionally reproduced on an individualized basis". The analysis draws on a corpus of 303 jokes collected from 15 hours of mixed-gender interactions, where roughly half these jokes are told by men and half by women. Interestingly Bird provides examples which demonstrate that the female joke tellers orient to the stereotype in an "unconscious way" within their performances, commenting on their own inadequacies as joke tellers rather than presenting these inadequacies as concerning women more generally. She concludes

that it is this orientation which reproduces and maintains gender ideology or the gender order: "what is felt as an internal and individual experience is circulated externally, reinforcing the ideology at both the generalized and individualized levels". The critical focus here is one which can be found in most of the chapters in the book, a signal of this ongoing trend within the field.

The second section of the book, *Feminism,* presents three chapters which illustrate various aspects of linguistic activism or politically feminist stances in language and gender research. Anne Pauwels' chapter *Men, masculinities and feminist linguistic activism* innovatively turns the spotlight on men in relation to feminist linguistic activism. She points out that the activists of the 1970s began by focussing on the problematic representation of women in discourse. Although the discriminatory treatment of women in language and discourse was intricately related to the discursive treatment of men as the representative of the human species *par excellence*, nevertheless feminist linguists chose to target changes to female terms, expressions, forms and structures. This was, as she notes, in line with feminist values and principles which sought to empower women and to define women without reference to men, and not surprisingly the primary agents of change in this process were, and still are, women. However, since the acceptance and spread of reform initiatives depend on increasing their adoption by the community at large, including men, Pauwels suggests that it is important to systematically investigate men's role and participation in the spread of gender-inclusive language reform. Pauwels' chapter contributes to this goal by describing some male trajectories in the adoption of non-sexist terms such as *Ms*, and their impact on the spread of gender-inclusive language reform more generally. Her analysis of the results of several surveys indicates a gradual acceptance of *Ms,* whilst also revealing a complex range of attitudes reflected in the continued maintenance of *Miss* and *Mrs* alongside *Ms*. Pauwels also explores the issue of how feminist language planning has played a role in the construction of new types of masculinities, describing the linguistic mechanisms and tools used to encode concepts such as 'a man who stays at home to look after his children', and relating them to strategies typical of feminist language reform.

The next chapter, by Momoko Nakamura investigates language and sexuality through the use of language to express sexual desire. With her focus on Spam emails in Japanese, and her consideration of "women's language" and "men's language" (a particular concern of Japanese gender scholars), this chapter returns our attention to Japanese society.

Following the proposition by Eckert that heterosexuality is "perhaps the most powerful force in the maintenance of the gender order" (Eckert 2002: 109), Nakamura problematises the "natural, unmarked status of heterosexuality" within Japanese. The prevalence of sexual spam emails proves useful in providing data for her to explore appropriate ways of expressing sexual desire and identity in Japanese. As she notes, the linguistic enactment of heterosexuality differs by community, and this provides a means of bringing the recognised gendered languages to the forefront of her analysis. By conceptualising features of women's and men's language as heterosexual resources, she demonstrates, with close analysis of examples of spam emails, that the features are used precisely to construct contrasting and clearly differentiated gendered identities. As a final and important point within her conclusion, drawing on the feminist claim proposed by Cameron and Kulick (2003: 46) that "heterosexuality as a political institution *requires* men and women to be 'opposites'", she asks us to consider if the oppositions that are drawn between women and men's language in Japanese (eg indirect/polite vs direct/rough) reflect a gender hierarchy. In other words, she argues that polite-indirect and rough-direct characteristics are assigned to symbolically represent and reproduce heteronormative asymmetry.

The feminist approach in the chapter by Fabienne Baider and Evelyne Jacquey moves the discussion from Japan to France, but the analysis continues to be directed to the differing treatment of men and women through language. Here the focus is the coverage of politicians in the 2007 Presidential race by the French media. Drawing in particular on the reporting on a female candidate (Ségolène Royal) in comparison with a male candidate (Nicolas Sarkozy) the authors consider if the media's avowed attention to avoiding sexist lexical items, and providing better linguistic representations of women in their quest for equity, also extends to the consideration of other relevant vocabulary and grammar choices. One of the interesting elements of this chapter is the interdisciplinary approach which is common in gender research. In this case the analysis draws on components of political theory and theories of linguistic change, usefully combining these two approaches to gain a deeper understanding of the media reporting, and making sense of their mixed findings: a low stakes situation shows improvement in the media's representation of women, but the high stakes of a presidential campaign result in a backward step.

Thus this second section provides further examples of critical analysis in the form of Critical Feminist Discourse Analysis, as well as representation from languages other than English. The international spread of contributions

in the section on feminism demonstrates the ongoing importance of a feminist approach in diverse contexts and by researchers across the globe.

In the previous two sections many of the chapters made use of discourse (analysis) within their discussions. In the third section, discourse moves to centre stage with three chapters that take *Gendered Discourse* as their central focus. The first of these, by Stephanie Schnurr and Agnes Kang, considers gendered discourses in media (specifically in luxury residence advertisements) and workplaces in Hong Kong. Sustaining the international focus of the previous chapters, the data here is drawn from a multilingual and multicultural society, and one in which the relationship between gender and language has previously been under-researched. The analysis brings together two quite separate domains in investigating gendered discourse, yet identifies similarities in the discourse of women. It makes explicit some of the gendered discourses (in the sense of "big D" Discourse (Gee 1990)) that permeate Hong Kong society. As with the research by the contributors who described Japanese society, the authors of this chapter also identify "traditional and very limited subject positions for women" - the familiar wife/mother role or the celebrity/high society role.

The second chapter in the section reports findings of an investigation into linguistic change over time, specifically pronunciation of Māori by fluent speakers. Members of the MAONZE project (Jeanette King, Catherine Watson, Margaret Maclagan, Ray Harlow and Peter Keegan) are currently investigating changes in the pronunciation of *te reo Māori* (the language of the indigenous people of New Zealand). In this chapter, entitled *Māori women's role in sound change,* the project team uses recordings of four generations of Māori women, (including women born in the early 1880s through to women born in the 1970s-80s) to explore sound change over time, and then contrast these findings with their analysis of change in the speech of Māori men. The authors test the important and frequently cited pattern of gender differences in language change. Specifically, they explore the claim that before speakers become aware of sound changes women tend to be ahead of men, but that if the sound change becomes salient and stigmatised women tend to pull back and use more conservative variants. The data allows them to provide firm support for these claims: comparison of the women's and men's vowel spaces confirm that the raising of the Māori mid-vowels has never reached the point of salience, whereas for other linguistic changes discussed, women in different generations have been in the lead, both in advancing sound change and in reacting to changes which have become salient and stigmatised.

The final chapter in the book reports on a symposium which took place within the Fifth International Gender and Language Association (IGALA5) conference held in Wellington, New Zealand in 2008. The goal of the symposium, which had as its focus language and gender research conducted through discourse analysis, is encapsulated by the chapter's subtitle, *Approaches in Dialogue*. Feminist researchers from a variety of methodological perspectives were involved in exploring the impact of their different discourse analytical approaches to the study of language and gender. The comparisons were made particularly clear by the use of a single data source (a talkback radio call) which was analysed from a range of positions: Conversation Analysis, Critical Discourse Analysis, Post-structuralist Discourse Analysis and sociocultural linguistics/Interactional Sociolinguistics, each of which is widely used within the field of language and gender research. The authors (Ann Weatherall, Maria Stubbe, Jane Sunderland and Judith Baxter) collaborated both to devise and run the symposium at the conference, and to report it here. The agreement reached by participants was that "because of the complexity of the relationship between language and the ways in which gender is represented and constructed, there is much to be gained from taking multiple perspectives" and that the different approaches have different strengths in providing nuanced readings informed by a different theoretical lens. The authors conclude that the recognition and use of a multiple perspective approach strengthens gender and language research methodologies, and as such is an important step forward for the field.

Conclusion

It will be clear from this overview that this book brings together articles which illustrate cutting edge research in language and gender studies, as well as a range of theoretical and methodological positions. Moreover, the different contributions represent research from a multiplicity of geographic and cultural backgrounds, thus supporting efforts to internationalise language and gender research, and to raise awareness of empirical studies undertaken in a wide range of linguistic and cultural contexts.

It is important to note that although, for the purposes of discussion and for the benefit of the reader, we have allocated each of the contributions in this book to one of the three themes discussed above, there is of course considerable overlap between the issues discussed in different chapters. Similarly, while this book focuses on gender performances, it is important to bear in mind that gender is but one aspect of social identity. As Bordo

notes, gender "never exhibits itself in pure form but in the context of lives that are shaped by a multiplicity of influences which cannot be neatly sorted out". (1990: 150). Gender is just one of many facets of our intrinsically hybridized social identities. Nevertheless, it is a very significant facet with a pervasive social influence on everything we do and say. Interaction is typically viewed through "gendered" spectacles much of the time (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003). Gender is a salient dimension in everyday life, and a key social category for most people (Holmes and Meyerhoff 2003a: 9). As Holmes (2006: 26) has argued, "our discourse is drenched in gender". This book provides a contribution to understanding the implications of this observation in a range of diverse socio-cultural contexts.

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Notes

[1] This chapter draws on a range of material including Holmes (2006, 2007). We thank Brian King for reading and commenting on a draft of this chapter.

[2] Mills (2003: 186-188) describes changes in feminist analyses of femininity over the last decade, and especially the ironisation of femininity which has been the focus of work by Liladhar (2001). See also Clift (1999).

FEMININITY

"WOMEN OF A CERTAIN AGE"— LIFE STYLES, THE FEMALE BODY AND AGEISM

CARMEN ROSA CALDAS-COULTHARD

The Female Poet on Reaching Forty
—Magi Gibson

She's suddenly aware
of crow's feet marching round her eyes
of orange peel upon her thighs
and silver strands
appearing in her hair.
She looks around
and is astounded
she is surrounded
by younger men.
And so she whispers to herself –
fuck forty then!

Introduction

A current social practice that is indisputable in my native Brazil is plastic surgery. Most of my middle class, professional friends, who are ageing but still proud of their appearance and bodies, have undergone some kind of plastic surgery. This made me question why Brazilian and other women, under the pressure of 'youth' discourses, feel they need to manipulate their bodies and why appearance is so important for their sense of well being.

Brazilian women are proud to be elegant, beautiful, fit and well dressed. But what have they had to suffer in the attempt to continue looking young?

I wondered:

- what is happening to their selves when confronted with ageing?
- what is the price these women have to pay to resist the process of ageing?

- what kinds of body manipulation and transformation are being enacted and what do they mean?
- what ideologies are being articulated through their bodies?

And most relevantly for this chapter:

- how are ageing women talked about, represented, classified and discriminated against in public discourses, particularly in the media?

These were the first questions that gave birth to a project which I am currently developing with some of my Brazilian academic colleagues who are interested in the role of the body in shaping women and ageing. We are also interested in the importance of time in shaping "the material continuity of bodies" (Lemke 2008: 18). For this research in progress, the methodology has been Multimodal in all respects – we have looked at images, texts, and the internet, and we have used ethnographic tools by carrying out interviews and informal talks. We are now analysing discourses around the practices of plastic surgery and body work, the popular media and advertising.

We all know that texts do ideological work in the world and produce effects since semiotic regimes are the ways in which semiotic practices are regulated in specific contexts. That is why we think it is important to look at a variety of data to understand these regimes since they include specific practices and their codification, role models and new technology. In this chapter, I examine how media texts and images can produce classificatory and therefore evaluative effects which influence behaviour, attitudes and practices in relation to the female body and ageing. I use linguistic evidence, corpus data and semiotic tools to exemplify some of these points.

This study falls within Critical Discourse Gender Analysis since this theory postulates that semiotic modes create and perpetuate power inequalities. They also encode specific world views. As Trew observes 'there are no raw, uninterpreted, theory-free facts' (1979: 95). My hypothesis is that life style procedural discourses legitimate the contemporary bias against older women, and the immediate consequence of this is to give undue prominence to the values of youth.

My aim therefore is to critique practices of discrimination and exclusion. Women are particularly affected by social and cultural changes in post-modern, consumerist societies. People are currently defined not only on the basis of who they are, but also on the basis of what they do (their job, their leisure time, their patterns of consumption, in other words, their life styles), and above all, on how they look. In post-feminist times, the female body continues to be represented in discourses of power and