

Natalia Konstantinovskaia, **The Language of Feminine Beauty in Russian and Japanese Societies**, Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, 215 pp., \$99.99 (hardcover).

Reviewed by

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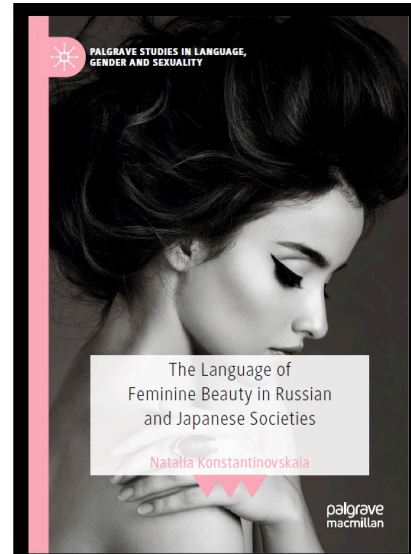
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Gender is a social construct, as are femininity and beauty. Feminine beauty is often embroidered in an endless variety of external appearances but in monotonous similarity of internal implication. In ***The Language of Feminine Beauty in Russian and Japanese Societies***, author Natalia Konstantinovskaia provides a cross-linguistic and cross-cultural study to unveil how femininity and beauty are socially and ideologically constructed in Russia and Japan.

This five-chapter book mobilizes an integrated theoretical framework, drawing upon multimodal analysis, critical discourse analysis, conversation analysis, stance-taking, and indexicality theories. The performativity of femininity and beauty is demonstrated and analyzed through three types of data: televised commercial discourse, conversation discourse, and computer-mediated discourse. This three-layered convergence first explores the multimodal representation of expected ideals of feminine beauty in Russia and Japan, and then examines the discursive strategies employed by Russian and Japanese women to forge their ideals of feminine beauty. Finally, it elucidates the contradictions and transformations concerning femininity and beauty in Russian and Japanese societies.

Chapter 1 begins with an introduction to the idealized femininities established with gender ideology and gendered language in Russia and Japan. Particularly, Russian femininity encounters more fluidity with mixed perceptions of domesticity, subservience, beauty, and self-reliance. Likewise, Japanese femininity is perceived with modesty, elegance, tidiness, cuteness, and as decorative “office flowers” (p. 24). This ideological expectation conceptualizes Japanese femininity as “other-centeredness” (p. 25); that is, self-sacrifice (i.e., job-quitting, homemaking, and taking care of children), for the sake of family is regarded as feminine in Japan. Linguistically, Russian women’s language features the frequent use of diminutive, emphatic, hyperbolic expressions and the acute awareness to avoid vulgar expressions, while Japanese women’s language features the frequent use of honorific expressions, indirect speech acts, interjections, and exclamatory expressions. The women-preferred language in Japan is considered as a deliberate political and ideological instrument to construct the ideal femininity, whereas Russian women’s language has never been linked to women’s inferiority or tied to any specific ideology.

Chapters 2 and 3 embody the reciprocal connection between women’s imagined and real discourses through 100 televised beauty commercials and 44 real-world language practices of Japanese and Russian women. These two chapters explicate the role of commercial-circulated messages in disseminating gender and beauty ideologies, as well as the means that women mobilize to constitute their ideal femininity. In



Russia and Japan, beauty commercials cultivate female consumers to chase culturally appropriate conceptions of beauty. For example, they confirm that authentic feminine beauty involves the male gaze and approval. This process synthesizes gender ideologies and postfeminism (Gill, 2008), which encourages women's self-transformation without considering unjust sociopolitical systems (Litosseliti, Gill, & Favaro, 2019). Unlike commercials' intensification of gender ideologies, real-world conversations reveal how women absorb and question gender ideologies.

In chapter 2, both Russian and Japanese commercials that portray women as inquisitive and deficient in tackling beauty-related problems are discussed. In Japanese commercials, men, with predominating voices, are the beauty-creators embodied in the roles of salon masters and connoisseurs. Japanese women showcase beauty and pleasure after consuming the beauty products. By contrast, female voices dominate in Russian commercials, while males, with heterosexual gaze, are the appreciators of feminine beauty. Russian and Japanese televised commercials, to varying degrees, reinforce and even capitalize on gender stereotypes while accommodating new perceptions of femininity in limited ways.

Linguistically, Russian commercials employ more interrogative and imperative sentence structures while Japanese commercials use more interrogative and hortative structures. For nonlinguistic representation, Russian commercials deploy heterosexual male gaze, women's self-commodification, and beauty images, while Japanese commercials employ mimetic expressions, personifications, and metaphors.

Chapter 3 analyzes conversation discourse by interviewing 20 Russian women and 24 Japanese women. These 44 women respond to ideological expectations of femininity and beauty by assimilating, transforming, and subverting ideologically embedded language. In the Russian context, the notions of ideal womanhood are inextricably bound to relationships with men and men's perceptions. Specifically, in discussing the ideal femininity, *mužčina* (man) was remarkably used 243 times, whereas *ženščina* (woman) was only used 146 times. The interviewees also said they believed that allowing men to feel valued and strong was regarded as a special skill for women. The other-centered personality and the ideal personality with self-reliance generate the tensions in contemporary Russian femininity.

Cuteness, or *kawaii*, has been an indispensable component of Japanese femininity. The meaning of *kawaii* encompasses not only a woman's external appearance but also her holistic persona, including language style, consumption habits, and ability to express happiness and gratitude. Tensions in contemporary Japanese femininity are derived from the complex facets of *kawaii*, which encompass not only the characteristics of being lovable, beautiful, funny, cheerful, and friendly but also the implications of women's reliance on others, pursuit of young looks, and childish manners. As a result, the author states that *kawaii* femininity links Japanese women to immaturity and incompetence, rendering them inferior to men in professional and social relationships.

Linguistically, vulgar and emphatic, swearing language is considered incongruent with femininity and beauty in Russia and Japan. Japanese femininity ideals summed up from the interviews also include women using language that is soft, calm, polite, and slowly paced.

Chapter 4 investigates women's actual, spontaneous use of language obtained from large spoken (National Corpus of Spoken Russian) and written corpora (Japanese blog data). The corpus analysis of these

materials reveals that women in these two societies tend to alter their language texture in computer-mediated communication by appropriating conventionally male language for various purposes. This computer-mediated discourse presents an explicit difference from conversation discourse, which demonstrates interviewees' acute awareness of avoiding male language. Russian women appropriate male language by combining male and female modes of speech, incorporating emphatic, coarse vocabulary and softening expressions. In blogs, Japanese women frequently use sentence-final particles *zo* and *ze*, both of which have strong linkage to the male gender in real-world discourse. By doing so, Russian and Japanese women aim to add emotionality to their narration and create individual styles and identities.

Chapter 5 provides a general statement of the main research results, contributions, and limitations. The study also confirms a constant interaction between women's ideals and their evolving linguistic behavior. It suggests that the notions and ideals of feminine beauty are fluid and undergo transformations. Women in both countries are moving toward more diverse gender expressions and away from socially imposed language canons. Unfortunately, the author does not expand on the reasons behind this transformation.

Konstantinovskaia's monograph comes at a critical moment and with crucial implications. Both Russia and Japan have undergone great politico-economic and sociocultural transformations. The gender ideology also encounters contestation and contradiction between expected ideals and women's own ideals on femininity and beauty, especially through computer-mediated communicative discourse. Women's ideals concerning femininity and beauty, which are often suppressed in traditional media like televised commercials, are increasingly echoed in the real world. Therefore, it seems in order, here, to applaud Konstantinovskaia's monograph. First, this book is crucial in providing insight into the intertwining study of language, gender, culture, media, and communication for its multilayered probing into the tensions and contradictions between ideological expectations and gender performativity in real life. Second, its creativity lies in its integrated analytical framework, especially filling the research insufficiency of critical discourse analysis (CDA) with stance-taking and indexicality. Third, it makes full use of three types of data, namely, idealized discourses, conversation discourses, and computer-mediated discourses, which not only adds value to Konstantinovskaia's analysis but also sets a good example for novice researchers studying language, gender, culture, power, media, and communication.

However, it should also be mentioned that several points may need clarification. First, chapter 1 aims to introduce the theoretical and thematic background related to feminine beauty in Russia and Japan, but its content hybridity might prevent readers from understanding its main function. Second, the introduction of data collection in chapter 1 helps solidify readers' situational bearings before embarking on the three-layered analysis, yet the reiteration of the three types of data in chapters 2–4 seems rather disadvantageous, for it makes the monograph repetitive. Third, the titles of chapters 2–4 are logically inconsistent because of the inclusion of varying elements. More synchronization between the structural styles and the content could have aided in the readability and accessibility of the comparative exploration.

Conclusively, Konstantinovskaia's monograph is an insightful and inspiring reference for scholars, researchers, and readers interested in the intertwining study of gender, identity, culture, and media communication. Its contribution lies in the exploration of the cross-cultural and cross-linguistic representations of femininity and beauty by indicating the fluidity of gendered language and gender identity and illustrating the contradictions and transformations of idealized and real-world feminine beauty in Russia and Japan.

References

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