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The fluid meaning of *femininity* in modern contexts: Demure, celebratory, assertive

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The paper presents the analysis of the use of the noun *femininity* in a sample of 700 contexts drawn from four English language corpora: COCA, COHA, BNC, NOW, spanning the period of the last three decades. Femininity is disambiguated as a polysemic word with its senses reflecting the evolutionary trends in the perception of female gender in contemporary culture. Sense 1 represents the traditional attitude to femininity. Sense 2 reflects the trend to disconnect the meaning of the word from the patriarchal perspective and still preserve all the traditional positive features of the word as they appear in its Sense 1. Sense 3 is defined on the basis of contexts that assert the radical change of the perspective and of the salient features of the word. The findings demonstrate how language responds and adapts to societal changes brought about by feminist activism. The paper provides a critical analysis of dictionary entries for femininity in Merriam-Webster, LEXICO, and Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, revealing the insufficient nature of treating femininity as a monosemic word as well as contradictions and inconsistencies in the entries themselves. Ample illustrative material from the language corpora is provided to explain the nature of each of the senses of femininity in modern English.

Keywords: corpus, context, polysemy, feminism, dictionary, gender.

Introduction

Since the second half of the twentieth century, linguistic studies have been exploring the way gender and language interact. There have been several investigations into the differences in speaking patterns and vocabularies of men and women [Bacang, Rillo, Alieto 2019; Coates 2015; Eriksson et al. 2012; Fitzpatrick, Mulac, Dindia 1995; Xia 2013]. According to Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall's article *Language and Identity*, in the early research on language and gender the categories of female and male were considered 'as dichotomous, and the corresponding linguistic practices of each gender as vastly different ("women's language" and "men's language")' [Bucholtz, Hall 2004: 374]. This approach "overlooked the extent of intra-gender variation and inter-gender similarity in language

use” [Bucholtz, Hall 2004: 374] and was criticised by language and gender researchers [Bing, Bergvall 2014; Cameron 2014; Eckert, McConnell-Ginet 2013; Gal 1995].

Since the second wave of feminism, feminist linguistic research has aimed to reveal and eliminate gender inequality in language. Robin Lakoff’s work *Language and Woman’s Place* became the first work on feminist linguistics [Lakoff 1973]. Lakoff addressed the issue that the women’s manner of speech is seen as inferior since the male language is normative and the female deviated from it. She claims that the way women speak reflects their subordinate status in society, and therefore the female language displays caution and disenfranchisement. Or vice versa language upholds and reproduces the belief in the inferiority of women through gender asymmetry. Then in *You Just Don’t Understand: Men and Women in Conversation* Deborah Tannen investigated miscommunications occurring in mixed-gender conversations and explained them by differences in socialisation in childhood and adolescence as well as in expectations that society imposed on men and women [Tannen 1991]. She considered male-female speech to be cross-cultural communication and eventually developed the concept of “genderlect”. The attention of researchers working in this field was directed to the lexicon, since it is the vocabulary that reflects biases against women the most clearly [Menegatti, Rubini 2017; Talbot 2019]. According to the authors, the lexicon encodes “the ‘male as norm’ principle through the phenomenon of lexical gaps, that is, the absence of words to denote women in a variety of roles, professions, and occupations” [Pauwels 2003: 553].

Simultaneously with the rise of second-wave feminism, the exploration of gender identity was gaining prominence. The development of gender studies has challenged the traditional binary understanding of gender identity. It is considered socially constructed rather than determined solely biologically. Many scholars emphasize the fluid and contingent nature of gender, recognizing that it can change, be transformed over time and in different social contexts. Moreover, gender identity is able to transform across societies, cultures, and historical periods, emphasizing the importance of considering social, cultural, and historical contexts for understanding gender identity [Brubaker 2016; Butler 1999; Foucault 1978; Laclau, Mouffe 2014].

As we can see, most of the linguistic research on gender focuses on revealing the asymmetrical treatment of men and women in language. The way natural language responds to evolutionary trends in social values at the level of verbal meaning has not received as much attention as discriminatory discourse practices. The article aims to demonstrate how the meaning of the noun *femininity* in a variety of contexts reflects the significant changes in the perception of the female gender in modern culture. We have chosen this noun because its meaning conveys the perception of the core features pertaining to the very nature of female gender. By analysing context patterns in which this word occurs in natural language, we are looking at significant variations in the way this word communicates its meaning, revealing the existence of a number of senses unrecorded in modern online dictionaries.

Materials and Method

In this article, we present the results of the qualitative analysis of a random sample of 700 contexts from Corpus of Contemporary American English [COCA] — 190, Corpus of Historical American English [COHA] — 60, British National Corpus [BNC] — 50 and

News on the Web corpus [NOW] — 400 spanning the period from 1990 to 2020. The analysis is based on studying the evaluative potential of the noun *femininity* and its variability. We have chosen to use contexts from these four corpora in order to obtain as wide a variety of contexts as possible. We believe that this approach has yielded a more comprehensive cross-section of culture and has provided us with reliable data for semantic analysis.

The significance of values and ideology in discourse has been widely studied in critical discourse analysis (CDA). Ruth Wodak claims that CDA focuses on analysing both implicit and explicit relations of power, political control, discrimination and dominance manifested in language. “CDA aims to investigate critically social inequality as it is expressed, constituted, legitimized, and so on, by language use” [Wodak 2011: 53]. Thus, CDA proceeds from the basic premise that a language is a tool for the formation and reproduction of values and ideology. Another characteristic feature of CDA is that it sees language as a social practice [Van Dijk 2009; Fairclough, Wodak 1997]. Language use “is constitutive both in the sense that it helps to sustain and reproduce the social status quo, and in the sense that it contributes to transforming it” [Fairclough, Wodak 1997: 258], and therefore CDA explores how and to what extent social changes entail language changes, as well as the relationship between changes in language and changes in social life. In our study we seek to expand the methodologies deliberated within CDA into the field of verbal semantics by proposing to apply the semiotic approach to meaning to the study of the interrelation between language and social values on the basis of corpus data.

In “Philosophical Studies” Wittgenstein defines word meaning through its functioning in the context: “For a *large* class of cases — though not for all — in which we employ the word ‘meaning’ it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language” [Wittgenstein, Anscombe 1986: 20]. Language corpora are a tool that opens up access to a systematic analysis of word meaning based on examples of authentic language use, as language corpora allow researchers to identify the same types of contexts and therefore make more accurate and sufficient definitions of a word meaning. Corpus linguistics can be described as the study of language that relies on examples of real-life language use [Baker 2010; McEnery, Wilson 2001]. Furthermore, corpus data helps researchers to confirm or refute hypotheses about language use and allows them to formulate new theories about language that otherwise would not be possible, as a large sample of authentic examples can be analysed [Baker 2010; McEnery, Wilson 2003].

The analysis of corpus materials has been preceded by a critical analysis of dictionary definitions of *femininity* which mainly treat this noun as a monosemic word. The following online dictionaries have been used: Merriam-Webster Dictionary [MW], LEXICO by Oxford [LEX] and Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English [LD]. The analysis of dictionary entries devoted to the noun *femininity* has revealed some deficiencies that distort the meaning of the word. Let us consider definitions in more detail.

MW:

1: the quality or nature of the female sex: the quality, state, or degree of being feminine or womanly.

//challenging traditional notions about femininity and masculinity

//...the women were visions of powerful femininity.

— Alan Shipnuck

2: WOMAN, WOMANKIND.

//...he was now to contrast her sharply with the best of what the Old World had to offer in the matter of femininity...

— Theodore Dreiser

LEX:

mass noun

Qualities or attributes regarded as characteristic of women.

'she alternated between embracing her femininity and concealing it'

LD:

noun [uncountable]

qualities that are considered to be typical of women, especially qualities that are gentle, delicate, and pretty.

You don't have to lose your femininity to be an independent, successful woman.

The most striking problem that we observe in all the entries is that the definitions do not correspond to examples given to illustrate them. MW dictionary defines *femininity* as 'the quality or nature of the female sex'. Since *femininity* is explained through the reference to the word *female*, it is necessary to consider the dictionary entry for this word. The word *female* is defined by focusing on the biological characteristics of women and their reproductive system: 'of, relating to, or being the sex that typically has the capacity to bear young or produce eggs' [MW]. However, the examples present femininity as a set of social attributes that characterise the behaviour, manners and style of women:

- (1) ...the women were visions of powerful femininity.
- (2) ...he was now to contrast her sharply with the best of what the Old World had to offer in the matter of femininity...

Although both examples provide a very limited context, *powerful femininity* clearly does not imply productivity in bearing children and producing eggs, just as *traditional notions about femininity* do not imply a traditional view on reproductive functions. It is also important that the definition puts special stress on physiology by using the phrase *female sex* rather than *female gender*. Moreover, though MW treats *femininity* as a polysemic word, the difference between the two senses of the word is not particularly clear. Considering cross-references to the words *feminine* and *female*, *femininity* in its first sense is 'the quality, state, or degree of, relating to, or being the sex that typically has the capacity to bear young or produce eggs'. The second sense gives a cross-reference to two words with similar meanings (*woman* in MW is defined as 'an adult female human being', and *womankind* as 'female human beings'), therefore reducing the meaning of this noun to the other two nouns. At the same time, the meaning of *female* is defined through the reference to the reproductive functions of the female sex. Thus, the difference between the two senses remains unclear since both ultimately refer to the biological function of women.

The same problem can be noted in the LEX definition that treats *femininity* as a monosemic word. Femininity is explained there through the word *female*, which is defined as 'Of or denoting the sex that can bear offspring or produce eggs, distinguished biologically by the production of gametes (ova) which can be fertilized by male gametes'. To illustrate the definition the following examples are provided:

- (3) 'she alternated between embracing her femininity and concealing it'

- (4) 'She's a woman, and dresses with style and femininity, which is wonderful to see.'
- (5) 'The destruction of femininity is an erosion of civilisation.'
- (6) 'The collection also highlights femininity through soft cutting lines.'

There is again some obvious discrepancy between the examples presenting *femininity* as a social and cultural concept and the definition that is based on purely biological characteristics of the female sex. Besides, the word *femininity* is always explained through the reference to the group of related words such as *feminine* and *female*.

Contrary to MW and LEX, LD tries to define *femininity* as a social phenomenon listing certain socially constructed qualities such as 'gentle, delicate, and pretty', though it doesn't fully explain how this word is used in English providing definition for only one type of context that we would consider the traditional or patriarchal meaning. The illustrative examples from LD represent contexts in which *femininity* reveals contrasting evaluations and displays different sets of semantic properties:

- (7) Add a silk scarf for femininity.
- (8) The biological fact of her femininity took precedence over serious critical evaluations of her work.
- (9) The picture of the rejection of femininity is thus brought into sharper focus.
- (10) The color pink is associated with femininity.

Sentences 8 and 9 cannot be applied as an illustration for the LD definition, which presents *femininity* as a purely positive phenomenon, since they reject femininity considering it a patriarchal construct (9) or criticise it for creating limitations for women (8). Moreover, the phrase *typical of women* creates ambiguity in the structure of meaning. The definition implies that anyone who has these qualities — *gentle, delicate, and pretty* — will be judged similarly since no information about the gender-sensitive evaluation potential of the word is provided.

Results

It is necessary to consider how the word *femininity* functions in the language to clarify its meaning. To do so, we have analysed 700 contexts with the word *femininity* in four corpora of English language — COCA, COHA, BNC, and NOW. The analysis revealed that there are three distinct senses of *femininity*.

Let us consider a few examples with the word *femininity* from the corpora:

- (11) I'm that rarity amongst men in that I genuinely appreciate women. And what I like most about them is their femininity. So many women today disguise that. They cut their hair short, dress like teenage boys. But why? Blondes are different. A girl says by choosing to remain or becoming a blonde, she says she's not ashamed of her femininity. She prizes it. And I prize it, too [COCA].
- (12) Femininity on the other hand, is made up of ideas that together appear to create an image of a "real" woman. These include soft, gracious movements and passive, genteel bodily expressions. Images such as floral patterns, tights, instrumental music, soft colours and emotion are also linked to femininity [NOW].
- (13) Today she considers Holiday a musical mentor. "I always thought she was the total epitome of femininity," she says. "Her voice was smooth, silky, sensual, seductive..." [COHA].

- (14) Reinforcing comfortable notions of what constitutes femininity, the proper kind of woman upholsters the domestic sphere of life, makes things soft and smooth, textures the home with her comfortable personality, adds depth to it with her feminine qualities, and affirms its difference from the public world of the marketplace [COHA].
- (15) “Not only was ‘making yourself up’ permissible; advertisers were soon claiming it was positively virtuous,” Weigel writes. “By making herself up, a woman showed that she valued her femininity and was willing to spend time and money on her appearance” [NOW].
- (16) But rose quartz, in mystical and Wiccan traditions, is associated with unconditional love, compassion, and healing — qualities that have for centuries been associated with the idea of femininity, particularly idealized mothers [NOW].
- (17) On the other hand, he said that the “sort of emancipation” that allows women to enter traditionally male domains may rob them of “the very femininity that characterizes them” [NOW].
- (18) A man will find it very hard to relate with an assertive woman romantically although most men are attracted to the idea of dating intelligent, assertive women but don't actually like the reality of it. Men are not intimidated by assertive women but are turned off by them. What we don't like is masculine energy you literally bring to the table. Most men are attracted to femininity not your masculine traits [NOW].
- (19) With cultural ideas of good/bad femininity so entrenched, how do these women refute or reclaim patriarchal tropes? The public, including the Catholic/republican community, were largely horrified by the protesters' actions when they took place. Fr Raymond Murray complained of “girls in Armagh Prison... suffering... defeminisation”. Murphy navigates the complex position her characters are in: disciplined soldiers, living in their own excrement, working through everyday violent power struggles. The title of the film itself, of course, is playing with Christian semantics: silence and grace were both hallmarks of “true womanhood” [NOW].
- (20) She was no worse than most recent French Prime Ministers, and her femininity was exquisitely candid. She complained that British men must be homosexual not to make a pass at her or look at her legs. Most women over 50 loathe the way men ignore them, but they are too terrorised by Politically Correct feminism to say so. Edith had the Gallic guts to speak the truth: she liked being seen as a sex object [BNC].

Care for home and family can be pointed out among the characteristics considered attractive and evaluated positively in this type of context — (14) *upholsters the domestic sphere of life, textures the home with her comfortable personality, adds depth to it with her feminine qualities*. Other qualities highlighted in the contexts are emotionality, softness, concern for the harmony and well-being of others, and empathy — (16) *unconditional love, compassion, and healing*, (14) *makes things soft and smooth*, (12) *soft colours and emotion*, (13) *Her voice was smooth, silky, sensual, seductive*, (12) *soft, gracious movements and passive, genteel bodily expressions*. Besides, the subordinate position of women, dependence, and some submissiveness as opposed to traditionally masculine qualities are often a part of the image: (20) *being seen as a sex object*, (12) *passive, genteel bodily expressions*, (19) *silence and grace were both hallmarks of “true womanhood”*. The manifestation of the opposite qualities entails a loss of femininity — (18) *A man will find it very hard to relate with an assertive woman romantically*, (17) *sort of emancipation” may rob them of “the very femininity that characterizes them”*, (19) *“girls in Armagh Prison... suffering...*

defeminisation”. Non-conformity to the patriarchal ideal of women’s appearance leads to the same — (11) *women today disguise that. They cut their hair short, dress like teenage boys* — since physical attractiveness is crucial in the patriarchal ideas of female identity — (11) *A girl says by choosing to remain or becoming a blonde, she says she’s not ashamed of her femininity*, (15) *By making herself up, a woman showed that she valued her femininity and was willing to spend time and money on her appearance*”. This type of context can be called *femininity 1 asserted*.

Furthermore, by emphasizing the passivity and dependence associated with *femininity*, men manifest their power and masculinity, while female identity is perceived as something compulsive, uncontrolled, and hysterical — (22) *defensiveness in MacLeish’s chauvinism, affirming his own manhood*, (23) *Aroused by “weak” femininity, invokes his male strength and authority, he would not be a “man” if he could not believe in feminine helplessness*, (21) *her inability to command to her femininity*.

- (21) Granted, she was supposed to be insane when she swapped bodies with Captain Kirk so that she could command a starship, but the problems with her command are clearly indicated in the dialogue to be at least partly due to her gender, and the nature of her “insanity,” largely expressed in excessive emotion and what Doctor McCoy refers to outright as “hysteria,” a word that comes from the ancient Greek word for “womb,” clearly relates her inability to command to her femininity [NOW].
- (22) It is hard, of course, not to see a certain defensiveness in MacLeish’s chauvinism, as if he is not so much attacking other writers’ femininity as affirming his own manhood as a poet and writer [COCA].
- (23) I wouldn’t be a man if this *feminine helplessness* didn’t make you twice as attractive to me. (Fjelde 189) Unconsciously, Torvald admits in the last line that *he would not be a “man” if he could not believe in feminine helplessness*. Aroused by his vision of Nora’s “weak” femininity, he again *invokes his male strength and authority* by returning to his masculine Creators vocabulary [COCA].

We can identify contexts that present the same qualities of patriarchal *femininity*; however, in these contexts they are considered unacceptable and perceived negatively, such contexts can be called *femininity 1 rejected*:

- (24) Kimmings names flesh-baring pop stars such as Rihanna and Katy Perry, who perpetuate a similar idea of femininity. As she points out, young people can get “a really limited view of what women are”. So the pair decided to take matters into their own hands — and invent an alternative [NOW].
- (25) Men’s Rights Activism sort of makes sense in a culture where masculinity places just as many limitations on men as femininity does on women. While women have hundreds of years of gender criticism to draw from when dealing with compulsory femininity, men don’t. There are few spaces where men can talk about the impact that gender stereotypes have on their lives [NOW].
- (26) Like same-sex relationships, cross-dressing has a long history in Japan. The earliest written records date to the eighth century and include stories about women who dressed as warriors. In premodern Japan, there were also cases of women passing as men either to reject the prescribed confines of femininity or to find employment in trades dominated by men [NOW].

- (27) Agyin Asare's sermon reinforces narrow definitions of masculinity and femininity; that men are not men unless they dominate another human being — preferably a woman (the “weaker” vessel). It is based on such logic that men have sex for conquest [NOW].
- (28) I don't know Aly but I suspect he oscillates, frustrated, between these two polarities. Working women who face workplace discrimination have an analogous battle: do I openly acknowledge my femininity, and all that comes with it — babies and breast pumps and the fear of being called bossy — and thereby define the terms of my own battle? Or do I shut up about all that and just try to pass? [NOW]
- (29) There is much, too, to be said about a woman's relationship with food — regardless of whether or not she eats animals. It is uniquely damaging. We measure our femininity based on our calorie consumption. There are typically feminine dishes (namely salads, white meats, and smoothies), and typically masculine dishes (anything bloodied and dense) [NOW].
- (30) While we idolise British heptathlete Jessica Ennis-Hill, an Olympic goddess with a six-pack is sadly still not viewed as a role model for many women and young girls. And that is because women are still being sold the myth that sport compromises your femininity (unless you're doing it in your knickers, Lingerie Football League). Because, as society keeps telling us, women are *married to* sports stars — not sports stars in their own right [NOW].
- (31) “I can still feel it,” she says of the sexual assault to which she was subjected. “I don't mean ‘in my tender heart it still pains me so,’” she continues, mocking the infantilizing ideas of femininity that have been used to keep her prisoner at least as much as violence itself. “I can still feel what he did in my body, standing here right now.” [NOW].
- (32) In contrast, the tent poles of femininity, as I observed them, high heels, eye makeup, Diet Coke, smiling, et cetera, all seem to be focused on the external. In any case, they felt completely foreign to me. As a result, throughout my childhood, I felt like an outsider to being a straight girl even though I was a straight girl [COCA].
- (33) With such dramatic changes in the roles women have in society, there are also shifts occurring in how women think of themselves and define their own identity. Historically, “femininity” has been defined in terms of men's ideals of beauty and sexual attractiveness. We are now starting to observe an ideal of femininity defined by women them-selves: “Women want to be her because other women admire her” [COCA].

In these examples, *femininity* is shown as a phenomenon that constrains and oppresses women. Moreover, it seems to be completely artificial, and therefore toxic and violent: (24) *really limited view of what women are*, (25) *compulsory femininity*, (26) *the prescribed confines of femininity*, (27) *narrow definitions of masculinity and femininity*, (31) *infantilizing ideas of femininity that have been used to keep her prisoner at least as much as violence itself*. Constraints of traditional *femininity* are meant to control the body and physical attractiveness and often lead to an eating disorder and are detrimental to mental health — (29) *uniquely damaging. We measure our femininity based on our calorie consumption*. Juxtaposition to men here reveals double standards, which deny women the opportunity for self-fulfilment — (30) *as society keeps telling us, women are married to sports stars — not sports stars in their own right*, (25) *[women] dealing with compulsory femininity, men don't*. The traditional view on female identity reproduces a worldview from the perspective of a cisgendered heterosexual man, therefore, it is almost impossible for women to relate to the image of traditional *femininity* — (33) *“femininity” has been defined in terms of men's*

ideals of beauty and sexual attractiveness, (32) all seem to be focused on the external, they felt completely foreign to me, I felt like an outsider to being a straight girl even though I was.

Besides, there are some contexts in which *femininity* is used to describe men:

- (34) While not a transvestite, nor transgender, Leocadio's male identified body is marked by an *excess of femininity* that is noticed by his mother, by himself, and by various men around him. This *excessive femininity creates a need to protect and shelter Leocadio*, specifically because *his femininity provokes the unwanted advances of older men*. The *need to protect* Leocadio extends to his new queer family established with doña Adelina [COCA].
- (35) William Morris, who taught in the school Mark attended, sometimes had difficulty with a teenage son who wore chartreuse pedal pushers and orange tank tops and long baggy coats from his favorite thrift shop, Value Village. "I think his dad was afraid of him in a way, because of his femininity," Hutchinson says. Already Mark was such a distinct personality, he couldn't control him [COHA].
- (36) One newspaper attributed his cross-dressing to nymphomania, writing, "It is evident... that the woman must have been mad on the subject of sex from the time she left Ireland dressed as a woman," and later celebrated Evans' return to femininity after "treatment": "Her breasts have almost regained their normal condition; the wrinkles in her face have disappeared, her arms are becoming fleshy, and the scars and marks on them being eradicated" [NOW].

In these contexts, the meaning of *femininity* is close to *femininity 1 asserted*, and presents the same set of qualities traditionally associated with women. Yet, when applied to men, feminine traits such as vulnerability or interest in fashion are seen as something deviant and requiring condemnation or provoking the same attitude to feminine men as to women: (35) *his dad was afraid of him in a way, because of his femininity, he couldn't control him*, (34) *his femininity provokes the unwanted advances of older men*, (36) *attributed his cross-dressing to nymphomania*. However, in the 34th example, excessive femininity of the character is evaluated rather positively, although it leads to certain submissiveness of the character, and his inability to cope with the situation, which is quite typical for *femininity 1 asserted* — (34) *excessive femininity creates a need to protect and shelter Leocadio, specifically because his femininity provokes the unwanted advances of older men*.

We suggest treating *femininity* in all of the contexts above as its first sense manifesting a traditional patriarchal understanding of the key features of the female gender. *Femininity 1* — *a set of features such as beauty, grace, vulnerability, helplessness, being caring and supportive which makes women attractive for men and inspire men to support and protect them*. We also point out that *femininity* in this sense can be used as a positive aspect of one's world view (examples 11–23) or can be criticised or rejected as an indicator of a discriminatory position towards women (examples 24–33). When applied to men, *femininity* in this sense is used to underscore what appears to be norm-breaking behaviour patterns (examples 34–36).

We can identify the contexts in which the concept of *femininity* is reinterpreted; in these contexts, the softness and tenderness of a woman are not opposed to the strength and power of a man. Women here have both softness and strength at the same time, combining the ability to care, and provide support, and at the same time to demonstrate strength, confidence, and express their opinion.

- (37) “I want my girls to think that being a scientist is the coolest job. I want them to not be afraid to lean toward their femininity,” says Garner [COCA].
- (38) Sophia says she has not compromised her femininity because of her passion. “I believe as a lady you train and compete and you don’t have lose your femininity to present yourself on a bodybuilding stage.” [NOW].
- (39) I can’t say anyone influences me. Strong women, who combine their strength with femininity, inspire me. I am a traditional girl at heart. Home and family are where my heart lies and this job lets me combine all of those things. It’s really my dream job! [NOW].
- (40) “With her charm, gracefulness, modernity and lively wit, Lily Collins is the perfect embodiment of femininity according to Lancôme,” said Françoise Lehmann, general manager of Lancôme International [NOW].
- (41) Murphy, a London-based photographer, was taking pictures of a series of jump jockeys at Kempton for the marketing campaign. He has said previously: “I was keen to include Katie. I wanted to show both the femininity and the toughness of spirit she requires to compete against the best riders in one of the most demanding disciplines in horse racing.” [NOW].
- (42) With all of my designs, I strive to make beautiful clothing that celebrates femininity and appeals to the confident, stylish woman. Making a garment is similar to making a sculpture; a creative process incorporating dramatic shapes, designs and textures. <...> The partnership also seemed like a natural fit because the Baileys woman — like the woman I design for — embodies style, femininity, confidence and spirit [NOW].
- (43) It manages to assert femininity and power simultaneously — no mean feat for a simple skirt. Worn with confidence and a pair of killer heels — it’s a potent combination. Powerful femininity: a fitting reflection of where noughties women are now — I am sure that Chanel would approve [NOW].
- (44) You don’t have to sacrifice your femininity to be powerful. I think that’s happening in the gaming industry. We’re seeing a big spearhead of feminism in the gaming industry, and I think don’t sacrifice your femininity to fit in [NOW].

Such contexts can be called *femininity 2 asserted: a set of features such as beauty, softness, and caring perceived as a constituent aspect of female identity, allowing them to celebrate their gender and be equal to men in their social roles*. In such contexts women are endowed with traditionally feminine traits such as beauty, attractiveness, tenderness, etc. (41) *With her charm, gracefulness, (43) embodies style, femininity, celebrates femininity and appeals to the confident, stylish woman, (39) Home and family are where my heart lies and this job lets me combine all of those things*, but at the same time, they do not prevent women from demonstrating strength, expressing opinions and ambitions, and aspiring to a career — (44) *don’t have to sacrifice your femininity to be powerful, (43) assert femininity and power simultaneously, (41) I wanted to show both the femininity and the toughness of spirit, (39) Strong women, who combine their strength with femininity, inspire me, (38) you don’t have lose your femininity, (37) think that being a scientist is the coolest job*. A typical syntactical feature of such contexts, which makes them different from *femininity 1* is the tendency to use this word in combinations with such nouns as *power, toughness*, and the like (*femininity and power; femininity, confidence and spirit; combining strength with femininity; etc.*). This sense of *femininity* seems to be the least controversial, since it takes into account changes in the perception of *femininity* connected with the popularization

of the feminist agenda but does not require rejecting traditionally feminine qualities. It is focusing on equality, yet is not denying the difference between male and female features. However, some contexts criticise this perception of *femininity* as well:

- (45) “I decided to make a zine of artwork and written word inspired by strong, powerful women and asked my followers to send in their submissions,” she said. “One woman sent in some poetry along with a screenshot of the definition of femininity being like, P.S., isn’t it *insane* that this is in the dictionary?!” “I decided to tweet it out because yeah, that’s nuts!” she continued. “Can you imagine: ‘He managed to become a CEO without sacrificing his masculinity’” [NOW].

Here, as in the critique of traditional femininity, the author points out the sexism and double standards in society, since it is impossible to imagine that masculinity were defined in the dictionary in a similar way: (*Can you imagine: “He managed to become a CEO without sacrificing his masculinity.”*). In 45 such a representation of femininity is perceived as absolutely unacceptable and as something that creates an unrealistic image of femininity and sets limits to women’s opportunities; therefore, we consider this type of context *femininity 2 rejected*.

Besides, we can identify a type of context in which the set of qualities associated with *femininity* is completely reformed; such a context can be called *femininity 3 recontextualised* — a set of features such as power, independence and self-reliance that allows women to fully realise their individuality and challenge male dominance in social contexts.

- (46) British actress Gwendoline Christie says it’s a thrill to play such a strong female. “It’s really exciting because she is dynamic with an incredible physical strength, and we also see a real depth of emotion,” says the actress, who’s in her mid-thirties. “This is a woman who has a journey of burgeoning femininity, of what it means to be an alternative kind of woman in a world of convention, a convention that she has rejected and continues to reject” [NOW].
- (47) With such dramatic changes in the roles women have in society, there are also shifts occurring in how women think of themselves and define their own identity. Historically, “femininity” has been defined in terms of men’s ideals of beauty and sexual attractiveness. We are now starting to observe an ideal of femininity defined by women them-selves: “Women want to be her because other women admire her.” Rather than seeking validation from outside, especially from males, women increasingly seek inner-directed goals in exploring their feminine identity. Pop artists such as Lady Gaga and Nicki Minaj channel these new, more powerful visions of femininity, capturing young women’s imaginations and desire for self-expression. <...> Women are taking control of communications media to leverage their collective power and even effect political change [COCA].
- (48) “She is bringing in a new genre — a man with a beard with... virility, but a great femininity,” he said. “It’s an incredible mix. It’s an act of courage and beauty to live her life the way she wants to live it,” he added [NOW].
- (49) In the 1990s, Riot Grrrls and Courtney Love played with non-traditional performances of femininity and sexuality, using what scholar Karina Eileraas has described as “ugliness as resistance,” to comment on issues including beauty standards, the objectification of and violence against women, patriarchy and compulsory heterosexuality [NOW].

- (50) The “Big Five” personality traits of psychology — openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and neuroticism — do not categorically vary between men and women. Contrary to stereotypes, women were not found to be significantly more intimate in their relationships, and science inclination did not overwhelmingly favor men. And masculinity and femininity, the study found, “are not all-or-nothing traits... they are truly a continuum” [NOW].
- (51) Furthermore, this moment decouples maleness from masculinity as well as femaleness from femininity. The fluidity of identifications opens a space of self-identification and self-actualization that does not depend on rigid social and sexual binaries [COCA].

The contexts that do not contrast *femininity* and strength and show it as a phenomenon without any definitive set of features, since there are as many variations of *femininity* as there are women, can be called *femininity 3 asserted*. In these contexts *femininity* is associated with non-conformity, as well as with the freedom and opportunity to be yourself despite the pressure of social expectations — (46) *alternative kind of woman in a world of convention, a convention that she has rejected*, (47) *new, more powerful visions of femininity, capturing young women’s imaginations and desire for self-expression*, (47) *Rather than seeking validation from outside, especially from males, women increasingly seek inner-directed goals in exploring their feminine identity*, (49) *non-traditional performances of femininity <...> to comment on issues including beauty standards, the objectification of and violence against women, patriarchy and compulsory heterosexuality*. Moreover, *femininity* here is often a spectrum including cis- and transmen, cis- and trans-women, queer and non-binary persons: (50) *masculinity and femininity <...> “are not all-or-nothing traits... they are truly a continuum*; (51) *fluidity of identifications opens a space of self-identification and self-actualization*, (48) *a man with a beard with... virility, but a great femininity*.

However, from a patriarchal perspective such a representation of *femininity* is perceived negatively:

- (52) Bender had written that Wonder Woman comics display “a strikingly advanced concept of femininity and masculinity” and that “women in these stories are placed on an equal footing with men and indulge in the same type of activities.” Wertham found the feminism in Wonder Woman repulsive. “As to the ‘advanced femininity’, what are the activities in comic books which women ‘indulge in on an equal footing with men’? *They do not work. They are not homemakers. They do not bring up a family. Mother-love is entirely absent*” [COCA].
- (53) Charlene, he had decided, was a *new kind of woman, not soft, nor gentle, nor modestly ashamed of her femininity*. She was *spare, strong, and confident, invariably upbeat and annoyingly capable*. As he had worked with her, he had realized that whatever other admirable characteristics she had, she could probably *run him into the ground*. Steven found himself competing with her. *He’d be damned if a woman young enough to be his daughter was going to be quicker, stronger, or more durable than he was* [COCA].

In these contexts, which can be considered *femininity 3 rejected*, the reformed image of *femininity* is seen as something unnatural and repulsive since women lose all the features traditionally associated with *femininity*: (52) *found the feminism repulsive, They do not work. They are not homemakers. They do not bring up a family. Mother-love is entirely absent*, (53) *a new kind of woman, not soft, nor gentle, nor modestly ashamed of her femininity*. Besides, the ability of women to compete with men is viewed as an attack on masculin-

ity — (53) *He'd be damned if a woman was going to be quicker, stronger, or more durable than he was*, (52) *women are placed on an equal footing with men and indulge in the same type of activities*.

Discussion

The result of the analysis of the corpora contexts can be presented in the following structure of the polysemy of the noun *femininity*:

Sense 1 (traditional) — a set of features such as beauty, grace, vulnerability, helplessness, being caring and supportive which makes women attractive for men and inspire men to support and protect them assigning the inferior social role to women.

// Basically, I'm trying to bring their femininity back and bring some grace and poise [COCA].
// And I've heard this from other people over and over and over again — that it's so incompatible, the feeling of anger, with the sense of femininity [COCA].

Sense 2 (reclaimed) — a set of features such as beauty, softness, and caring perceived as a constituent aspect of female identity which allows them to celebrate their gender and be equal to men in their social roles.

// she is able to be a distinct, unique individual with a strong voice without sacrificing her femininity [COCA].
// there is a common misconception among some teens that for a girl to be "strong" she can't embrace her girliness at the same time [COCA].

Sense 3 (recontextualised) — a set of features such as power, independence and self-reliance that allows women to fully realise their individuality and challenge male dominance in social contexts.

// I use femininity in its widest possibly sense to include any way any person chooses to identify with being female including transgender femininity [COCA].
// I sort of eventually landed in this place of what I call sort of casual femininity, of being able to express myself as I authentically feel, be able to sort of have the freedom [COCA].

Sense 2 depicts the same set of features as *sense 1*; however, the same qualities that in the traditional version are claimed to be the evidence of women's weakness, dependence and inability to take leadership roles in public matters, in *sense 2* are perceived as a source of positive self-identification and independence, emphasising gender quality. This gives us ground to treat *Sense 2* as a sub-sense of the traditional patriarchal *Sense 1*, which we suggest considering to be a case of reclaiming the word by the speakers who have no problem with the key features of femininity as they are conveyed by *Sense 1* but do not accept that these features determine the inferior social status of women as it is revealed in the way this word is used in *Sense 1*.

Due to the evolutionary processes in the social values, in *Sense 3* there is a change in the perception of the qualities that make up the core of meaning, challenging the traditional image of *femininity* as represented in *Sense 1* and shaping its meaning around such properties as self-reliance, independence and freedom.

It can be noted that the traditional image of *femininity*, which is associated with such features as caring for home and family, elegance, weakness and dependence, is still most widely represented in the English language. However, we can point out active changes in the evaluation of this phenomenon, since the number of corpora examples that consider *femininity* to be a means to limit and control women (*femininity 1 rejected*) is higher (253 out of 700, or 36.1 %) than the number of *femininity 1 asserted* (228 out of 700, or 32.6 %). Thus, the perception of *femininity 1* as something unacceptable and violent towards women is more common nowadays. *Sense 2* is the least frequent in our sample; the number of examples with *femininity 2 asserted* is only 57 out of 700, or 8.1 %. As for *femininity 2 rejected*, this figure is even lower — 1 out of 700, or 0.1 %. Therefore, such an understanding of *femininity* is rare. We attribute it to two factors: on the one hand, it is viewed as an attack on the status quo by those supporting the conservative views, and, on the other, as upholding stereotypes and maintaining a binary system that is widely criticised by the feminist and the queer communities [Butler 1999; Nicholas 2019; Thompson 2019]. The number of corpora examples with *femininity 3 asserted* is 158 out of 700, or 22.6 %. *Femininity 3 rejected* is significantly less frequent — only 3 out of 700, or 0.4 %. Overall, the types of contexts that abandon the binary dichotomy of male-female identity and criticise the patriarchal image of female identity as limiting (*femininity 3 asserted*, *femininity 1 rejected* and *femininity 2 rejected*) are much more widely represented in our sample, which indicates a reinterpretation of the patriarchal ideal of *femininity* in modern English. Moreover, the use of all the three senses in contexts treating the respective sense of *femininity* as something negative or problematic indicates the presence of an on-going unresolved value conflict in modern culture.

Our study demonstrates a more versatile pattern of the use of *femininity* in modern English than what dictionaries suggest. We have demonstrated that the meaning of this word clearly reflects significant evolutionary changes taking place in society and it is not sufficient to treat it as a monosemic word. We have come to the conclusion that dictionaries can provide a more nuanced representation of words which are used as markers of gender in contexts representing different ideological perspectives. The corpora contexts allowed us to propose a sense structure of this word which reflects the existence of an ideological conflict as each sense represents a specific type of context conveying a specific perception of female identity. We see the root of the value conflict in the significant role of feminist activism that has influenced the way society in general is beginning to articulate perceptions concerning the role and the nature of female gender. We have also demonstrated that language can be flexible and responsive to evolutionary trends in culture concerning gender issues. The sense structure of *femininity* as a polysemous noun is a convincing example of the interrelation between culture and language.

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Вариативность значения *femininity* в современных контекстах: от патриархального идеала к вызову традиции

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Статья предлагает результаты анализа существительного *femininity* в 700 контекстах, полученных методом случайной выборки из четырех корпусов английского языка: COCA, COHA, BNC, NOW. Выборка проводилась за период, охватывающий последние три десятилетия. Обработка данных различных корпусов обеспечила большую вариативность контекстов для анализа и более надежную информацию о характере использования этого слова в современном английском. Существительное *femininity* в данных контекстах описывается как полисемантическое слово, варианты значения которого отражают эволюционные процессы, затрагивающие представления о женском гендере в современной культуре США и Великобритании. Выделены три варианта значения: традиционное патриархальное определение содержания этого существительного (sense 1); производный подвариант, представляющий компромисс между традиционным взглядом и независимой позицией женщины в современном

обществе (sense 2); и вариант, представляющий собой полностью переосмысленное существительное (sense 3). Результаты анализа показывают, каким образом язык реагирует на социальные изменения, обусловленные активностью феминистского движения в США и Великобритании. В статье представлен критический анализ словарных статей для femininity в онлайн-словарях Merriam-Webster, LEXICO и Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English. Все словари представляют недостаточную и противоречивую информацию о значении этого слова. Оно трактуется как однозначное, а примеры не соответствуют предлагаемым дефинициям. Предложена альтернативная словарная статья, учитывающая специфику употребления этого существительного в современном английском языке. Делается вывод о необходимости и возможности для англоязычных словарей более последовательно отражать структуру значения слов, используемых для обозначения явлений, находящихся в центре конфликтных эволюционных процессов в обществе.

Ключевые слова: корпус, контекст, полисемия, феминизм, гендер.

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