Constituting Gender Roles through the Transitivity Choice in Commodity Advertising - A Critical Discourse Approach

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Abstract

Based on Fairclough's three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis and guided by gender theories and focusing on an advertisement of Motorola's cellular phone as a case study, this study explores the construction of gender roles through Transitivity choice in commodity advertising. After a detailed description, interpretation and explanation of the gender roles encoded in the advertising text, this study gets the following findings: 1) Ideological conceptions and social consciousness can be expressed in a text through verbal presentation and also revealed through the arrangement of linguistic devices or resources like Transitivity processes. 2) Influenced by current gender ideology, commodity advertisements tend to represent women with strong desires for self-fulfilment. 3) The advertising of a magic product which can help fulfil a woman's self can stimulate women's desire for its purchase and thus promote its sale. 5) The construction of gender roles through linguistic choice in commodity advertising can infuse or indoctrinates new concepts of gender roles into people's mind. Hopefully, this essay can improve people's awareness of how ideology is encoded in linguistic devices and how ideology controls the choice of linguistic resources.

Keywords: gender roles, transitivity choice, commodity advertising

1. Introduction

Commodity advertising discourse is not only a kind of commercial discourse but also a kind of cultural discourse, which may connote different social norms and living styles. So studies of commodity advertising texts can contribute to the exertion of commodity advertising discourse's consumption-oriented function in commercial promotion, to people's awareness of the influence of commodity advertising discourse on their ideology and also to people's objective view of the current social value orientation, social relations and cultural psychology.

Previously, most studies on commodity advertising language have focused on the use of figures speech or the persuasive effect of figures of speech on urging people to buy goods, but few studies have attempted to explore the ideology hidden in advertising discourse or the influence of the hidden ideology on people's concept and understanding of the society or on people's tendency of making choice of commodities.

The current writing is an attempt to uncover the hidden gender ideology in advertising discourse and its effect on the establishment of satisfactory gender roles in our social and cultural context and also on the motivation of people in purchasing goods through analyzing the Transitivity choice in a commodity advertising text concerning Motorola's cellular phone. The reason for the author to choose the advertisement for Motorola's cellular phone as a case study is that nowadays cellular phones are the most often used communication tools whose style will directly influence people's cultural taste and social value orientation and that Motorola's cellular phone is very popular in the world and its advertising is always trying to match with the prevailing ideology and taste, so this advertisement is well chosen in language and connotative in meaning, worthy of deep analysis. In the following, we will first make clear some terms and the method that will be used in this research.

2. Key Terms

2.1 Gender

The word "gender" which is one of the terms most frequently mentioned by feminists refers to the socially constructed knowledge, values, and practices connected to sex based differences. And it is used to distinguish social and cultural sexual identity from biological sex. People are born female or male, but learn to be girls and

boys, who grow into men and women. Males are supposed to be masculine, strong, and macho, while females are attributed to be feminine, fragile, and nurturing. Therefore, gender roles are not innate features, but are cultivated by family reinforcement and social expectation. What's more, gender is constructed based on everything from appearance and dress, on relations with family and friends, on culture and sexuality (Appelbaum, 2001). And Judith Butler, in her famous *Gender Trouble* specifies:

Gender proves to be performative ... that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed.…There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very `expressions' that are said to be its results. (Butler, 1990, p. 25)

According to this, she believes gender is a cultural construction molded by representation and that representation, especially media representation, plays a significant role in forming gender role and identity and compelling women to follow what is represented. That gender is constructed by society refers to not only how women and men's roles, social relationships and expectations are built by society, but also how the balance of power between men and women is determined by social structure. In the patriarchal society men are in the position of power domination, women are treated differently from men and men view them as gendered beings. Moreover, male perspectives are seen as the norm and masculine behaviors are taken as the standard, while women's voices are silenced and their experiences are marginalized. Under this condition, such power imbalance is doomed to result in the resistance of oppressed women, and the harmful stereotypic notions of male and female roles must be challenged. However, changing the gender injustice caused by the unequal power relationship depends on the process of social reform.

In this point, feminism urges the action to change the social structure in order to make it less oppressive to women, as well as, to men because not all men equally benefit from the way that society is structured and society also oppresses men in different degrees (Mills, 1995). Therefore, feminism doesn't mean to place women above men and strive for the complete sameness in every aspect of social life between women and men. After all, people cannot deny the existence of the difference between two biological sexes in the world. For this reason, feminists proclaim the harmonious co-existence of the male and female without losing their respective features and females should correctly face the mental and physical characteristics which are different from males' and make good use of their unique traits and advantages to realize their real value, and finally forge a concept of an acceptable, reciprocal male-female relationship.

2.2 Androgyny

The theory of androgyny has been put forward by Virginia Woolf who is generally regarded as one of the forerunners of feminist criticism. She expresses her feminist idea that the ideal relationship between man and woman is not the binary opposition but should be an androgynous unity. (Woolf, 1929) According to Hawthorn, androgyny means: Technically, the union of both sexes in one individual. The original OED (Oxford English Dictionary) gives this as a biological term and equates it with hermaphrodism, but in recent feminist writing the term is used to refer to culturally acquired characteristics rather than to biologically determined ones. (Hawthorn, 1992)

"Androgyny" is different from the absolute-equality feminism, which emphasizes absolute equality between female and male, and from the difference-remaining feminism, which affirms the subjectivity of female and constructs a female centre while breaking the male center. It is based upon the principles of the complementary of both sexes and aims at people's development in an all-round way. Therefore, it is an ideal theory that sets forth the new developmental direction of gender roles and an ideal world in which the male and female live in harmony. Meanwhile, it also provides us with ideal models of gender roles and a helpful perspective of female images in the prospective medium.

2.3 Transitivity Choice

According to Halliday, Transitivity is "the set of options whereby the speaker encodes his [sic] experience of the process of the external world of his consciousness, together with the participants in these processes and their attendant circumstances; and it embodies a very basic distinction of process into two types, those that are required as due to an external cause, an agency other than the person or object involved, and those that are not" (Halliday, 1971, p. 359). Therefore, it is the part of grammar that encodes the speaker or writer's view of reality in the form of different types of process which determine how the participants are represented and literally it is concerned with who acts and who is acted upon. All participants will become proficient in analyzing texts according to their Transitivity choices. Through recognizing the basic types of Transitivity patterns in English texts, we can explore not only a wide range of English texts but also the speaker or writer's world-view and the

social ideology at that time. Thus, as the major component of the ideational part of the linguistic system, Transitivity plays a key role in understanding social process and the reconstructed gender roles.

There are three main sets of choices: material, mental and relational processes, which are categorized in terms of how actions are represented: what kind of actions appear in a text, who does them and to whom they are done. Specifically defined, material processes refer to processes that describe what is happening and being done in the external material worlds involving physical actions such as running, throwing, cooking, and so on; mental processes refer to processes of perception (see, hear, smell, feel, etc.), of cognition (know, understand, think, etc.) and of affection (like, fear, hat, etc.); relational processes are the processes of being signaling the existence of the relationship between two concepts.

According to S. Mills, "When we are making choices between different types of process and different participants, between different roles participants might take, these decisions are shown syntactically through Transitivity choices" (Mills, 1995, p.143). Thus, we can analyze Transitivity choices by counting the ratios of choice of types of process so as to explore the way that characters in the texts view their position in the world and their relation to others. And Mills further states that "the extent to which a character is the passive 'victim' of circumstance, or is actively in control of the environment, making decisions and taking action, is one of the concerns of feminist stylistics" (Mills, 1995, p. 144). Therefore, the different Transitivity choice made on a syntactic level is one of the most important ways to represent the characters and to explore the power relationship between the female characters and male ones. If a character is very actively engaged in controlling its environment in a text, in control of their own decisions and actions, there are a relatively high number of material processes to describe the character in that text. And when we conduct a feminist stylistics to analyze a text, we can explore the construction of a character who is apparently assertive, in control of her/his life, and question 1) whether the syntactic choices support or destroy the content of the text, 2) whether her/his characteristics are reflected by her/his behavior in every aspect of her/his life (Mills, 1995). Mills' feminist stylistic approach to analyzing Transitivity choice is helpful for the following analysis of the data.

3. Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

In the study of CDA, Fairclough makes a distinction between discourse and text. Fairclough (1992&1995) believes that 'text' is used for both written texts and transcripts of spoken interaction and a text is regarded as a product of the text production process; while 'discourse' refers to the use of language seen as a form of social practice, which underlines a dialectical relationship between the microstructure of discourse like linguistic structures and the macrostructures of society such as social structure and ideology and etc. Faiclough thinks that discourse refers to the whole process of social interaction, of which text is just a part.

Faiclough's interpretation of the relationship between discourse and text is clearly shown in his three-dimensional concept of discourse. He (1995, p. 96) suggests that discourse or any specific instance of discursive practice, as simultaneously: 1) a language text (spoken or written); 2) discursive practice (text production, distribution and consumption); 3) social practice. Meanwhile, he holds that any piece of discourse as embedded within socio-cultural practice at a number of levels: in the immediate situation, in the wider institution or organization, and at a societal level.

Correspondingly, Fairclough (1989 & 1992) puts forward three stages of discourse analysis, be they description, interpretation and explanation respectively. Description, concerned with the analysis of text, is the linguistic description of the language text in terms of linguistic devices and concepts mainly by making use of Systemic Function Grammar. Interpretation, concerned with the analysis of discourse practice, is interpretation of the relationship between the productive and interpretative discursive processes and the text, with attention paid to the situational contexts in which text production, distribution and consumption occur. Explanation, concerned with the analysis of social practice, is explanation of the relationship between the discursive processes and the social processes, in other words, it aims to analyze the discourse within a wider social practice or identify the social determination and social effects of the discourse, as Fairclough believes that explanation of social practice involves analysis whose "objective… is to portray a discourse as part of a social process, as a social practice, showing how it is determined by social structures, and what reproductive effects discourses can commutatively have on those structures, sustaining them or changing them." (Fairclough, 1989, p. 163)

The three-dimensional concept of discourse and the corresponding analytical methods constitute the three-dimensional model of Fairclough, as shown in Figure 1.
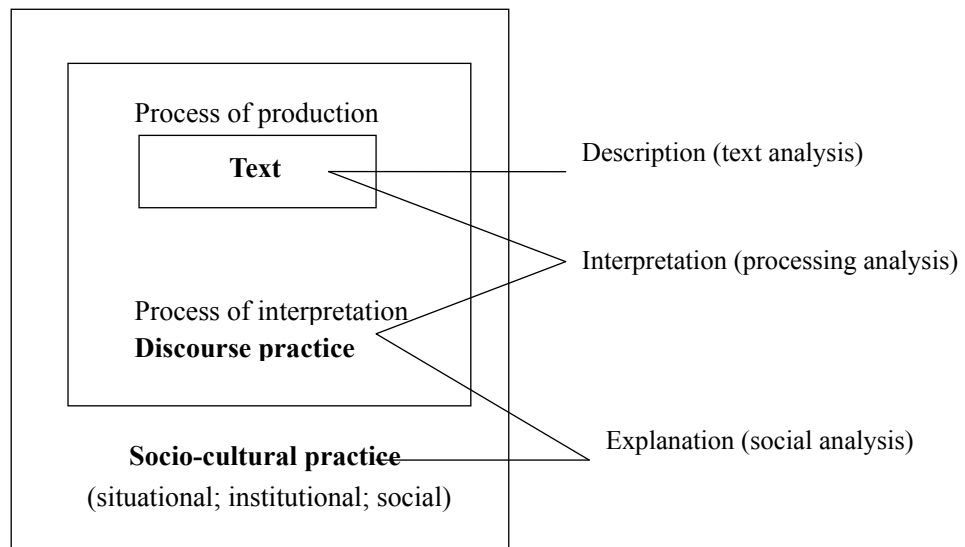
Figure 1. Fairclough's three-dimensional model

The procedure of Critical Discourse Analysis can be conducted as follows:

(1) Description (text analysis): describe the end product (text), analyzing the linguistic features of a text;

(2) Interpretation (processing analysis): on the basis of the result of linguistics analysis, study the process of text production, distribution and consumption, that is, interpreting the process of constructing the text and the interactive process between the author and the reader;

(3) Explanation (social analysis): on the basis of interpretation, put the text into the social context in which the text is produced and accepted or consumed and then examine the social structure that determines the text and the effect that the text exerts on the social structure, and further reveal the ideology hidden/encoded in the text.

Just as the three dimensions of discourse are interrelated with each other, these three stages of discourse analysis also enjoy close interconnection, which is shown in the fact that the analysis of discursive practice serves as a bridge between text and social practice analysis. According to Fairclough (1992), a special feature of this three-dimensional approach to discourse analysis is that "the link between socio-cultural practice and text is mediated by discursive practice". Fairclough values the feature as one of the significant principles of CDA, that is, analysis of text should not be artificially isolated from analysis of institutional and discourse practices within which texts are embedded (Fairclough, 1995, p. 9). The following analysis of the data will be based on the above procedure.

4. Analysis of the Data

The analysis of the Transitivity choice in the data will follow the following three steps: first is the description of the features of Transitivity processes, second is the interpretation of the relation between the use of Transitivity and our understanding of its use (interaction) and third is the explanation of the relationship between interaction and social context. In the processes of interpretation and explanation of the data we will be guided by Mills' feminist stylistic approach. The following advertisement will illustrate how the workings of Transitivity in revealing gender ideology can both strengthen the attractiveness of commercial product and influence people's gender ideology:

I need to learn how to multiply.

Take one woman.

Add job.

Add boss.

Add husband.

Add children.

Add promotion.

Add overtime.

Add daycare.

Add pressure.

Subtract time.

Divide attention.

How does this equal one woman?

(Sivulka, 1998, p. 383)

This is an advertisement for Motorola's cellular phone targeting to modern women. The speaker "I" desires to become a fully realized woman both in family and career, who can work outside as a boss and can also stay at home caring for her husband and children, who can shoulder important task and endure pressure with a chance to be promoted and who can balance her work and family and at the same time enjoy the leisure of life. The implication of the advertisement is that a woman with a Motorola's cellular phone in hand can be very efficient and capable in managing life and work and thus unparalleled by others.

4.1 Description of Linguistic Features in Terms of Transitivity

In this advertisement, there are 13 sentences, among which 11 sentences are imperative ones. Actually the first person "I" is the actor of the first 12 sentences. In order to have a clear view of the Transitivity structure of all the sentences, we need first to analyze all the Transitivity processes. The result is:

(1) I need to learn how to multiply.   (Mental process)

(2) Take one woman.   (Material process)

(3) Add job.   (Material process)

(4) Add boss.   (Material process)

(5) Add husband.   (Material process)

(6) Add children.   (Material process)

(7) Add promotion.   (Material process)

(8) Add overtime.   (Material process)

(9) Add daycare.   (Material process)

(10) Add pressure.   (Material process)

(11) Subtract time.   (Material process)

(12) Divide attention.   (Material process)

(13) How does this equal one woman?   (Relational process)

From the above analysis, we get the distribution frequency of the Transitivity processes as shown in Table 1.

Table 1.

process	material	mental	relational
number	11	1	1
ratio	85%	8%	8%

According to the above statistics, we can see that material, mental and relational processes are adopted in the advertisement, and material process holds the highest percentage of 85%. Both mental and relational processes account 29% in percentage.

4.2 Interpretation of Gender Roles in Terms of Transitivity Choice

To decode the hidden meanings of gender roles which are transferred by particular Transitivity choices, the first important thing is to recognize the Transitivity patterns in the text. It is obvious that the result has a strong bias because in the eleven material processes, the female speaker "I" appears in the position of actor, According to Eggins (1994), a material process refers to process of doing, usually involving four elements: actor (the "doer"), goal (sth/sb "being done to"), the process (the verb) and circumstances (which appear when necessary). So in

those material processes with female as actor, the woman is the doer who has independent self and can determine her own destiny at will. Her behavioral freedom in making her own choices reveals her equal status in society in which women can play different roles as men and her enjoyment of female versatility in life. Furthermore, material processes often represent narrative function and these sentences containing material processes serve to narrate the process of a modern woman's future life experience.

As far as the only mental process is concerned, the female speaker "I" is the senser, who shows her desire to learn to become a woman with spiritual and physical freedom and intelligence.

As for the only relational process at the end of the text, according to Halliday's view of relational processes (Halliday, 2000, p. 122), it is structured as the following Table 2 shows.

Table 2.

How does this	equal	one woman
Identified	Process: Intensive	Identifier

The deictic pronoun "this" as the "Identified" refers to all the things to be done or all the roles to be played in the above eleven sentences in the text, while "one woman" as the "Identifier" is just the woman who is endowed with the magic and unparalleled power. So the meaning of the relational process is: How are all the things to be done and all the roles to be played identified with a woman? Or simply, how can one woman manage to do all the things or play all the roles? The answer is: When a woman possesses a Motorola's cellular phone, she can be powerful and capable enough to fulfill all her desires.

By appropriately using different processes, especially the material processes, this text shows us a type of androgynous or bisexual gender roles played by modern women who are active, diligent, capable and free in action; smart, rational, independent and determined in mind, and also mild, nurturing, affinitive and domestic as mothers and wives,. These diverse roles a modern woman can play are completely different from the roles played by men and women in a patriarchal society.

4.3 Explanation of Gender Roles in Terms of Social Context

With the development of technology and society, women have been freed from the drudgery of housework and able to be engaged in social life to exert their intelligence. The influx of women into workforce and the progress women have made at entering professions and filling positions once dominated by men changed people's traditional concepts of gender. The improvement of women's social and economic status allows them to make large important purchases such as automobiles, computers and high-priced mobile phones. Since the roles of women in society have changed greatly, "a continuing reliance on traditional advertisements may not be the most effective way to appeal to a substantial minority of the consuming public." (Morrison & Shaffer, 2003, p. 273) Therefore, advertisers are encouraged to produce a number of nontraditional advertisements to promote their products more broadly, for example, promoting power tools to women and cosmetics to men.

With the rise of female's purchasing power, women are represented as gaining more power of decision making on items and topics other than household and as sharing equal and harmonious relationship with their male counterparts. (Belknap & Leonard, 1991) There are an increasing number of advertisements showing women who are independent, playing diverse roles both in daily life and workplace. These advertisements not only provide important information about gender relations, social changes and views of values and also influence people's gender ideology.

Therefore, in the above advertisement for Motorola's cellular phone, modern women's desire for high social and domestic status and equality with men, or more exactly, their desire for androgynous roles is naturally represented through not only the verbal expressions but also the Transitivity choice. And the repeated use of the material process is conducive to the enforcement of the diverse roles which can be effectively played by a woman possessing a Motorola's cellular phone. In this way, this type of mobile phone product is well recommended to the public, specifically to female customers. So we can understand that the gender ideology prevalent in modern society governs the Transitivity choice in the commodity advertisement for Motorola's cellular phone and also the proper use of Transitivity processes can redound to the promoting power of a commodity advertisement and at the same time indoctrinate people with gender ideology.

5. Conclusion

Through a detailed description, interpretation and explanation of the gender roles encoded in the advertising text concerning mobile phone, we get to discover that ideological conceptions and social consciousness can be expressed in a text through verbal presentation and also revealed through the arrangement of linguistic devices or resources like Transitivity processes. In this commodity advertisement, the writer not only vividly presents a woman with strong desire for self-fulfilment but also implicates the magic power of the newly developed Motorola's cellular phone and thus promotes the sale of this type of cellular phone products. At the same time, this advertisement also infuses or indoctrinates the concept of androgynous gender roles of women and the view of value of equal status and opportunities of two sexes in family and society, which is advocated and eulogized by the present society and thus positions the customers as people who seek or appreciate such view of value. So in our understanding of a text, we should be more sensitive to the way of how ideology is encoded in the use of linguistic devices, such as Transitivity choice and how ideology controls the choice of linguistic resources.

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