Linguistic means of reflecting gender-related changes in modern society (exemplified by English-language newspapers advertisements)

Elena Monakhova1,2, Elena Yurieva2,3*, and Jemma Amanzholova4

1 People’s Friendship University of Russia, 6, st. Miklukho-Maklaya, 117198, Moscow, Russia
2 Moscow City University, 4, Vtoroy Selskohoziaistvenny proezd, 129226, Moscow, Russia
3 Russian Social State University, 4 building 1, st. Wilhelm Pika, 129226, Moscow, Russia
4 Kazakh National University, 71, Al-Farabi Avenue, 050040, Almaty, Kazakhstan

Abstract. Language means play a crucial role in the shaping stereotypes within cultural groups. The present study addresses the issues of gender neutralization in English-language advertising and newspaper texts. The paper investigates linguistic means involved in the creation of gender-neutral advertising texts. The analysis of gender-unmarked advertising texts was conducted on the material of English-language newspaper texts from the rubrics "Lifestyle", "Health", "Sports", "Culture" of The Guardian edition. As a result of the study, the authors conclude that the main features of gender-neutral advertising texts are the absence of lexical units that would refer advertising to male or female; the use of scientific terms, numbers in the description of the goods; the use of imperative sentences. Gender neutralization in advertising occurs due to the use of impersonal sentences, defining pronouns and euphemisms. Gender neutralization is a relatively new trend in advertising and has a huge impact on the use of language in modern advertising texts. Keywords: gender, neutralization, gender-unmarked, mass media, advertising

1 Introduction

Mass media is a powerful factor in the formation of consciousness, public opinion, assessments of people and events in the society. Nowadays, the flow of information has significantly increased, because of this, stereotypes play an important role for the functioning of the society and people [Peluso: 2021]. A person is relatively not free from stereotypes, they shape his perception of the world, which leads to stereotypical thinking. Images of people, relationships between them, attitudes to events are offered by the media and perceived by people with the help of stereotypes. Gender stereotypes are one of many stereotypes. They are based on the ideas accepted in the society about the masculine and feminine.

According to the current interpretations, gender is considered to be a socio-cultural gender of a person, it is constructed by the society, and reflects social and cultural norms of behavior for men and women [Maksimenko, Savin, Pochernyaeva: 2020; Malyuga,
Petrosyan: 2022]. The main concepts of gender theory are the concepts of femininity and masculinity, highlighting ideas about typical female and male characteristics. The key factor of creating gender differences is the "male – female" opposition. The gender norms accepted in a particular society simplify communication and interrelation between members of this society. Gender is characterized by institutionalization (i.e., support by social institutions of gender norms accepted in a given society) and ritualization (i.e., replication of these norms in daily social rituals) [Goffman, 1977: 325].

The rapid development of modern society poses the question of what tools for the construction and representation of gender are used. According to A.V. Kirillina, language mechanisms occupy an important place in the construction of gender identity [Kirilina, 2003: 12].

Since gender is an integral component of communication, it can be argued that it is also represented in any discourse. Due to the growing influence of digital communication channels, at present one of the most relevant types of discourse is media discourse, which is understood as "a set of speech practices and products of speech activity in the field of mass communication in all the richness and complexity of their interaction" [Dobrosklonskaya, 2014: URL]. Media discourse is of a particular interest to the humanities because it is created "here and now", and therefore "represents a momentary cross-section of linguistic and cultural state of any society" [Gribovod, 2013: URL]. Media discourse raises topical issues and exposes the problems of the society. The media act as a kind of public laboratory that tests the validity of old ideas and the development of new gender stereotypes.

The product of media discourse and its main discrete unit is a media text, which, unlike a classical text, is described by most researchers as extensive and multilevel, since it contains units of verbal and nonverbal levels, as well as "media additives" peculiar to the distribution channel [Dobrosklonskaya, 2006: URL].

The main function of media is considered to be the manipulative one (A.A. Negryshev, M.R. Zheltukhina). This means that the competent purposeful use of language in combination with media properties has a powerful effect on the mass addressee, first of all, it tells on the formation of a certain point of view on any issue. Thus, the media discourse has a bidirectional force: on the one hand, it reflects the current social context and cultural and ideological background, on the other hand, it affects the mass recipient, which means it constructs reality.

2 The concept of gender in linguistics

Gender is a characteristic feature that most fully reveals the essence of an individual in the society, influences the formation of his personality. The relationship between language and gender has long been of interest for sociolinguistics and related disciplines. Throughout the years of research many linguists such as F. Braun, R. Lakoff came to the conclusion that our speech is gender-specific and men and women talk differently.

Current research in the field of gender approach by Russian linguists is carried out in several directions: the manifestation of gender stereotypes in advertising discourse and images (I. Groshev), the differences in the use of non-verbal means in advertising aimed at men and women (E. E. Anisimova, A. A. Dudareva), the description of gender stereotypes in the linguistic consciousness and speech behavior of native speakers (A. V. Kirilina, M. V. Tomskaya, L.H. Maslova).

Russian gender linguistics has a number of methods for analyzing gender representations (fig. 1):
3 Findings and Discussion

3.1 A gender representation in media discourse

Electronic media, which largely represent media discourse, illuminate the difference in the sphere of human life. The right choice of vocabulary and other expressive means helps to establish a trustworthy contact with the audience [Malyuga, McCarthy: 2020]. Since gender relations are a hot topic in modern society, it seems interesting to study exactly how they are represented in the media discourse. The purpose of this research is to study which linguistic means are used in modern gender-neutral English-language electronic media to represent gender differences.

For the study analysis, 20 media texts from the sections "Lifestyle", "Health", "Sports", "Culture" of The Guardian edition published in January 2023 have been randomly chosen. The texts contain stories of men and women. The conducted research has shown that the gender aspect in media discourse is manifested at the lexical, stylistic and syntactic levels. To reflect femininity, the following linguistic means of expression are used:

- Emotionally colored vocabulary: “I was over the moon”; “Working with makeup all day felt like a dream. It was exciting, challenging and I would look forward to moving to different brands each shift”.
- Stylistically low vocabulary: “Nowadays I think I could go: ‘Don’t fucking do that!’ But as a younger person, I couldn’t”.
- Euphemisms: “At worst, it results in women being killed for not bleeding on their wedding night, and queer teens being sent to quacks to be ‘cured’ by conversion
practices”; “Next I was told I had to write to the “decision-makers”, even though the whole trail is in black and white on the journal”.

- Modal constructions: “...and that they might fine me, unless I had a good reason why I'd made this mistake”.

The analysis of the gender aspect to identify the representation of masculinity showed the prevalence of the following linguistic means:

- Introductory constructions: “Anyway, after much malarkey and desperate calls to the hotel I'm staying at, a kindly receptionist collects some crutches from an Argos next door and delivers them to my room”; “Obviously, I won't be participating”.

- Short, jerky phrases: “Good line. But I’ve talked him into it; “Some things get easier with age. Many do not”; “We call. We talk. We catch up. It’s been invaluable to me”.

- Similar phrases with a recurring thought: “The offside that we had – we have seen it, the offside doesn’t exist, I'm sorry. It’s impossible. Someone has told him [the referee] it’s offside, but we’ve seen the images, it doesn’t exist. The decision is wrong. I make mistakes every day, and sometimes they do too. It is a pity, because I’m sorry, it’s not offside”.

- Terminology: “Each one focused on a different skill – there was aperture and composition, darkrooms and exposure”; “My USP? A fine-dining restaurant exploring and elevating the food of west Africa”.

- Rhetorical questions: “Then one day it dawned on me – why not try to create a food business here instead?”; “Fears? You bet”.

The results of the study analysis demonstrate that the gender indicator in media discourse is expressed with the help of lexical, stylistic and syntactical expressive means. Femininity is most often displayed at the level of vocabulary and stylistics and it is represented by emotionally colored vocabulary, stylistically low vocabulary, euphemisms and modal constructions. It gives an idea that these language tools are used for the purpose of emotional impact on readers [Malyuga, Yermishina: 2021]. It is noted that at the lexical level, expressive means are often used to give femininity a more "aggressive" shade, which indicates a certain tendency in constructing a new image of femininity in the English–language media discourse: a modern woman is strong and fearless, she constantly struggles not only with obstacles that arise on the way to her success, but also with stereotypes and conventions.

The representation of masculinity in media texts most often occurs at the syntactical level. Frequent use of introductory and partial constructions, rhetorical questions, similar sentences, and terminological vocabulary are noted. Such expressive means can be used to give weight to the statement and express the confidence of a speaker. In general, media discourse indicates the stereotype existing in the society about the restraint and self-confidence of men.

Thus, linguistic means of expression are actively used in modern media texts to construct and represent ideas about femininity and masculinity. The analysis of such language means allows to trace the current trends in the construction of gender.

3.2 A gender aspect of advertising texts

The target audience of advertising plays a key role in the creation of an advertising message. The task of advertisers is to attract the attention of as many people as possible, so the division of the target audience on the basis of gender is one of the most effective ways to reach potential buyers. So, L. V. Ukhova, analyzing stereotypes in advertising texts, notes that “the task of the creators of commercial advertising is to find a suitable stereotype and creatively introduce the image of the advertised brand. An advertising image based on a stereotype is perceived by the mass addressee as familiar, and therefore credible”. For the most part, the media are focused on a person of a particular gender and use gender
stereotypes. Thus, the effectiveness of an advertising text depends on the logical and semantic organization of the text and the presence in it of those language units that are aimed at a man or a woman [Danilina, Kizyan, Maksimova: 2019]. Advertising texts implement stereotypical images of a man and a woman, thereby forming an idea of masculinity and femininity as two significantly different characteristics of a person's gender identity. The gender factor plays one of the fundamental roles in creating an advertising message. According to T.B. Ryabova, advertising can be considered as one of the main resources of “creating gender”, since the media influence the formation of public consciousness.

Currently, it is increasingly said about the existence of gender-non-binary people who do not ascribe themselves to either the male or female sex, do not assign themselves any social role (men or women), do not have characteristics and manners of behavior that are typically attributed to male or female identity, this is the reason of the emergence of gender-neutral advertising texts.

The emergence of gender-neutral advertising is associated with stereotypes imposed by the society. Many advertising texts use stereotypes that help to immediately create an image of a particular advertising hero.

Gender neutralization refers to the use of linguistic means aimed at eliminating asymmetry in the naming of persons by sex and words semantically related to the idea of sex.

Gender neutralization is becoming popular in modern society, as more and more often the society broadcasts gender equality, the emergence of various minorities, the empowerment of them, the spread of feminism, thanks to which gender-neutral advertising becomes the subject of consumer interest.

Gender neutralization began with the advertising of cosmetic brands, which in modern society have become unisex, as men are increasingly concerned about their appearance.

Clarins: «Beauty lashes for everybody»
At first, it seems to the consumer that the advertisement is aimed at women, the lexeme "lashes" demonstrates this, then follows a lexeme that reflects the female archetype of "beauty", but an indefinite pronoun (each) indicates that the product can be used by anyone.

Large brands have relatively recently come to new advertising campaigns that destroy gender stereotypes.

Marketing has always been gender-oriented, it started in the 1920s. Then the company Marlboro was one of the first to turn to women (smoking for women was unacceptable), the feminist movement was gaining momentum, and the release of this advertising campaign was decisive: Cigarettes for women by Marlboro: «Mild as May»

Using the simile "mild may" and comparing cigarettes to May makes it feminine, romantic and sexy.

This is how non-binary marketing appeared, its essence is not to take into account all gender identities, but to generally stop using gender as a factor.

Advertising of the Starbucks coffee chain: "Every names a story",
appeal to each person, the use of impersonal sentences is one of the indicators of gender neutralization in advertising texts.

Brand Dove: «Natural beauty for you»
The direct appeal (for you) does not refer to any particular gender, natural beauty is characteristic of both men and women.

The advertising text which was demonstrated by a new generation of Barbie dolls, becomes a new stage in the development of modern dolls.

Barbie: «Do you dream of being an astronaut, a scientist, a CEO or want to be beautiful?»
Euphemisms become one of the ways of gender neutralization and are applied to nouns denoting the names of persons for a certain kind of activity. A euphemism is a special linguistic phenomenon by which gender neutralization is carried out at the lexical level. Its functioning is due to the implementation of the principles of political correctness.

Dollar Shave Club: «Accept your dadbods»

In modern society, gender neutrality is not always a fusion of male and female. In most cases, "gender-neutral" products have rather "masculine" characteristics (durability, strength and functionality), and their communications appeal to rational thinking. From the point of view of linguistic means, most often there are impersonal sentences and verb forms.

Apple: «Get a Mac»

A direct appeal to the consumer, an ellipsis is a demonstration of gender neutrality, anyone can get a MAC, regardless of gender.

Modern advertising is looking for ways to interact with different audience. Gender neutrality is even useful in that it is not aimed at external triggers (a person's status or appearance), but at functionality and practicality. From the point of view of linguistic means, there is a mixture of stereotypes of "male" and "female", so in one advertising text you can find epithets and metaphors, most often found in women's advertising and incentive sentences, numbers and repetitions characteristic of male advertising. Gender neutralization in advertising occurs due to the use of impersonal sentences and defining pronouns.

4 Conclusion

The study showed that nowadays Western culture is striving for gender-neutrality as the policy for tolerance and equality is gaining momentum. This trend displays itself in all spheres of life including advertising. The main source of manipulation in advertising is linguistic means, they change in accordance with trends undergoing in the society.

The gender aspect plays one of the main roles in the creation of advertising text, this factor becomes influencing the structure and language features of advertising texts. Stereotypes in gender advertising texts help to establish contact between a man and a woman, as they determine their behavior.

The current research demonstrates that the main linguistic features of gender-neutralization are: the absence of gender-marked vocabulary, the absence of personal pronouns instead of which indefinite ones are used, the active use of scientific terms, numerals, imperative sentences.

By way of conclusion, we would like to indicate that gender neutralization trend is undergoing the initial stage, it is relevant and it should be observed from the point of view of linguistics because there is a great possibility that soon the advertising texts and their main linguistic features will be significantly altered.

Acknowledgements

This paper has been supported by the RUDN University Strategic Academic Leadership Program.

References

5. E. Goffman, Theory and society 4, 301 - 331 (1977)
8. R. Lakoff, Language in Society 2, 45-79 (1973)
12. E.N. Malyuga, V.E. Yermishina, E3S Web of Conferences 284, 08012 (2021)