***Transgender Identities in the Press:
A Corpus-based Discourse Analysis***

By A. Zottola (2020)

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Reviewed by Pr. Fabienne H. Baider

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The book entitled *Transgender Identities in the Press: A Corpus-based Discourse Analysis* completes a series of the very few studies investigating how the media construct transgender identities using corpus linguistic tools to investigate the representation of trans people in the press (see Baker 2014); here, specifically, by examining the semantic prosody inherent in the linguistic choices used to construct transgender identities as found in British and Canadian English language press newspapers during the years 2013 – 2015. The study also aimed to determine if the discursive strategies used to represent transgender identities reflect specific political and ideological stances. To this end, the author identified three essential steps, as follows:

- First, to identify discursive strategies used in the British and the Canadian press (2013–2015) to represent transgender people;
- Second, to analyse whether newspapers differ in terms of language when covering news stories about transgender people;
- Finally, to establish if the findings of the first two steps of the procedure relate to the social contract and social practices in the UK and Canada.

Affiliation

University of Cyprus

email: fabienne@ucy.ac.cy

The book is divided into seven chapters, including the Introduction and Conclusion, namely: 1. Introduction : Law Rights and Guidelines; 2. Transgender Identities and the Press; 3. A Matter of Choices: Identity Labels in English; 4. Semantic Prosodies in the Press; 5. Differences and Similarities in the Representation of Trans Identities; 6. Conclusion. The book ends with a bibliography and an index.

The study is anchored within the framework of Queer Linguistics, and as such adopts a post-structuralist approach: i.e., it embraces the definition of sexual and gender identities as being constructed and performed, calling into question binary categorisations, and deconstructing the notions of ‘normalization’ and ‘binarism.’ The chosen methodology and the subsequent data analysis involve Corpus-based Discourse Analysis or CBDA, adopting a two-step procedure that is widely in corpus linguistics to identify the ways in which transgender identities are enacted and indexed through linguistic and social cues, namely:

- Step 1: Observing, analysing and contrasting *the frequency and context of naming strategies*, such as the use of nouns and pronouns.
- Step 2: Observing, analysing and contrasting *the semantic prosodies*, which are primarily represented by the use of adjectives and verbs, the latter for identifying grammatical agency. Semantic prosodies work on the principle that the connotation of co-occurring words will be included in the field of meaning of that specific lexical item; in other words, some words will occur in specific semantic environments. This principle points to the importance of collocations, which would be found in the first step, in understanding the meaning in context of a specific word and the importance of the evaluation of the context.

Chapter 1 covers the fundamental terms used in the study. It first clarifies how it defines the umbrella term *transgender* (i.e., an inclusive term that encompasses the many lexical ways used to refer to transgender identities such as, for example, MTF or FTM), and then explains that a plural *identity marker* has been chosen since it best acknowledges the fluidity of the concept, identity being considered as a relational and socio-cultural phenomenon. The chapter investigates the most recent legal developments concerning transgender people, and discusses the theory underpinning the research. Finally, it contextualises the research focused on transgender identities.

Chapter 2 briefly summarises the academic disciplines of language and gender, and that of transgender studies (encompassing literature,

translation, cinema, art, etc.), noting the latter's historical development. The author stresses the usefulness of the concept of 'community of practice' and the importance of studying the 'performativity' of gender, illustrating the post-structuralist framework adopted in this book; indeed, both concepts symbolise the fluidity of gender itself. Further on, the chapter presents the methodology of data collection and the corpus linguistics tools used for data analysis.

Chapter 3 details the theories and methodologies framing the study. It presents the field of new discourse studies, focusing on studies devoted to the language of the press and the media (re)presentation and construction of gender and sexuality. There is a critical overview of earlier studies that used CBDA, especially those that combined Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and corpus linguistics, followed by a detailed description of the specifics of the sampled corpora – namely, the TransCor corpora, which comprises the TransCorUk and the TransCorCan. The TransCorUk, for example, includes newspapers representing the British popular press (PopCor) as well as the British quality press (QualCor). The corpus linguistics' concepts at work in the study are very clearly explained, and include the terms *frequency lists*, *collocations*, *concordances*, etc. These parameters were obtained with the AntConc free software for the TransCorUk and with the CQPweb software for the TransCorCan. It is the collocations that are the focus of the study, and these collocations are observed within the concordances to understand the contextual use and the evaluation of the transgender identities. Differences between the two corpora are highlighted and the author explains why a different software was chosen to explore each of the two corpora.

Chapters 4 and 5 present, analyse and discuss the results obtained through the collocations analysis.

Chapter 4 explores the first two categories of representation: *personal details* and *implying verbs* and uses the concept of semantic prosody in particular for analysis. The chapter is anchored in the theory of social actor representation (van Leeuwen 1996) and taxonomy, and – much like Koller's (2009) study – uses this perspective to analyse discourses about gender and sexual identity. It focuses first on the inclusion strategies (e.g., (im) personalisation, generalisation, specification), and then investigates the exclusion strategies (suppressions and backgrounding, for example). One of the conclusions is that representations of trans people seem to focus on their individuality.

Chapter 5 examines two categories: 'LGBTIQ+ group and labels' and 'Entertainment and celebrities,' both common to the two corpora. With regard to the first category the analysis focuses on the concordances of

using the terms *transgender*,* *transsexual*,* and *trans*,* all three of which are associated with different patterns of collective forms of representations (p. 107). Note here that association is understood as a way to represent social actors as a group (van Leeuwen 1996). Although most newspapers adopt an inclusive and positive strategy when referring to the *community* of trans people, this is not the case when the collocate is the word *lobby*. Interestingly, the analysis highlights an overlap between LGBTIQ+ people and other ethnic minorities such as migrants – categorisations that create another amalgam, here between two societal minorities. Therefore, collective representations can not only obliterate individual characteristics, but can also blur the distinctions between social minorities to the degree that their aims and needs are unclear. Another troubling result is the incorrect amalgam that some media assume exists between transgender people and transvestites, inferring an equivalence or at least membership in the same community. This serves to reinforce prejudices towards both groups, trans-genders and transvestites.

The book's concluding chapter evaluates the methodology used for data analysis and considers the societal and relational implications of the analyses.

This book is one of the very first attempts to assess – in both a contrastive fashion and on large corpora – the representation of transgender identities in mainstream outlets using corpus linguistic tools and analytical tools (e.g., semantic prosody). Indeed, the topic of transgender and gender non-conforming identities has not been of great interest in linguistic research, as most related studies have focused on LGBTIQ representations. This is an important step in 'regard to tracking gender ideology,' since newspapers belong to a category that van Dijk calls the 'elite discourse' and they have been known to circulate stereotypes and prejudices through linguistic representation and word choices. This detailed analysis of the semantic categories of representation associated with transgender identities is also a welcome addition to the literature in the field of Language and Sexuality studies. The enactment and indexing of transgender identities through linguistic cues are amply illustrated by the close examination of terminology, classification and identity labels. The author's use of quantitative and qualitative methods enables assessment of the complex picture of the strategies used to disenfranchise or empower a social minority; this highlights the media responsibility in social ostracism due to their specific lexical choices. The quantitative corpus linguistic methods, together with the qualitative Critical Discourse Analysis, offer insight into the linguistic patterns chosen to construct trans people's identities.

We must emphasise the study's contrastive dimension (Canadian vs British) – a feature not often found in earlier works in this research field. Different collocates have been identified with the word *transgender*; for example, the compound '*two-spirited*' is unique to the Canadian data, and Canadian collocates are generally more diversified – which could hint at a more inclusive perspective on the transgender community. Because the study is contrastive, the author is well placed to give practical advice for a more ethical journalism when discussing the transgender community. Indeed, Canada is a society known for its generally positive sociopolitical outlook towards transgender people, and the data could point at recommendations for inclusive lexical choices and improving linguistic strategies when referring to the transgender community. Hence, this book does not simply criticise current usage; it also recommends practical ways to improve the dialogue, and as such, has a potential social impact. Nevertheless, considering Fairclough's (1995) definition of context, we might wonder if the readers need a good grasp of the nuances of British and Canadian English as well as a thorough knowledge of both societal contexts, especially since the last chapter gives this social dimension to the interpretation of the data. For this reason, it could have been useful to have worked with a reference corpus for the two varieties of English investigated, in order to identify the main trends in the British versus the Canadian press. Moreover, the reason for using a different software for the two corpora could be more clear, even though the author notes (end of chapter 2) that this choice was based on the differences found between corpora when working on frequencies and collocations. The software used to retrieve the most frequent co-occurrent words could be specified.

We could also suggest adding a discussion of the results, bearing in mind that the data date from 2013–2015 and might be biased given the media focus on the arrival of migrants in the EU in 2015; in this case any common discursive strategies between transgender and migrants could be further investigated with a comparison between the data of 2013, for example, and those of 2015.

In conclusion, this book should be recommended as a very useful tool for both teaching and researching the interface between language and sexual identity. Each chapter takes a pedagogical approach, explaining clearly and thoroughly key concepts used in the study as well as methodological approaches; further, many examples are given to explain the interpretations of the data. This is an ideal book to introduce students to corpus linguistics. As mentioned earlier in this review, the book's contrastive dimension enhances its value. All in all, this study offers the reader a

very good understanding of ideological stance regarding sexuality enacted through language choice.

References

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