

**“DIS IS SCHUBERT, TOUGH GUY”:
LINGUISTIC CONSTRUCTION OF MASCULINITIES IN A MICROSOFT AD**

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Abstract: In this paper I analyze how an ad for Microsoft Composer Collection represents physical and technical masculinities through constructed speech in contrastive linguistic styles. These linguistic varieties link to our consensual knowledge about gender stereotypes. The ad pictures a menacing white biker guy who is also stylized through tough, working-class talk. As the narrative voice of the ad, he extols Microsoft’s classical music software. He style-shifts between working-class talk and a highly educated, even arcane, techno-geek talk. I consider Eckert & McConnell-Ginet’s suggestion that technical masculinity and physical masculinity are disjunct, Kiesling’s claim that different forms of masculinity compete with each other, and Smith’s claim that advertising is increasingly using ironic humor aimed at young males to reinforce traditional notions of masculinity. The ad plays with our beliefs about how linguistic forms depict types of masculinities, but also manipulates linguistic variation to reify masculine stereotypes.

1. Introduction

In this paper I consider a magazine advertisement for Microsoft Multimedia Composer Collection (Microsoft, 1994) in which linguistic caricatures are constructed to represent two forms of masculinity, which are contrasted in order to sell the product. I will show how the ad makes use of two recognizable, if exaggerated, linguistic varieties of English and the gender ideologies that are associated with them. The linguistic exaggeration heightens the contrast between two stereotypes of masculinities that are in play in the culture and this incongruity draws attention to the ad. The ad is artful. Some may find it humorous, even ludicrous. Or offensive.

Because linguistic knowledge is easily associable with normative gender practices, and because such knowledge is implicit and supported on a wide scale, it can be successfully exploited in the advertising industry, which thrives on using gender representations to sell products to mass audiences. As skillful language users themselves, ad makers understand that different ways of speaking are tied to different social identities. Pennock-Speck (2005) found that there is a “bias towards the visual” in advertisements (p. 978), but the Microsoft magazine ad is a notable example of how mass media wordsmiths capitalize on consumers’ shared sociolinguistic knowledge and commonplace notions of gender. The linguistic form of the message is the medium here. Sociolinguistic competence and linguistic ideology are resources that are used to sell the product.

* I am grateful to Harold Schiffman and Johan Oberg for locating the ad in *Entertainment Weekly* and in *People* magazine, respectively. Michael McLachlan provided technical assistance. I thank Bryan Gordon, Scott Kiesling, Gilbert Rodman, and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on a prior version of this paper.

IUWPL7: Gender in Language: Classic Questions, New Contexts (2008), edited by Jason F. Siegel, Traci C. Nagle, Amandine Lorente-Lapole, and Julie Auger, pp. 151–160. Bloomington, IN: IULC Publications.

The two-page ad, shown in Figure 1, appeared in 1994 in *Entertainment Weekly* and *People* magazines (and nowhere else, as far as I know).¹ It exploits two linguistic styles, each of which indexes a different version of masculinity and its associated gender ideology. We see an image of macho, heteronormative masculinity in a photo of a somewhat menacing, long-haired, bearded, tattooed, white biker. He's wearing biker regalia, including what seems to be a Harley-Davidson wings logo on his belt. He stands with arms akimbo and looks down at us unsmilingly. His body takes up most of the visual frame on the left page of the ad.

His is the narrative voice of the ad. He is telling us a story about an argument he had in a bar with another man about Schubert's musical style. His black T-shirt and leather vest serve as the background for the text of the story, written in large white letters displayed across his chest and onto the opposing page of the two-page spread. There we find the rest of the ad copy, which appears against a flat background. (The complete text of the ad is transcribed in Figure 2.)

COMPOSER COLLECTION

I'm in dis bar arguin' with dis jerk about Schubert

I sez to him, "The essential Schubertian style is the unfolding of long melodies both brusque and leisurely. That's the blessed earmark Schubert's style and it's all anyone needs to sense his distinctive attitude toward musical structure. Well, in a high girlie voice, the jerk tells me, "By classical standards, it's fairly loose construction. To which I replies, "Dis is Schubert, tough guy; and belaboring him with his musical ancestors is like comparing apples to oranges." And then I decked him.

IF THERE'S TWO THINGS I KNOWS, it's I know how to deck somebody and I love my Schubert. And I know all I know about Schubert cause I got Microsoft® Multimedia Schubert, it's an all-in-one look at Schubert's loose limbbed, jig-trotting, lighty-bubbling, stout Quintet. You'll learn all about Schubert while being accompanied by his loving and inspiring music.

If that ain't enough, it's got a gallery for dem orn-magnific who don't know a scherzo de capo from a relative major. There's even a game to test your Schubert knowledge before I do.

And for the holidays, it comes bundled with Multimedia Beethoven and Multimedia Mozart programs. Some of my buddies prefer the Mozart or Beethoven programs over my Schubert one, but they have no taste.

So if you're likes me, and enjoy gouncing with ferdinand glie on the little subtleties Schubert invented to sidestep the rigid structure of classical sonata form, gets yourself the Microsoft® Composer Collection. And if you ain't likes me and don't likes Schubert, I won't like you.

Microsoft

WHERE DO YOU WANT TO GO TOBERRY?

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Figure 1. An ad for Microsoft Multimedia Composer Collection

The biker begins his story using a spoken genre that we recognize as colloquial, working-class American English. We don't see the other man in the bar, but we can imagine him based on the biker's reconstruction of their conversation. In reporting it, the biker shifts into what sounds like a highly educated speech register that I'll call "music critic talk," which is more characteristic of a formal, bookish, written genre of English than informal conversa-

¹ I first encountered a version of the ad at Schiffman (1999); he labeled the linguistic switches as "register shifting."

tion. It features complex syntax and arcane word choices. This speech style references another type of masculinity, labeled "technical masculinity." The music critic style indexes a different gender ideology, social identity, and normative practices, which maximally contrast with working class, "physical masculinity." Technical masculinity can be associated with effeminacy. Compared to tough guys, geeks and nerds are stigmatized (Bucholtz, 2002).

The biker-narrator is shown to be fluent in both speech registers. He may be mocking the man in the bar when he reports his speech, because evaluation is the primary function of a narrative. But in telling the story, he shifts between an informal working class dialect and the formal, music-critic register, to extol the Microsoft software as the narrative voice for the ad.

I will discuss the linguistic features of these contrastive speech styles in section 4 after a brief discussion about relevant gender ideologies and social identities that are called up by the linguistic material. I will show how the linguistic styles and the associated masculinities that they index are symbols that are exploited, as they are transferred to the Microsoft product in order to sell it.

2. Language and social Discourses about gender

Native speakers learn to associate particular linguistic varieties with certain social groups that have certain characteristics. When speakers "sound" a certain way in a print ad, the ad works if we can associate their style of language with a particular social Discourse.² The two linguistic styles in this ad are performances that recognizably fit with Discourses of physical and technical masculinity. Discourses are

ways of displaying (through words, actions, values, and beliefs) membership in a particular social group or social network (people who will associate with each other around a common set of interests, goals, and activities). The Discourse rewards and sanctions characteristic ways of acting, talking, believing, valuing, and interacting, and in doing so it incorporates a normative or ideal set of mental associations and folk theories, toward which its members more or less converge (Gee, 1992, pp. 107–108).

Kiesling (2006) described Discourses as "the entire interlocking web of practices, ideologies and social structures: a system of understanding and expectation that prefigures which practices and interpretations are available, and how practices and structures are understood" (p. 262). Woolard (1998) noted that "ideologies of language *are not about language alone*. Rather they envision and enact ties of language to identity, to aesthetics, to morality, and to epistemology [*italics added*]" (p. 3).

Discourses of gender and associated language ideologies are the backdrop against which consumers interpret and imaginatively respond to ads. Because the language styles in the Microsoft ad are exaggerations, we can easily conjure up different male personas, with different social characteristics, values, and practices.

² The term "Discourse" (capitalized) refers to social values, practices, and ideologies. The term "discourse" (in lower case) refers to conversation.

3. Ideologies of masculinities

Connell (1987) took the view that there is a hegemonic masculinity, which stands in relation to other masculinities and in ascendance over them: “Hegemonic masculinity is very public” (p. 185). It is embedded in cultural practices and cultural artifacts, such as advertisements, which align with or contest normative hegemonic masculinity. The fact that masculinities and femininities need to be organized on such a large, public scale gives rise to “stylized and impoverished” (p. 183) representations of gender. “The winning of hegemony often involves the creation of models of masculinity which are quite specifically fantasy figures, such as film characters played by Humphrey Bogart, John Wayne, and Sylvester Stallone” (p. 184). Real people, of course, are more complex than stereotypes. But large numbers of people “collaborate in sustaining these images” (p. 185).

Kiesling (2006) furthered the idea that different kinds of masculinity compete with each other for dominance. He claimed that the hierarchy of masculinities “is never clear-cut (nor is it always clear where one ends and another begins)” (p. 207). The same person may simultaneously take on competing masculinities, such as “jock” and “nerd,” even if they are in conflict, which, Kiesling said, they often are. In so doing, a person can appear to be both physically *and* intellectually powerful (p. 270).

Bamberg (2004), Bucholtz (1999), Cameron (1997), Cutler (1999), and Kiesling (2006), among others, have described how compelling hegemonic masculinity is to young males. They described how, in everyday conversation, young men display their conformity with and support for hegemonic masculinity, and how they sanction effeminacy. Although nerd masculinity is stigmatized in relation to hegemonic masculinity, there are work contexts in which it is highly regarded and rewarded (e.g., at a computer company).

Eckert & McConnell-Ginet (2003) discussed the distinction that Connell (1995) elaborated between “technical masculinity,” linked with “technical (scientific and political) power,” and “upper-middle-class males,” and the “physical masculinity” of working-class males (p. 47). They noted that although “the masculine ideal throughout society involves physical power . . . physical power is *fundamental* to working-class masculinity [italics added]” (p. 48). Connell (1995) stated that the relationship between technical masculinity and rationality (in particular, technical reason and the knowledge-based workplace) “sets up tensions within hegemonic masculinity” (p. 181). He claimed that “masculinity organized around direct domination . . . is being challenged by forms organized around technical knowledge” (p. 165). However, according to Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003), “the advent of high tech wealth seems to be *decreasing* the connection between masculinity and physical power, as greater financial power is moving into the hands of those who have notably defined themselves as living by their brains [italics added]” (p. 48).

Working-class speech is associated with hegemonic masculinity because it is associated with toughness, a desirable masculine characteristic (Trudgill, 1995, p. 72). Hegemonic masculinity also indexes heterosexuality and sanctions other sexualities. The overt prestige of school English, or mainstream English, competes with the covert prestige of working-class speech and other non-mainstream vernaculars.

4. The language of the Microsoft ad

The ad exploits consumers' implicit linguistic and cultural knowledge. With ironic effect, the ad socially reconstructs masculine hegemony and works amid the tension it creates between two types of masculinities. In Figure 2, I have reformatted the text from the ad into **Braggadocio** and *Bradley Hand* ITC typefaces as iconic representations of each of the masculine voices, and to assist with imaginatively "hearing" the speech variation.

I'm in dis bar arquin' with dis jerk about Schubert.

I sez to him, "The essential Schubertian style is in the unfolding of long melodies both brusque and leisurely. That's the blessed earmark of Schubert's style and it's all anyone needs to sense his distinctive attitude toward musical structures." **Well, in a high girly voice, the jerk tells me**, "By classical standards, it's fairly loose construction." To which **I replies**, "**Dis is Schubert, tough guy**; and belaboring him with his musical ancestors is like comparing apples to oranges."

And I decked him.

If there's two things I knows, it's I knows how to deck somebody and I knows my Schubert.

And I knows all I knows about Schubert 'cause I got Microsoft® Multimedia Schubert. It's an in-depth look at Schubert's loose-limbed, jog-trotting, lightly-bubbling *Trout Quintet*. You'll learn all about Schubert while being accompanied by his loving and ingratiating music.

If that ain't enough, it's got a glossary **for dem cro-magnons [sic] who don't knows** a scherzo de [sic] *capo*³ from relative major. There's even a game to test your Schubert knowledge before I do.

And for the holidays, it comes bundled with *Multimedia Beethoven* and *Multimedia Mozart* programs. Some of my **buddies** prefer the Mozart or Beethoven programs over my Schubert one, but they have no taste.

So if you're likes me, and enjoy pouncing with fiendish glee on the little subterfuges Schubert invented to sidestep the rigid structure of classical sonata form, **gets yourself the Microsoft Composer Collection. And if you ain't likes me and don't likes Schubert, I won't likes you.**

Figure 2. Transcription of the ad copy to represent two voices of masculinity

³ Thanks to Karlyn K. Campbell for pointing out that the correct musical term is "da capo."

The biker begins with the story of meeting a fellow music aficionado in a bar. Speaking in a simulated American English working-class dialect, he uses dialect features that are popularly perceived as “bad grammar” (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 1998, p. 161), such as *dis* (“**I’m in dis bar arquin’ with dis jerk about Schubert**”), *dem* (“**for dem cro-magnons**”) and *ain’t* (“**If that ain’t enough**”). No known American working class dialect uses the pattern of verbal *-s* in this ad’s depiction of white working-class speech (William Labov, personal communication, March 15, 2008). But the employment of verbal *-s* adds to the impression that his speech is “non-standard.” It suggests a degree of ludicrousness in the portrayal as well. According to Schiffman (2004), language in advertisements is often used to achieve certain effects and is rarely an authentic sample of how the represented person would actually talk.⁴ Forms typical of informal (as well as uneducated) speech add to the characterization of physical masculinity. The biker uses a *g*-dropping rule (“**arquin’**”) and slang and informal vocabulary (“**decked**” and “**buddies**”). The ad has *eye dialect* (“**sez**” and “**cause**”), spellings which help to create the impression of an actual conversation. Misspellings (“*de capo*” and “**cro-magnon**”) convey a lack of precision about the details of written language.

So it is easy to imagine that the biker does not have much formal education, does not have “refined” or “high” culture tastes, would not associate with people who do, and is not upper middle class. Thus, we would guess that he is unlikely to have had contact with the genre of music criticism in English, or that he could knowledgeably talk about classical music. Tough, competitive, and outspoken, the biker demeans the other man’s masculinity (“**high girlic voice**”), insults his intelligence (“**the jerk**”), insults others like him (“**cro-magnons who don’t knows**”), and ridicules his opinion (“[Schubert’s style is] all anyone needs to sense his distinctive attitude . . . and belaboring him with his musical ancestors is like comparing apples to oranges,” “**Dis is Schubert, tough guy**”).

Yet when the biker is talking about Microsoft’s product, or reports the speech of the man in the bar talking about classical music, there is an abrupt shift into a hyper-educated speech style that simulates a techno-geek register. The biker sounds like a nerdy know-it-all (“*The essential Schubertian style*”). Witty adjectives are chained in syncopated riffs about music aesthetics (“*It’s an in-depth look at Schubert’s loose-limbed, jog-trotting, lightly-bubbling Trout Quintet.*”). Arcane music-critic jargon pours out in long and complex constructions. One can even imagine these lines spoken in a higher pitch than the biker-guy’s gruff tough talk would be. Is this a spoof of technical masculinity in the guise of a pedant who is playing the expert, showing off what he knows (“*That’s the blessed earmark of Schubert’s style and it’s all anyone needs to sense his distinctive attitude toward musical structures.*”)?

It seems that we are not to judge the biker by appearance alone. Linguistic style and skill do matter. Creating a biker who *effortlessly* style shifts, both within and between sentences, is how the ad makers represent both his physical power and his technical, intellectual power. Linguistic style shifting is iconic of the conjunction of masculinities. The ad comes close to representing the claim that the hierarchy of masculinities “is never clear-cut (nor is it always clear where one ends and another begins)” (Kiesling, 2006, p. 270).

This linguistic tour de force is not just entertaining, it makes the masculine dualism preposterous. He is lowbrow *and* highbrow, down to earth *and* pretentious, tough *and* effe-

⁴ He discusses examples of inauthentic uses of language in print media.

minate-sounding, a regular guy *and* an esthete, not very educated *and* pedantic. He is an incarnation of incongruity and discordance:

If that ain't enough, it's got a glossary **for dem cro-magnons who don't knows** a scherzo de capo from relative major. There's even a game to test your Schubert knowledge before I do. . . .

So if you're likes me, and enjoy pouncing with fiendish glee on the little subterfuges Schubert invented to sidestep the rigid structure of classical sonata form, **gets yourself the Microsoft Composer Collection.**

By speaking out of both sides of his masculinity, as it were, the biker indexes competing masculinities and different kinds of power simultaneously. The ad exploits our prejudices and then subverts them. We recognize the stereotyped masculinities. We don't expect a tough guy to have acquired arcane expertise or to boast about something that can mark him as effeminate. Each style in its own right is believable, but his fluent control of both speech practices is surprising.

The ad's deliberate manipulation of language to represent a tough-talking/geeky classical-music-aficionado biker is an ironic accomplishment. If the narrator were just a tough-talking biker and did not display the authority of a music sophisticate, the ad might not convincingly peddle its software. If he were just to pontificate as a music expert, the ad wouldn't work as well either. That the narration is funny and unexpected is consistent with Eckert & McConnell-Ginet's (2003) suggestion that technical masculinity and physical masculinity are disjunct. It also supports Connell's (1995) contention that there are tensions between technical masculinity and hegemonic masculinity.

5. Marketing masculinities linguistically

There are three ways in which the creative use of language in this ad fits the construction of gender in the mass media. First, the male voice sells products. According to Pennock-Speck (2005), Kimmel (2003, p. 165) "states that authoritative voices in ads are nearly all men's, but he offers no empirical evidence to back this up" (p. 978).

Second, although this is a written ad, it supports the claim by Pennock-Speck (2005) that voices in spoken ads are deliberately manipulated to "fit in with the image of the product" (p. 975). Interpreting this ad by that principle, we can say that linguistic style-shifting to represent two types of masculinities in the same body captures the power of covert prestige in the informal masculinity projected through working-class talk (physical masculinity). This boosts the authority and prestige of the technical masculinity guise to sell its product. Covert prestige also insulates the image of esthetes and geeks from the "taint" of effeminacy. If a "real" man loves the product, it must be for everyone, not just geeks.

Third, this ad is consistent with a claim made by Smith (2005) that advertising is increasingly using ironic humor aimed at young males to *reinforce* traditional notions of masculinity, in a post-feminist era. Physical masculinity and heterosexuality are core attributes of hegemonic masculinity. The ironic juxtaposition of tough talk and geek talk bordering on effeminate as styles embodied by the same speaker promotes the consumption of hegemonic

masculinity. Ridiculing another man as “**girlie**” is a normative practice among males that aligns them with heteronormative masculinity (Cameron, 1997). Aggression and domination, whether done by physical means (“**And I decked him**”) or through the verbal insult (“it’s got a glossary **for dem cro-magnons who don’t knows** a scherzo de capo from relative major”), are also normative practices of hegemonic masculinity reinforced in the ad.

The biker has obvious masculine bona fides (physical power and heterosexuality) as displayed in his working-class speech, his dress, and his fists. It is as if his bona fides inoculate him against ridicule, and would deflect any criticism that he’s “girlie” when he too rhapsodizes about the software, sounding like a music critic. As he says, “**If there’s two things I knows, it’s I knows how to deck somebody and I knows my Schubert.**”

The biker is an intriguing fantasy figure. Although he “uses” the technical product and “knows” a lot about classical music, it doesn’t keep him from acting like a “cro-magnon” himself. Physical power is fundamental to his masculinity. Scripting the biker’s “real” man guise with the word “cro-magnon” opens the possibility of reading the ad as an ironic jab at the biker’s sense of superiority. This interpretation might be attractive to upper-middle-class geeks and nerds who feel they’ve moved beyond normative practices of physical masculinity.

Microsoft gets to have its cake and eat it too. The ad grabs attention for the product, humorously extolling its musical qualities in sufficient relevant detail. Simultaneously, it makes a reassuring statement to its customers about “real” men. It ironically reinscribes the ascendancy of hegemonic masculinity, reinforcing heteronormative practices. But paradoxically, because it is fiction, it can playfully challenge our folk beliefs about the disjunction between physical and technical masculinities. Technical masculinity and physical masculinity *co-exist* in this visually realistic but fictional realm. Do these competing masculinities coexist in everyday life more than we think?

For better or worse, the biker guy was short-lived. A protest was made that the ad promoted “male violence and gay-bashing.” And Microsoft withdrew it.⁵

⁵ The protest was reported by the *Seattle Times* (1994) as follows:

A recent magazine advertisement for the Microsoft Composer Collection promotes male violence and gay-bashing, two Hawaii lawmakers complained in a letter to Bill Gates, Microsoft founder and chairman. Microsoft has apologized and said it would withdraw the ad. The ad, which appeared in the Nov. 21 issue of *People*, shows a tough-looking, bearded man and includes his supposed narrative about his confrontation with a man with a “high girlie voice” over the essence of music composer Schubert’s style. “And then I deck him,” says the punch line to the ad. “The ad certainly does not convince us to run out and buy Microsoft products,” said the letter sent by Reps. Cynthia Thielen and Annette Amaral. “Instead, we would support a boycott of a company that perpetuates the idea that male violence is the solution to differing ideas.”

Microsoft said in a statement: “We apologize if the advertisement has offended in any way.” The company added that “Its attempt was to communicate in a humorous way the wealth of knowledge and enjoyment on our CD-ROM products.”

Microsoft’s counter that the ad was all in fun is a familiar public-relations attempt at image management, to deflect criticism and minimize the company’s accountability. It suggests that it is possible to read the ad as a joke, as satire, or as containing an absurd proposition. But it also sanctions criticism by implying that whoever finds the ad offensive does not have a sense of humor.

6. Conclusion

Current research in language and gender is exploring how we use spoken language to construct or resist gendered identities, and how stereotypes in social Discourses circulate and perpetuate sociolinguistic differentiation. As Trechter (1999) has eloquently said about gender constructs, "their insistent force is silently invoked even as speakers confront them" (p. 102). In this paper I have discussed how regularities of spoken language and the "silent force" of their ideological corollaries can be artfully transported to the genre of print advertising, to persuade consumers to buy a product. In using the genre of spoken conversation, the Microsoft ad makers exploited at least the following types of knowledge:

- 1) the reader's cultural knowledge that there are these kinds of masculinities;
- 2) the reader's understanding of how these masculinities are in play together in the culture; and
- 3) the reader's knowledge of social dialects and language ideologies in circulating Discourses.

Readers of the ad have such kinds of implicit knowledge about how language and gender ideologies intersect in the world. Their experience of these practices is also close at hand.

Such knowledge is readily engaged for the benefit of commerce. Mass media ads profit from using linguistic representations of gender stereotypes *because* they provide easy access to tacit, subconscious,⁶ consensual knowledge on a large scale. For this reason, the language of ads, not just the visual information in them, plays a powerful role in upholding and re-circulating social Discourses about gender.

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⁶ The potential for conscious-unconscious divergence in one's gender beliefs and attitudes is demonstrated by the Implicit Association Test (n.d.).

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