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“Girl, we are serving looks!”: the influence of drag queen’s language on the “beauty gurus” channels on YouTube.

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Introduction

While reading the title, one may guess the overall meaning of the first sentence but not fully grasp the reason why these nouns and verbs are in this unusual disposition. The answer can be found in the unique ways drag queens speak of speaking, whose culture has been recently rediscovered and brought to the mainstream audience thanks to the success of the reality television show RuPaul's Drag Race. (Schottmiller 2018: 2). This queer cultural phenomenon attracted a large interest on the internet, in particular for what concern the slang of drag queens considered trendy and evocative (cf. Pandell). Among the many people involved in this influence phenomenon, the group of beauty gurus stands out. Then, a second question may arise regarding the so-called "beauty gurus": who are they and what do they do? In this digital era, their presence on social media – mostly on YouTube – is more relevant than ever for the make-up industry. In fact, beauty gurus "are content creators who are particularly authoritative in a specific field" (Riboni 2017: 191) and have gained such a wide audience, that make-up companies are exploiting their influential power to sell products and for advertisement. They are changing the way the make-up industries are selling product while dictating also the linguistic trends on the internet.

This paper will be focused on the influence of drag queens' language on the way beauty gurus speak in make-up tutorial and reviews on YouTube. The method used is a comparison between the lexicons through the use of two different corpora. The results will be considered from a qualitative perspective. This examination takes first into consideration the culture and identities of the two subject and concludes with some speculations, whether it is a matter of cultural appropriation or not.

1 Definitions

As a starting point of the analysis of the two corpora, it is fundamental to have a general background knowledge of the two subjects and terms of comparison: the language of drag queens and the one spoken by famous beauty and make-up youtubers, so called “beauty gurus”. Hereafter, their identity, culture and linguistic features will be briefly presented.

1.1 Drag queens and their language

Who are drag queens and what do they do? These questions are the starting point of the analysis and find relevance nowadays, thanks to their rising relevance in the pop and mainstream culture. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, a drag queen is “a man, often a gay man, who dresses as a woman for entertainment” (cf., s.v. *drag queen*). The issue of drag must not be confused with the identity of transgender; unlike the latter, drag queen and transsexuals do not see themselves as females but rather they identify themselves with the gender corresponding to their assigned sex. Their performance, which usually include comic sketch, lip-sync, fashion shows etc., is focused on the portrayal of a physically realistic and exaggerated imagery of a woman (Barrett 1999: 314). The success of the performance can be measured in the disguise every hints of masculinity in the appearance. For this reason, drag queens rely on heavy make-up, redundant wig, extravagant clothes, fake breasts and pads for a round shape of the hips (1999: 315). However, the true e deep essence of their acts di performance is the representation of a particular gender performance and not the superficial mockery and impression of women (Butler 1990).

The queer identity of those who perform drag is evident in the exposed disunity between performed and true biographical identity (Barrett 1999: 316). Important tools for showing this dichotomy are the unique ways in which drag queens - through language - create and share their reality as a LGBT+ community and thus, as a minority. (Simmons 2013: 631) in this sense, language becomes a way to emphasize their performed femininity on stage and symbolically communicate a shared meaning and identity (p. 632). Drag queens’ identity constantly shifts from one form to another, creating a multivoiced and heteroglossic form of communication that, rather than just imitating the solely female language, is purely connected to the drag queen community and goes beyond the female/male categorization (Barrett 1999: 318). The result is the creation of a unique speech community, new ways of speaking and, a rich, new and creative lexicon representative of the drag queen culture, used and understood within the community.

Being often considered a marginalized group, the concept of family and “sisterhood” is strongly present in the queer and drag queen community (Simmons 2013: 631). In reality as in the tv show RuPaul’s Drag Race, strong feelings of belonging to a minority and mutual support are always stressed. For this reason, terms as “family” and “sisters” are frequent (2013: 641), as well as epithets like “honey” and “sweetie” while referring to one another.

Lakoff (1975) elaborates the concept of “women’s language” (henceforth WL) that enlists nine features exclusive of the female speech, whose main common ground is their association with an “out of power” identity (Labotka 2009: 18). She further hypothesizes that gay men may use these features to distance themselves from the image of power traditionally associated with the male gender (Lakoff 1975: 10). Therefore, while performing in drag, such linguistic features provide an outward feminine attitude that can be often interrupted by a stereotypically masculine voice, evident in the utterance of swears and lower pitch of voice. All these strategies are purposely mixed to create a polyphonous and ambiguous performed identity (Barrett 1999: 320), the core of every drag performance.

This section will be focused on drag queen vocabulary and two out of the nine main linguistic features of Lakoff’s WL theory are taken into consideration, the intensifier “so” and lexical item “like”:

- (1) “[...] I’m in such a state of disbelief right now I have *so* much to offer this competition and the thing that I’m going home right now is beyond me and just didn’t have the opportunity to showcase who I am, I’m *so* happy that I was able to meet these wonderful entertainers, I have no regrets because from every experience you learn from it. I have learned that I can be *so* much more than what I do back home.”¹
- (2) “She’s *like*, she has made that brand her look us together when she first walked in I was *like*, oh hey Brit brand, *like* I fully believe in the method-method of drag but feel *like* because she’s been doing Britney for so long it’s harder for her to break out of that method [...]”²

¹⁻² Both examples are transcription of oral speech in English taken from the video “Untucked: RuPaul’s Drag Race Season 8 - Episode 1 “Keeping It 100!” (Murray) on YouTube; retrieved on the 7th of March 2019. “Untucked” is a companion series that airs immediately after the main series, which includes interviews with contestants often out of drag, all set in a post-competition and backstage narrative (Moore: 8).

The example 1 shows the frequent use of the intensifier “so”, that Lakoff (1975) claims to be representative of a weak intensifier used by women as a rejection of the power to make a strong assertion (Labotka, 2009: 22); the example 2 shows the use of the lexical item “like”, here used as a discourse marker often described as a meaningless particle of discourse. On the contrary - as Lakoff (1975) states - such discourse makers do have a function that can be identified with the framing of the monologue in a conversational and colloquial style, used by the speaker to organize the topics (Labotka 2009: 23).

1.1.3 RuPaul’s Drag Race

The first term of comparison is the corpora created from an episode of the Emmy-winning³ American reality television show “RuPaul’s Drag Race” ideated by the famous African-American drag queen RuPaul. It first aired on 2009 on the Logo network and it includes thirteen contestants from all over the United States that compete both individually and in teams through various challenges, traditional of the drag queen culture: lip-sync, comedy sketch, fashion show etc. Each episode lasts for about 45 minutes and it is structured into three distinct challenges (Moore 2014: 7). Continuity devices are used throughout the series to get a cohesive image of the show, such as the repetition of format of challenges and “of various catch-phrases, mottes and trademark linguistic constructions at specific points of the show.” (2014: 8). Example 3 shows the catchphrase used by the host of the show RuPaul at the beginning of each episode, example 4 is typical expression directed to the losing contestant who must leave the competition, while example 5 is referred to the contestant who won the final challenge:

- (3) “Gentlemen, start your engines, and may the best woman...win!”
- (4) “Sashay away”
- (5) “Shantay, you stay”

The popularity of this format is surely connected with its unicity - being the first one of its kind - and its high level of entertainment (Simmons 2013: 633). Thanks to its success, the reality show became a queer cultural phenomenon that provided a strong public visibility and marketability at unprecedented levels (Schottmiller 2018: 1) and started a process of spreading of drag culture and history among a broad audience, introducing

³ The Emmy Awards recognize excellence within various areas of television and emerging media. Starting from 2016, RuPaul’s Drag Race won nine Emmy Awards. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1353056/awards> (13th March 2019)

drag slang in pop culture. This vernacular has been absorbed very quickly, especially on the internet (Pandell).

1.2 Beauty gurus

The second term of comparison is the language used by the so-called beauty gurus in make-up tutorials and reviews of beauty products. Beauty gurus can be either professional or amateur make-up artists that gained popularity and success on the internet, especially on YouTube. As Riboni (2017: 191) correctly states: “‘Gurus’ are content creators who are particularly authoritative in a specific field, have a considerable follower base thanks to their expertise and are often paid by brands in order to promote their products.” Their popularity depends on various factors - often unpredictable - such as their talent, charisma, technical quality of their videos, and ability in building virtual connections with the audience (2017: 191). Their main activity on YouTube and object of our analysis are make-up tutorials and product reviews that often mix elements of how-to video and vlogging⁴. One indicator of success of a video is usually the well-balanced mixture of informative and entertaining content: beauty gurus’ strategies to gain a high number of views are, in fact, the use of catchy titles, challenges with other youtubers, interaction with the audience, honesty, transparency in the product reviews and, a formulaic language (cf. Riboni 2017: 190-192).

1.2.1 The language of beauty gurus

The terms make-up tutorial and reviews, seems to indicate a genre with a mainly educational and informative content, however, as regards beauty gurus, this is not quite the case. (cf. Riboni 2017: 193) As previously mentioned, their success is linked to entertainment factors that enables them to build a strong image, gain millions of followers and potentially partnership and collaborations with make-up brands. To achieve such aim, they often exploit new and creative linguistic strategies. Their tutorials are realized following a fixed and recognizable sequences of steps, from the greetings, to the conclusion (2017: 193). Many beauty gurus use formulaic expressions to be immediately recognizable among the many other youtubers and they can eventually become a proper

⁴ Vlog: “a video blog: a record of your thoughts, opinions, or experiences that you film and publish on the internet”. Definition of “vlog” from the Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary & Thesaurus Cambridge University Press (March 14th 2019).

trademark of signature. Example 5, 6 and 7 illustrate ritual greeting of famous beauty gurus that characterise the beginning of every video:

- (6) “What's up everybody welcome back to my channel! Hi, how are ya?” (Star)
- (7) “Hi sisters, James Charles here and welcome back to my YouTube channel”
(Charles)
- (8) “Hello guys, it's me Nikki” (de Jager)

The register is highly informal and colloquial, the conversational features are typical of face-to-face interaction in order to build a friendly relationship with the viewers. Formulaic expressions of this kind are also used throughout the video and at the very end (cf. Riboni 2017: 196).

1.3 Comparing the two corpora

This paper analyses the influence of drag queens' language on beauty gurus' vocabulary by comparing two corpora using the software AntConc, “a freeware corpus analysis toolkit for concordancing and text analysis” developed by Laurence Anthony. The first corpus contains 50 transcripts of randomly selected videos of make-up tutorials or reviews taken from YouTube. The transcripts are all in the English language, dated between 2015 and 2019 and belonging to ten different beauty gurus from the categories of “beauty” and “how to & style” of the website Socialblade⁵. The comparative analysis is made with a smaller corpus used as keyword list and created with a transcript of the episode 1 “Keeping it 100!” of the series “Untucked” of RuPaul's Drag Race season 8 (2016) taken from YouTube. Furthermore, a glossary of 15 words exclusively from drag queen lexicon was used as word list reference. Table 1 shows the list of beauty gurus, whose selection has been made taking as parameter the number of subscribers of at least 1 million and a mixing different ethnicities and genders.

⁵ Social Blade is a website that tracks social media statistics and analytics. <https://socialblade.com/> (16th March 2019)

Name	Uploads	Subscribers	Views	Country	Gender
Jeffreestar	330	13,564,304	1,465,121,975	US	Male
Jaclyn Hill	332	5,823,578	485,705,317	US	Female
James Charles	207	14,970,703	1,273,761,946	US	Male
NikkieTutorials	711	11,674,214	1,010,137,267	NL	Female
Jackie Aina	832	2,957,189	245,728,505	US (African American)	Female
PatrickStarr	314	4,295,588	289,199,156	US (Philippines)	Male
Bretman Rock	81	5,048,330	240,040,441	US (Philippines)	Male
Alissa Ashley	204	1,855,043	79,472,214	US (African American)	Female
Manny MUA	382	4,884,084	444,190,804	US	Male
Nikita Dragun	84	2,079,223	118,510,298	US (Southeast Asian/Mexican)	Female transgender

Table 1: list of beauty gurus selected for the analysis.

1.3.1 Vocabulary

After collecting all the material, the seven more salient keywords taken from the transcription of the episode “Untucked” have been selected and compared to the beauty gurus’ corpus as regards concordance hits and clusters, considering the results from a qualitative perspective. Their specific and exact meanings have been checked with a glossary of drag terms.

“Bam”: int. an interjection or exclamation of excitement. Has an overall of 12 concordance hits and from a qualitative point of view concordance hits show that this interjection is used exactly as in drag queen lexicon:

(9) “I’m gonna go back in with this color, *bam* and it’s like a very light [...]”

(10) “Alright y’all now for that holiday glow *bam* come on Rudolph and, you got nothing on me [...]”

“Bitch”: n. A fierce woman. A friend. Used as a term of endearment among drag queens.

(11) “[it] is working, yes *bitch* at least highlight words *bitch* and I’ll be using this morphe brush”

(12) “a little more setting spray because I’m just that *bitch*, alright [...]”

In these two examples, it is evident how the derogative term has lost its negative meaning, but rather it gained a new and endearing one.

“Sick/sickening”: adj. Incredibly amazing; excessively hot.

(13) “you may not want the metal [shade] but this is *sickening*. Alright, now [...]

(14) “look at the left brow [it] is pretty *sickening* I'm not gonna lie”

“To serve”: v. to present oneself in a certain way.

(15) “I'll see you guys in a few minutes or hours *servin* you fish glamour”

“To slay”: v. To be on point, to win, to be outstanding, or to be the best.

(16) “[I'll be] showing you how to get this holiday look how to *slay* a face”

(17) “[...] fake freckles and no lashes and just nice and *slayed* brows”

“Sister”: n. endeavouring term often used to address other drag queens.

(18) “This video's ‘Shishter Shoutout’ goes to *sister* Donna. Thank you so much for [...]

(19) “[it]'s just awesome so a big *sister* shoutout to *sister* James and a big congratulations [...]

“Tea”: n. A back-formation from the letter T for “truth”; refers to gossip, news, information, or true facts, e.g., “What’s the tea?”

(20) “Honey we're all waiting, *what's the tea* give us an update”

(21) “I'm pleasantly shocked by it so *tea*, I honestly don't see a single pore”

A further example that demonstrate the influence of drag queen’s language and in particular of RuPaul’s tv show, is the high number of mentions of drag queen make up and reference to the reality show; the examples 22 and 23 are concordance hits, in which the youtuber explicitly express admiration and influence from the drag queen world, not only for what concerns make-up techniques. Analysing the clusters on the right of the word “drag” with a minimum of 3 word, the first cluster ranked by frequency is “RuPaul’s Drag”

(22) I love a *drag* and you guys love *drag*, and I think *drag* is just an art form”

(23) “It is just so amazing, and the art of *drag* has inspired me so much throughout being a person”

1.3.2 Lexical items

As previously mentioned, Lakoff's in her "Language and Woman's Place" (1975) elaborates the theory of "women's language", whose feature are unique of women's speech and strictly linked to the idea of lack of power (Labotka, 2009: 19) and has been applied to the language used by drag queens to impersonate the stereotypical middle-class white woman (Barrett 1999). This section will be focused on analysing lexical items that have been considered by Lakoff as empty and meaningless particles of discourse.

Empty and meaningless adjectives, such as "cute" and "nice" are frequently present in the corpus of beauty gurus. The adj. *cute* has it is mostly located in cluster with intensifier as "kind of" "really really" and "so".

(24) "[...] which I thought was super *cute* and then on the inside there is a clear plastic [...]"

(25) "Alright, so far we're giving you a really *cute* but very subtle look [...]"

The adj. "nice" is often preceded by similar intensifier, same as for the adj. "cute". What is peculiar of this adj., is its location in clusters of two adjectives connected with the conjunction "and": "nice and blended", "nice and easy" "nice and light" etc.⁶

The interjections of surprise and shock "oh my god" - here considered as a meaningless particle of discourse – is used as a surprise and excitement exclamation as in example 26:

(26) "[I am] gonna go ahead and use my concealer from L'Oreal, *oh my god* already better"

The idiom "you know" organises the sentence and gives structure to the thought of the speaker. It is in fact common in informal and oral speech and frequent in this corpus, since all the material is taken from video tutorial and reviews, a non-scripted oral and improvised speech.

(27) "they look really nice, you can always get like, *you know* a pair like this"

(28) "I'm just gonna keep on moving forward because *you know*, at the end of the day [...]"

⁶ Anthony, L. (2019). AntConc (Version 3.5.8) [Windows]. Tokyo, Japan: Waseda University. Available from <http://www.laurenceanthony.net/software>

it is evident in this paragraph that these elements, contrary to what Lakoff states, do have the function (Labotka 2009: 23) of engagement markers, defined by Hyland (2001) as: “metadiscursive elements which explicitly address readers, either by selectively focusing their attention or by including them as participants in the text”. The speaker uses them to organise conversational segments, to make the monologue easier to follow and comprehend and more importantly to involve the viewer and grab their attention.

1.3.3 The creative use of personal pronouns

Among the engagement markers previously analysed, the usage of personal pronouns in new creative is highly present in the corpus. The aim is to grab and maintain the viewer’s attention focused during the make-up application. In the example 29, the 1st person plural pronoun “we” is used to include the audience in the action as in a face-to-face conversation:

(29) “So, before *we* actually go into the makeup routine today, let’s go ahead and talk about the actual product itself”

(30) “[...] and *we* are here back with the powder, again can *we* admire the packaging right now”

Another method to make the audience feel involved in the video, is to refer to them with epithets like “honey” or “girl”, traditionally used by drag queen and more broadly LGBT+ community while addressing fellow members. The noun “honey” has the highest frequency rate with the noun “look”, specifically with the cluster “the look honey”. In sentences like Example 31 and 31, the epithet seems to be directed to an imaginary audience member present in the room and to give emphasis to the sentence:

(31) “[...] just that’s not the look *honey*, it’s not the look.”

(32) “Betsy sent me this shade and, *honey* it’s looking a little on dark for the concealer [...]”

The use of the female singular pronoun “she” for indicating inanimate object and beauty products can be considered as a consequent translation of its original presence and function in the drag queen language. In fact, one of the many linguistic manifestations linked to the performance of drag queen is the female pronouns when referring to other queens (Barrett 1999: 318). Beauty gurus adopted this method, using the general “she” while referring to object with the result of giving feminine personalities to make-up products or part of their body (usually the face), as drag queens do with themselves.

- (33) “I feel like my skin looks so nice, really cute oh my god it’s so good, who is *she*? *She* looks so naturally good”
- (34) “I kind of think I like ‘Sugar High’, *she*’s kind of cute”

In Example 33 the speaker is referring to his skin after applying a highlighting powder on their cheekbones, in Example 34 the speaker is referring to the name of an eyeshadow from a palette, while reviewing it.

Conclusion: can we talk about cultural appropriation?

As Simmons (2013) states: “Marginalized groups as drag queens have unique ways of using language to create a shared reality”. Their language offers in fact, an insightful view of cultural ideologies, racial discrimination, and eradication of traditional gender roles. Their special way of speaking originates from a complex relationship between linguistic forms and different identities (cf. Barrett 1999: 318). Such linguistic forms can be switched during a performance from one register and speaking style to another; for instance, African American drag queens often use the African American English to go back to their male persona (1999: 321). Even though the concepts of performance and entertainment play a fundamental role in their existence, drag queens have deeply contributed to the queer community through actions for social justice against homophobia and racism. (Simmons 2013: 631). Their language has a strong connotation in the LGBT+ community and the risk of cultural appropriation can occur when it is used as an instrument decontextualized and emptied of its true meaning. In this sense, cultural appropriation becomes problematic, because the culture of a minority - often subject of social discriminations – becomes just a mere symbol of trendiness. Can the appropriation of drag queen slang by beauty gurus and non queer people be considered an issue?

It must be also taken into consideration the huge success of the reality tv show RuPaul’s Drag Race, which significantly helped drag queen culture to widespread and educate the mainstream pop culture. Being gender fluid and deconstructing the traditional gender roles become more accepted, especially among young generations, who rely on the internet as a source of inspiration. (Pandell) In fact, the tv show started many linguistic trends that boomed online and became common vocabulary of cisgender women and men, regardless of their ethnicity and sexuality. Therefore, it seems that the world and culture

of drag queen has become part of the pop culture and the process of linguistic influence and acquisition is inevitable, especially due to the internet.

The reasons why it particularly influenced the beauty gurus' language can be the topic of speculations for further researches. Surely, drag queens have always been source of inspiration for make-up methods of application and look transformations and those trends spread intensely among make-up artists on YouTube, who absorbed their techniques and eventually, their language. **(4426 words)**

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