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## **GENDER-RELATED DIFFERENCES IN THE LANGUAGE OF MAGAZINE ADVERTISEMENTS TARGETING MEN AND WOMEN IN SERBIA**

The present study explores the idea of gender-related differences in language use with a focus on the language of magazine advertisements. The aim of the study was to test whether the differences noted to discriminate ways in which men and women perceive linguistic messages presented to them in the form of written texts affect the choice of lexis in magazine advertisements targeting their intended consumer by gender. For this purpose, a linguistic analysis of sample advertisements was conducted at two levels: the first relating to the frequency of specific parts of speech and the second referring to semantic properties of the related words. As expected, the obtained results suggest that the proposed differences are reflected in linguistic choices of sample advertisements at both levels of analysis with an aim of achieving greater persuasive power of the language of magazine advertisements.

*Keywords:* gender differences, language perception, language of advertising, information processing, magazine advertisements.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

101

One of the major lines of investigation in the field of sociolinguistics is the relationship of gender and language. Scientific interest in the area is not of a recent date as some of the earliest accounts of linguistic gender differentiation date back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Linguistic variations found to be affected by gender refer to the presence of lexical, phonological and morphological forms in language use (Trudgill, 2000). The most thoroughly explored proposition under the scope of language and gender is that language and the way in which it is used may differ depending on the gender of the speaker. The observed differences between male and female speakers relate to distinct communicative styles men and women have been found to adopt in general (Newman et al, 2008; Argamon et al, 2003; Lakoff, 1975). A related sociolinguistic suggestion, which has not received as much attention, includes linguistic variations depending on the gender of the message recipient. Under this approach, gender-related differences may be identified in linguistic choices made to address male and female audiences, with regard to the communicative intention of the sender and/or the expected response of the recipient (Mayer & Tormala, 2010). The proposed differences appear to be a result of distinct ways in which men and women process and perceive linguistic information (Skeehan, 2013).

Apart from purely linguistic, gender-related differences in language use may be investigated and exploited for a number of reasons, including those to deliver economic gain. Product suppliers and service providers in the global marketplace appear to be well aware of demographic differences of their prospective consumers and the ways in which these specific characteristics can be exploited to achieve higher profits. In the same vein, gender-based market segmentation is one of the easy avenues to boost sales. In their attempts to provoke a particular behavioral response of the consumer, advertisers employ a whole range of devices they find most appealing to the targeted gender. These, among others, include linguistic ones, as spoken and written language remain to be one of the dominant forms of marketing communication despite the fact that technological development has brought about a number of more

recent formats of consumer interaction (Cheng, Chandramouli & Subbalakshmi, 2010). While different advertising techniques have been extensively investigated by marketers with an aim of identifying successful strategies to approach distinct consumer groups, applied linguists have simultaneously developed their interest in the specifics of the language of advertising. The discourse of advertising has gained considerable attention among linguists due to its common occurrence in everyday life and its undeniable effect on peoples' behavior. So, as gender established itself as an independent variable in the sociolinguistics of speech, research into gendered language has found its place in the field of advertising.

Bearing in mind that the scope of the study of the discourse of advertising is rather broad, the focus of the paper is limited to one aspect of verbal advertising, which is the language of magazine advertisements targeting men and women. The language used in magazine advertisements is looked into so as to reveal possible gender differences in addressing male and female consumers, as well as to test whether these potential differences are in line with the proposed features of how men and women both process and perceive information presented to them in the form of written text.

## 2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### 2.1. Advertising communication: Challenges and responses

Most people would say that they pay little or no attention to advertising messages and that the overwhelming use of different forms of advertisements is more likely to annoy them than provoke an interest. Even so, advertising communication depends on complex processes that go far beyond the notion of advertisements as simple messages for the simple-minded (Goddard, 1998). In other words, any advertising message may be viewed as using a number of linguistic, visual and/or audio elements, depending on the medium, which, in turn, requires creative and subtle readings from their target audience. As advertising communication continues to heavily rely on messages presented in the form of spoken or written text, the language of advertising messages is carefully planned and delivered in order to affect consumer behavior in an intended way.

The word 'advertisement' was derived from the Latin verb 'advertere', which means 'to turn towards' and, accordingly, one of the main functions of advertising is to draw attention to a certain product or service (Goddard, 1998). Apart from getting the audience's attention, advertising messages also need to be informative and persuasive, as they are created with a specific communicative intention which, in most cases, is to provoke a particular behavioral response of the target audience i.e. to make the purchasing decision (Silaški, 2009). These basic functions of advertising serve as guidelines for advertisers when deciding on the visual and verbal elements to be included in the deliverable. However, advertisers also face the challenge of temporal and spatial constraints as their messages need to be economical in terms of the space they occupy and time needed to read them. This is why advertising messages are commonly viewed as typical examples of loaded language, as they have to reach the targeted consumer group, provide sufficient information and affect consumer behaviour in an intended way, while all of this is to be achieved in a limited time and space span.

Another thing important to note is that the act of advertising communication does not impose a static role on members of the audience as passive recipients of the message, since they bring their own worldviews and experiences to the message and create meaning from it (Skeehan, 2013). This results in a considerable range of potential readings depending on a number of reader-specific variables such as gender, social status, age or ethnicity. Even though advertisers manipulate different meanings and ideas, which are not always fixed or uniform for all readers, similar readings are expected within a defined consumer group based on the assumption that group members have a sufficient number of the required criteria in common to respond to their message similarly.

Despite the fact that advertising messages incorporated in short texts are not long-lived, they produce cumulative, long-term effects in the sense that they gradually build up a body of messages

revealing of the culture in which they originated (Goddard, 1998). In their attempts to affect consumer behaviour, advertisers typically promise to satisfy different consumer needs that mirror accepted social values and beliefs. This effect of mirroring is somewhat implied in the concept of advertising messages because they need to relate to certain aspects of everyday life in order to be relevant to the consumer. On the other hand, in market conditions where almost every market segment is highly saturated, it is no longer enough to offer fulfillment of consumer needs through purchase. It has become an imperative to create new needs which are to be successfully met through more spending. In effect, advertising messages not only reflect the norms and values of a given culture, but simultaneously construct them. To achieve such a powerful double effect, advertisers rely on a number of persuasive strategies including linguistic ones. As different audiences vary considerably in what appeals to them best, the words chosen to describe a product or service also vary depending on a defined consumer group.

## 2.2. Gender-based differences in processing and perception of advertising messages

It was noted in the introductory paragraphs that there is a scientifically proven tendency of men and women to use language differently (e.g., Newman et al, 2008; Mehl & Pennebaker, 2003). However interesting and controversial the findings of research on differences between genders in language *production* may be, they unrightfully outnumber studies on differences in language *perception*. As the latter set of distinctions is by far more relevant to linguistic variations depending on the gender of the message recipient, the specifics of language processing and perception of both males and females will be addressed in more detail. Also, in line with the general framework of the paper, the noted distinctions are discussed from the viewpoint of advertising language.

In addition to different ways in which male and female speakers use language, men and women also differ in the way they process and evaluate linguistic information (Skeehan, 2013). The related difference in approach men and women take when processing information is significant because it affects the overall perceived meaning of the message they are presented with. When developing meaning from the message, men tend to focus directly on the primary meaning, while women take a more elaborate approach in that they evaluate the message from many different angles to infer a more complex and intuitive meaning from the information available. In more concrete terms, men are inclined to focus on the most evident and overt meaning of the advertising message (e.g. 'buy this product'), whereas women tend to derive a more complex meaning based on more subtle cues (e.g. 'buy this product and you will be more efficient, trendy, prepared, elegant, etc.').

Gender-related differences in information processing are supported by the sociological theory of the selectivity model, suggesting that women are more comprehensive in picking up multiple cues while men tend to be more selective in the process, often relying on a single cue instead of getting engaged in a more detailed and comprehensive kind of processing (Meyers-Levy & Maheswaran, 1991). This makes men more efficient in making purchasing decisions, as they need less time to process and evaluate advertising messages. On the other hand, women process and evaluate information provided by advertisers in a more time-consuming manner, as they tend to take notice of more details and only then decide on the possibility of purchase.

Also, gender has been found to affect how both individual sentences and whole texts of varying length are perceived by men and women (Von Neuform, 2007). In this respect, females are more favorably oriented toward sentences and texts of greater length, while men tend to prefer shorter ones. The reasoning behind this distinction is that females' appreciation of longer stretches of spoken and written language is rooted in their perception of shorter samples as being produced hastily and with a lack of care. On the other hand, men find longer stretches being unreasonably lengthy and prefer messages delivered in a more precise, economical and goal-oriented way.

In the same line, propositions have been made that simple and direct advertising messages are more likely to affect male consumers, in contrast with females, who prefer more elaborate verbal descriptions of products (Putrevu et al, 2001). Related research results imply that there is also a difference in how gender affects perception of advertising messages depending on the focus of information pro-

vided by advertisers. It is believed that men are more responsive to advertisements that place greater emphasis on product characteristics, in marked contrast with women, who tend to be more positively oriented toward advertising messages the focus of which is on user benefits associated with a product (Meyers-Levy, 1989).

Similarly, it has been suggested that men and women respond differently to advertising messages with regard to their objectivity of presentation and description of a given product (Darley and Smith, 1995). Along these lines, men and women have been found to differ in their perception of advertising messages that include objective claims providing factual information, on the one hand, and those conveying information susceptible to individual interpretation, on the other. Objective claims would be those referring to tangible characteristics of a product and subjective ones would include those denoting intangible properties that are not subject to physical inspection. Under this view, men are expected to be more influenced by advertisements containing objective information, whereas women are believed to be more affected by advertising messages depicting qualities and ideas that are subjective and appealing to emotions.

Finally, the language used in advertising messages can be broadly categorised as either having a cognitive or an affective character (Mayer & Tormala, 2010). Advertising messages that are considered cognitive in nature generally use a more rational language style, which contains references to the product itself and its most competitive attributes. Conversely, advertisements constructed by means of language that is figurative and appealing to emotions are considered affective. Cognitively framed advertising messages are constructed around the 'think' context and depend on the use of a more 'report' oriented language style that is informative whereas messages in an affective text framework are composed within the 'feel' context and by the means of more expressive language that is 'rapport' oriented. In terms of what kind of language is believed to be more appealing to each of the genders, it has been found that women tend to respond more favorably to affectively framed messages and that men are more likely to react positively to messages framed in a cognitive context (Mayer & Tormala, 2010).

### 3. METHOD

The corpus of the study included advertisements collected from six magazines available at newssstands in Serbia. Three of the chosen magazines are aimed at a female readership and three of them target males as their prospective consumers. The number of the magazines that served as primary material for the study was affected by the fact that there are substantially more formats of this kind targeting women than men on the Serbian market. Since only three editions addressing a male readership were found (*Men's Health*, *Esquire* and *Playboy*), the choice was made to include the same number of magazines addressing females (*Lepota i zdravlje*, *Lepa i srećna* and *Cosmopolitan*). Also, as many magazine advertisements are composed of images only, for the purpose of the research it was necessary to single out the advertisements containing written text.

In total, 30 magazine advertisements were analyzed, 15 of which are addressing a female readership and 15 male. Both a quantitative and a qualitative analysis were conducted, the former in terms of the number of words belonging to different parts of speech and the latter with regard to semantic properties of the words.

### 4. RESULTS

In 30 magazine advertisements analyzed, a total of 516 words from women's magazines and 335 words from men's magazines were included in the research. The difference in word count between the two groups of advertisements was expected as the proposed gender differences in information processing suggest that women are more comprehensive in their processing, pay more attention to detail and are more responsive to longer and more elaborate texts.



Results presented in Table 1 show the quantity of words included in the study by parts of speech. Because of the difference in total word count between advertisements targeting men and women, the results are given in percentage points:

Table 1 – The quantity of words by parts of speech

	Nouns	Adjectives	Verbs	Int. Adverbs
<b>Adverts targeting women</b>	53%	22%	21%	4%
<b>Adverts targeting men</b>	53%	29%	16%	2%

The study results suggest that the number of nouns used in magazine advertisements addressing men and women is approximately the same due to the fact that most advertisements focus on the product being advertised and the ingredients or components it is made of. However, advertisers also frequently use nouns to create associations between certain concepts generally recognized as positive and alluring and the product or service on offer. A number of abstract nouns are typically exploited this way (e.g. '*elegancija*', '*samopouzdanje*', '*nega*', '*sloboda*', '*svežina*', etc.). Because of the necessity for the advertisement to be informative and appealing, the observed extent of noun use was expected.

An insight into the number of adjectives shows that a greater portion of this part of speech is included in advertisements targeting males. This can be explained by the fact that men tend to be more focused on product characteristics and, as adjectives are typically used to denote qualities, the obtained result was expected. Similarly, women's greater interest in the effect a given product will have is reflected in a higher frequency of verbs found in female advertisements. This result is also in line with the proposed gender differences dealt with in the theoretical section suggesting that women are more responsive to advertisements that focus on user benefits. Accordingly, verbs such as '*pomaže*', '*olakšava*', '*umanjuje*', '*deluje*', etc. were used to emphasize product usefulness and effectiveness.

In the same vein, an overview of the use of intensifier adverbs revealed that magazine advertisements addressing female consumers contained more of this type of adverbs than it is the case in advertisements targeting males. Given that intensifier adverbs are commonly used to appeal to emotions and signal emotional involvement, their higher frequency in advertisements aimed at females is in line with the proposed preference of women toward messages constructed in the 'feel' context, using language that is emotionally expressive.

At the level of qualitative analysis, it was expected that advertisers targeting women would use nouns denoting concepts and ideas generally found to be more frequently associated with women and femininity. It is also typical for such nouns to be considered to belong to affective, emotional contexts. This was confirmed by the study results for advertisements addressing this group of consumers included words such as '*zaštita*', '*osećaj*', '*hidratacija*', '*volumen*', '*nega*', etc. In more concrete terms, advertisers manipulate cultural assumptions that women are emotional and gentle and, hence, need and expect to be protected and taken care of. By the use of nouns like '*zaštita*' and '*nega*', it is suggested that, through purchase, women will receive the kind of treatment they desire. Similarly, females are commonly believed to appreciate the soft and smooth feel of things and are, accordingly, approached with nouns like '*osećaj*' and '*hidratacija*', which are used to convey the advertiser's promise that consumers will experience pleasant sensations when using a given product. A number of similar examples were found: '*tekstura*', '*čula*', '*note*', '*tonus*' and others.

Following the same line of reasoning, advertising messages aiming at men were assumed to contain nouns referring to objects and ideas believed to fit into cognitive, more rational language styles and/or carry connotations of masculinity. The study results met these expectations as the wording of advertisements targeting males was composed of nouns such as '*snaga*', '*brzina*', '*performanse*', '*istraj-*

*nost*', '*avanturista*', etc. Unlike women, men are not expected to be influenced by emotional, 'rapport' oriented language style, but are more inclined to positively respond to words referring to physically observable objects and occurrences. In this light, nouns like '*snaga*', '*brzina*' and '*istrajnost*' denote concepts that can be detected and measured by relying on cognition rather than emotions. In addition, the given nouns not only belong to the rational context, but are closely associated with general ideas of masculinity, as is the case with nouns such as '*avanturista*' and '*performanse*'. Other examples include words like '*komponente*', '*superiornost*', '*nadmoć*', '*sigurnost*' and the like.

Another linguistic difference found to discriminate the language of advertisements addressing males and females refers to the choice of adjectives. In terms of their semantic properties, the identified adjectives may be defined as either objective, i.e. neutral adjectives, or subjective and emotionally laden ones. Neutral adjectives are those making references to non-subjective, widely recognized attributes of people and things, whereas adjectives denoting qualities that are open to individual interpretation and indicative of an emotional stand are referred to as non-neutral or subjective. The qualitative analysis found indices of this sort of language differentiation, as advertisements in women's magazines contained words like '*prefinjen*', '*dubinska*', '*kosmopolitski*', '*blistav*', and the like. It is difficult to define any of the given adjectives in precise and concrete terms in the sense that perception of a person or thing as cosmopolitan or sophisticated is highly dependant on a number of variables. Also, there is a question of relevance of someone or something being described as '*blistav*' or '*dubinska*' as the given attributes almost never contribute to better understanding of people or things. The adjectives in question solely reveal a subjective perception and not an objective quality. Other similar examples found are: '*čaroban*', '*slasna*', '*senzualan*', '*dragoceni*' and the like.

On the other hand, advertisements collected from men's magazines included adjectives like '*samouveren*', '*slobodan*', '*dinamičan*', '*urban*' and others. The meaning and perception of such attributes are rooted in the physical world and, therefore, are not subject to individual interpretation and are, unlike subjective adjectives, more easily defined and understood. In addition, the dynamics or freedom of someone or something is generally considered more relevant than their level of sophistication. Similar examples found in the same set of samples are: '*pouzdan*', '*brz*', '*kompaktan*' and others. Also, the given examples are commonly associated with the traditional attributes of masculinity, just as the example adjectives from the female set of samples are in line with the widespread understanding of women and femininity. Finally, as suggested by the relevant literature, neutral adjectives figured in advertisements targeting both females and males, while those commonly referred to as women's adjectives appeared in magazines addressing females only.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The results of the study indicate that linguistic features of magazine advertisements differ depending on the gender of the intended consumer. As suggested in the previous section, advertisements addressing a female readership in comparison to those targeting males, include more verbs and intensifier adverbs, which is in accordance with the expected results. The higher frequency of verbs in advertisements addressing female consumers is associated with the tendency of women to appreciate advertising messages with a focus on user benefits. The identified difference reflects the way in which women perceive information and make decisions, as the emphasis on 'what a given product does' to achieve the promised results works as a persuasion strategy. Similarly, a more extensive use of intensifiers in the same set of sample advertisements is in line with the female preference for affectively framed messages. Accordingly, this appreciation of emotional expressivity in language is reflected in the widespread use of intensifier adverbs in advertisements targeting women. Also, the observed difference in the number of adjectives is in line with the male inclination to place great importance on product characteristics when making a purchasing decision.

In terms of qualitative analysis, the differences observed at the level of semantic properties of nouns and adjectives are also in line with the proposed differences in language perception. The related theory suggests that women tend to respond more favorably to words which belong to the 'feel' context and carry connotations of femininity. This was confirmed by the study results, as nouns and adjectives that appear in female magazine advertisements mostly included words such as 'lepota', 'elastičnost', 'osvežena', 'hidrirana', which are all commonly related to the shape and condition of the female body and skin. At this point, it should be noted that most of the products advertised in women's magazines are those used for cosmetic, sanitary and dieting purposes. Also, men's magazines mostly feature advertisements for cars, watches or sports equipment and, therefore, promotional messages for these product categories contain words denoting their technological attributes and advantages such as 'brzina', 'superioran', 'kompaktan' and the like. It is possible that the differences identified were so clear-cut because of the nature of the content included in magazines that target one specific gender as their intended audience. In this light, it is open to speculation whether a woman would be intrigued to purchase a car described as having qualities such as 'blistav' and 'kosmopolitski' or user benefits such as 'olakšava' or 'čini da se osećate'.

## 6. CONCLUSION

It has been suggested throughout the paper that a gender-based differentiation of language use has provoked considerable interest in the field of social sciences. However, there are numerous studies on gender differences investigating distinctive characteristics of the language used by male and female speakers, but there is a conspicuous lack of research on the language used to communicate with men and women. The aim of the study was to explore the idea of linguistic differences in the language used to communicate advertising messages to consumers of different gender. As expected, gender-related differences were found to exist in the language of sample advertisements. The gender of the targeted consumer was found to affect the frequency of specific parts of speech, as well as the choice of words with regard to their semantic properties.

Even though it is common knowledge that individual perception of and reaction to different propositions may vary depending on the way they are linguistically put, it is interesting to speculate how susceptible individuals may be to, at times, unreasonable ideas if approached in a carefully planned way. In combination with other social pressures, advertising messages not only promise to fulfill people's needs but they also create them. The noted effect is achieved by means of persuasive language that manipulates attitudes and behavior to the extent that there are numerous men and women who believe that their confidence lies in a pair of red-soled shoes or a fast car.

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## РОДНЕ РАЗЛИКЕ У ЈЕЗИКУ РЕКЛАМНИХ ОГЛАСА У ЧАСОПИСИМА ЗА МУШКАРЦЕ И ЖЕНЕ У СРБИЈИ

### Резиме

У раду се разматра идеја о родним разликама у језику са посебним освртом на језик рекламних огласа у часописима. Циљ рада је био да се ближе упознају различити начини на које жене и мушкарци обрађују и перципирају језичке поруке, као и да се провери да ли се уочене разлике пресликавају на језик рекламних огласа у часописима који за циљну групу имају жене, односно, мушкарце. У наведене сврхе, лингвистичка анализа 30 рекламних огласа прикупљених из женских и мушких часописа спроведена је на два нивоа: на првом је мерена учесталост одређених врста речи док су на другом нивоу анализе испитивана семантичка својства датих речи. Резултати истраживања указују на то да родне разлике постоје у језику анализираних рекламних огласа. Као што је било и очекивано, наведене разлике уочене су и на нивоу учесталости одабраних врста речи, као и на квалитативном нивоу анализе. Рад пружа увид у начине на које се састављају рекламне поруке у часописима, док је посебан акценат стављен на језичке манипулације у смислу одабира тачно одређених речи са циљем да се постигне што већа персуазивна моћ рекламних порука упућених одабраној групи потрошача.

*Кључне речи* : родне разлике, перцепција језика, језик реклама, обрада информација, рекламни огласи у часописима

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