



Sexist paradox in the names of female perfumes: A critical stylistic analysis of selected products

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Abstract

Naming of cosmetic products is vital to continuous customer patronage. Therefore, marketers have adopted some stylistic devices which include clipping, nominalization, ellipsis, abbreviations etc in naming their products since they are limited by space provided for labelling. More importantly to this study has been an attempt to reveal an ideological paradox by using critical stylistic devices to show how women have been stereotyped, objectified and at the same time assigned power roles which contradicts sexism. The study adopted a critical stylistic framework propounded by Lesley Jeffries with the 'idea that there is a level of meaning which sits somewhere between the systematic (coded) meaning of what Saussure called the 'langue' and the contextual and relatively variable meaning of language in use, which Saussure called 'Parole' (408-420) and uses the textual-conceptual functions therein as tools of analysis. A total of 134 female perfume names were collated from an online shopping mall to serve as data for the qualitative analysis carried out. The study found out that some names of female perfumes align with the ideology that 'sex sells' in advertising. It also establishes the idea that perfume names assign power to women depicting them as the stronger sex.

Keywords: critical stylistics, describing, nominalization, naming, sexism



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1.0 Introduction

The cosmetic industry has grown over the years and continues to grow; a growth that is associated with opportunities of an ever-expanding business platform provided by social media multi-level marketing opportunities. In 2018 for example, a Swedish company named Oriflame posted sales of €1.3billion in over 60 countries of the world in their annual report. The Nigerian cosmetic industry has also been valued at approximately ₦500 billion as reported by Beauty West Africa of the same year. Such huge sales require brands adopting aggressive marketing and advertising strategies which can be reflective in the names of their products. It is not strange to hear 'sex sells' in advertising and this ideology has been transferred to the names of products which subtly influence the mindset of users. Andersson and Schytt maintain that 'how women are portrayed in advertising has been suggested to affect women's perceived role in society and increased stereotypical roles defining how they should act and behave' (2). It is within the purview of linguists to investigate such language phenomena as Wales, Katie says 'more generally, linguists have taken more notice of 'abusage', the ways language can be manipulated, through euphemism, jargon, ambiguity and sexism, for deceitful or demeaning ends' (340). The study of sexism in cosmetics and the objectification of women in advertisements is not new, researchers like Nur and Musa have adopted feminist stylistics to look at language as a carrier of ideology communicating 'harmful underlying messages that could result in women being perceived as sex objects, passive and undignified' (21). There is also a general belief that 'constant misconceptions of beauty ... reported a sense of insecurities and inadequacies are constantly instilled in women to invoke purchase desires' (21). The gap in such studies however, is that power relations attributed to women as found within the names of cosmetic products has not been foregrounded. This study then attempts to look at the naming of female perfumes to reveal underlying sexist discrimination and at the same time, a conferment of power to the woman. Therefore, by investigating ideological conceptions of names of perfumes, a new discovery of what Gavins calls the 'text worlds' could be unravelled.

1.2. Sexism

Being politically correct these days comes with the numerous sensitivities of a people; sensitivities that were before now not recognized or even given a name. Today, women and men have seen the need not to refer to women as the weaker sex and so any labelling, inference, act or action at reducing or dehumanizing the woman is not appreciated. From the Merriam-Webster dictionary, Sexism has two entries:

1. Prejudice or discrimination based on sex; especially: discrimination against women.
2. Behaviour, conditions, or attitudes that foster stereotypes of social roles based on sex. The English Oxford Dictionary has sexism to mean: 'Prejudice, stereotyping, or discrimination, typically against women, on the basis of sex. Sexism in language is an offensive reminder of the way the culture sees women'. In language, we can say that this offensive attitude towards

women is captured in words and sometimes in the collective inference (pragmatic) by a culture but not necessarily found in the individual words uttered (semantic).

Bukola Adebayo writes about how Hillary Clinton changed her Twitter biography after an interview with Chimamanda Adichie. Adichie raised some bias about the former first lady starting her biography with 'wife'. Before the interview, Clinton had written:

'Wife, mom, grandma, women + kids advocate, FLOTUS, Senator, Sec State, hair icon, pantsuit aficionado, 2016 presidential candidate.' Adichie expressed feelings of being upset because when she looked at Bill Clinton's biography, he didn't start his with 'husband'. Hillary then changed her biography after the interview to '2016 Democratic Nominee, Sec State, Senator, hair icon. Mom, Wife, Grandma x 2, lawyer, advocate, fan of walks in the woods & standing up for our democracy.' This just shows how sensitive male and female roles are now perceived.

However, not every feminist agrees with such an attack on a woman deciding to be recognized first of all as a 'wife', because in fact, being a wife or housewife can be a deliberate and very tedious path for a woman, meaning, perception of sexism is changing and a concept we can't avoid talking about. Sara Mills in her *Language and Sexism* cites Vetterling –Braggin on a definition of sexism to mean 'the practices whereby someone foregrounds gender when it is not the most salient feature' (1). She however disassociates herself from this definition because it assumes sexism 'is simply an individual mistake or slip caused by thoughtlessness or lack of awareness (although it is, of course, sometimes the result of these factors) which can be rectified by simply pointing out the error and suggesting alternative usages' (1). For her, sexism and 'racism and other discriminatory forms of language, stems from larger societal forces, wider institutionalised inequalities of power and ultimately, therefore, conflict over who has rights to certain positions and resources' (1).

From the statement above, we can deduce that sexism is not only captured in language or the actual words uttered by a speaker or writer but the context which listeners or readers attach as contributing factors in making judgments as to if a statement is sexist or not. We are informed by Sara Mills:

Statements may be considered to be sexist if they rely on **stereotypical and outdated beliefs**, when referring to a particular woman (i.e. 'Look at you crying over this film – women are so emotional'). Here, it is assumed that the woman referred to is exhibiting behaviour which is typical of feminine women and therefore she is being classified less as a person in her own right, with her own feelings, but rather as simply an anonymous member of a social group, experiencing an emotion due to membership of that group. A further factor in statements being considered sexist is **when they imply that men's experience is human experience** (to give an example from a textbook: 'Circumcision was common amongst Americans in the 1950s' – where it is only male circumcision which is, in fact, being referred to). Another factor in the judgement of

statements as sexist is **when they are based on the presupposition that any activity associated with women is necessarily trivial or secondary in relation to male activities** (for example, 'Women tennis players get lower prize money at Wimbledon because the game is less exciting'). These beliefs are ones which are affirmed in some measure by conservative and stereotypical beliefs, some of which have been institutionalised and which form part of a background common sense which it is assumed that speakers and writers can draw on (2) (highlights mine).

In summary, this paper adopts a working definition of sexism to mean prejudice, discrimination and objectification of women or attitudes that foster stereotypes of social roles based on sex or gender, especially against women and girls and does not consider emerging issues posed by lesbians, gay, bisexuals, transgender and queer.

2.0 Theoretical Framework

This study has adopted a critical stylistic framework propounded by Lesley Jeffries with the 'idea that there is a level of meaning which sits somewhere between the systematic (coded) meaning of what Saussure called the 'langue' and the contextual and relatively variable meaning of language in use, which Saussure called 'Parole' (408-420) and uses the textual-conceptual functions therein as tools of analysis. 'All of the textual-conceptual functions that are the basis of critical stylistic analysis are part of the ideational function of language as they create a particular view of the world (or text world)' (412). These tools include:

- a. Naming and Describing
- b. Representing Actions/Events/States
- c. Equating and Contrasting
- d. Exemplifying and Enumerating
- e. Prioritising
- f. Implying and Assuming
- g. Negating
- h. Hypothesising
- i. Presenting others' speech and thoughts
- j. Representing time, space and society

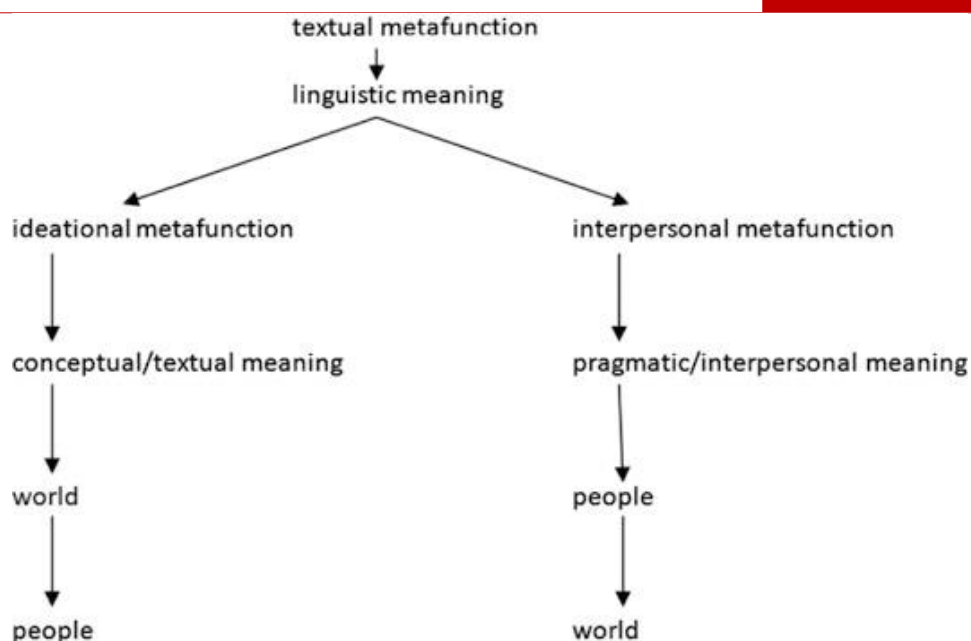


FIG. 1. Diagram representing the Metafunctions of language and their relationship to meaning, adapted from U. Tabbert (38).

Critical Stylistics

Critical Stylistics is a relatively new branch of stylistics propounded by Lesley Jeffries in 2010. This approach to linguistics provides richer insights into the interpretation of meaning by looking at ideologies and power relations in texts; fictional and non-fictional. Jeffries justifies this concept as ‘a reaction to the rise of critical discourse analysis as an increasingly influential approach to ideology in language’ (408-420). Jeffries says there is a difference between critical discourse analysis (also known as CDA) and critical stylistics:

The important distinguishing feature of critical stylistics, then, is the interest it has in exposing the underlying ideologies of texts. This aim is shared with CDA, though CDA has recently become much less interested, it seems to me, in developing the analytical tools of textual analysis and more interested in contextualization (159).

Dorpar maintains that ‘critical stylistics is largely inspired and informed by critical linguistics and critical discourse analysis’ (2). Jeffries further states that ‘indeed, the development of a specifically ideological or ‘critical’ stylistics has led me to the conclusion that the tools of analysis that we need to perform all kinds of text analysis are the same. In other words, texts make meaning in fundamentally the same way, whether they are poems, novels, newspapers or political manifests’ (408). In addition, Norgaard et al support the term as ‘used to refer to stylistic work investigating the ways in which social meanings are manifested through language’ (11). They go further to state that critical linguistics and critical discourse

analysis are related with CDA and assumed to be the umbrella term for both of them. This is particularly important because critical linguistics associated with Roger Fowler and his colleagues first set out to uncover how social meanings, such as power and ideology, were expressed through language and how language impacted on the way we perceive the world. Norman Fairclough then turned this trend of thought into critical discourse analysis. Both these fields however, are based on M.A.K Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) branching from the attention he paid to linguistic constructivism with its claim that all texts realize contextual factors such as register, genre and ideology (11).

Analytical Framework

This study has adopted a qualitative approach to examine instances of latent ideology which exists in the chosen data. This method is particularly favourable to such a study as maintained by Uwe Flick who affirms that a qualitative approach enables us to look more in-depth at the text and to describe and explain linguistic revelations, to understand, describe and sometimes explain social phenomena 'from the inside' (5). A corpus of 134 women fragrances has been sampled from an online store, Jumia.com, with perfume brands available for purchase in Nigeria. This method provides us with a wider range of products found across the country than what would have been available in single corner shops.

Data Analysis

This analysis takes two major ideological assumptions into consideration to establish what happens whenever humans apply perfumes and fragrances. The first assumption is that we 'wear' perfumes because once it has been applied to the pulse areas; we are then engulfed by the fragrance. This idea of being engulfed is like a 'jacket' we have put on, wearing the brand of the fragrance. This action can be likened to an endorsement by the 'wearer', the same thing as putting on a shirt with a logo or a badge of a university or institution; a tick for *Nike* or a sail for *Nautica* which inscribes designer clothing brands. In this case, the signature scent is worn and the bearer 'ideologically' becomes an ambassador for the brand as captured in the verb 'wear'. The second assumption is that maintained by Kandhasamy and Songmun that 'the sense of smell plays an important role in the physiological effects of mood, stress, and working capacity'. Their research further examines 'the influence of fragrances such as perfumes and room fresheners on the psychophysical activities of humans ... and its significance is gradually increasing in the medical and cosmetic industries' with established cases of aromatherapy. Science has proven that perfumes have a 'feel-good' effect. Whenever we have a pleasurable experience a substance called Dopamine is released to our brain. Healthline.com maintains that 'the reward centre in your brain releases dopamine in response to pleasurable experiences. This part of your brain is also closely linked to memory and motivation'. Some of these scents are most attractive to men with some of them serving as aphrodisiacs and libido

enhancers. These two assumptions consolidate the idea that wearing perfumes changes the 'wearer's' and 'perceiver's' ideology consciously or unconsciously.

Naming and Describing.

This tool reveals stylistic choices that product marketers have chosen to sell an idea. Several stylistic devices are employed with naming, such as elision, foregrounding, clipping, metaphors and so on because of the space constraint on the product bottles. So, a unique method of nominalization which Mills 'refers to the morphological derivation of a noun from a verb' (61) is mostly employed. This syntactic change provides a stylistic naming strategy which also changes other word classes to nominals like in the examples: *Obsession* (noun from the verb *obsess*) *Perceive* (verb), *Guilty* (adjective), *Forever* (adverb), *Explore* (verb). In some cases of nominalization 'most of them do no more than provide some economy in the language, so that we are not objected to put each process into its own clause' (61) while in other cases it serves as a 'useful grammatical process, whereby the verb changes into a noun and various other participants may be left unmentioned for good reason (such as not knowing their identity) may also be used for less straightforward processes, including hiding the identity of participants, reifying the process and creating existential presuppositions' (62). Roger Fowler maintains that 'nominalization is a radical syntactic transformation of a clause, which has extensive structural consequences, and offers substantial ideological opportunities ... nominalization was, inherently, potentially mystificatory; that it permitted habits of concealment, particularly in the areas of power-relations and writers' attitudes' (80).

Mystification in nominalization and economy in perfume names can be revealed when we insert 'I am' in front of each perfume name, meaning the 'wearer' of the perfume ideologically declares she is what she is wearing. In this case we have: 'I am' *Beauty*, 'I am' *Vegas Dream*, 'I am' *Far Away*, 'I am' *Shimmering Heat*, 'I am' *Seduction*, 'I am' *3am*, 'I am' *Female Charm*, 'I am' *Plum Drops*, 'I am' *Diamond and Sapphires* and the same thing can be applied to the 34 perfume names collated.

Implying and Assuming.

We can use this tool to unravel the meaning behind perfume names which do not only hold sexual references but also reveal demeaning objectification of women. We have not limited our word definitions to conventional dictionaries but have also looked at popular or urban dictionaries which account for popular word use mostly among a younger generation who ascribe social meaning to words or slang as a means of mystification which nominalization is capable of producing. The following examples are quite revealing:

- i. *Sugar Baby*: A young person who receives cash, gifts or other financial and material benefits in exchange for being in an intimate relationship, usually including sex as

part of the transaction. The paying partner is typically wealthier and older (Wikipedia).

- ii. *Queen of Hearts*: A woman who has gained the adoration of the public (yourdictionary).

A woman who seduces and teases men. Makes them fall for her and just plays with them. She belongs to no one (urbandictionary).

A control freak. A rather nasty, manipulative, self-appointed queen for all events relating to anything in her limited, but tightly-reigned little world (urbandictionary).

- iii. *XX*: This means a double kiss or kiss kiss.
- iv. *3 AM*: 3 am in some circles is known as the 'witching hour' (urbandictionary).
- v. *5th Avenue Nights*: This is a metaphor that likens a woman to 'a street running north and south in Manhattan borough of New York City, famous for the elegance of its shopping district and its wealthy residential sections' (whatdoesthatmean).
- vi. *Provocative Woman*: Provocative means causing annoyance, anger, or another strong reaction, especially deliberately. Something that provokes or stimulates, usually in a sexual way (urbandictionary).

The names below depict names that ideologically objectify women by presenting them as 'things' that can be acquired:

- i. Red Diamond
- ii. Heat Wild Orchid
- iii. Little Black Dress
- iv. Diamonds and Rubbies
- v. Red Door
- vi. Diamonds and Sapphires
- vii. Amethyst
- viii. Diamonds and Emeralds
- ix. Little White Dress
- x. Rare Gold

'Power' Relations in Female Perfume Names

So far, this study has provided examples of names that objectify and present women as 'things' to be possessed by men or as symbols with sexist connotations. These same examples can be looked at from another perspective revealing the same examples portraying women to wield certain powers over men, therefore placing them in a position of authority and as people who own the qualities to dominate men. The nominalization of perfume names can be subjected to a *processes* and *participants* test to establish a syntax semantic relationship. This test would reveal who the actors are and what roles they play in carrying out actions. The **Agent** or Subject is the 'one' in focus doing 'something' to another person referred to as the

Patient or Direct Object or the receiver of the action being performed. The Agent is seen as occupying a position of authority with an ability to carry out certain functions on the receiver revealed by the performative verb. This ability for utterances to carry out specific functions has been captured by John Searle as speech acts. He uses Felicity Conditions to determine the validity of verbal exchanges:

- a. Futurity condition: each party is to perform (or refrain from performing) a future act.
- b. Ability condition: each party is able (physically, mentally and/or financially) to perform the required act and will do something to further that performance.
- c. Non-expectancy condition: a party is not expected to do the act in the ordinary course of affairs.
- d. Benefit condition: each party sincerely wants the other party's performance of the act and it is that desire that motivates entering into a bargain. (ucsd.edu.com).

We would now examine the same names of perfumes with Searle's felicity conditions to see how power has been vested to the woman.

- i. *Sugar Baby*: if the 'wearers' ideology is to be conditioned by the name of the perfume and we investigate her possession of such abilities to perform the said role, our answer would be in the affirmative. In other words, if she meets the conditions of being young and being able to benefit financially from an older wealthier man, she has the ability to function as a Sugar Baby. Therefore, a woman who meets the felicity conditions of the said action is the **agent** and not the **patient / direct object** or 'victim' of objectivity but rather, the initiator and beneficiary of her actions. By implying and assuming, we can infer that not everyone has the ability and 'skill' to be a sugar baby, therefore those who possess such potential and use it for their social good are not victims of this act but agents in action.
- ii. *Queen of Hearts*: Declaring a queen presupposes that a man cannot perform in this position. Therefore, a queen of hearts is a role reserved for women to function. The social meaning ascribed to this name also implies that the woman has the ability to tease men and get what she wants from them consciously and deliberately. She is then the agent while the men are the patients /direct objects and victims in this relationship.
- iii. *3 AM*: This time referent which alludes to a 'witching' hour is one that depicts total authority to the woman, as only women can be said to be witches. By implicature, the woman is transformed to wield absolute power at this time of the day and can perform actions that bind men in a spell with her prowess.
- iv. *5th Avenue Nights*: By assuming the woman embodies everything that goes on these nights, that is, radiating luxury and leading nights of debauchery, she would have power to control everything that goes on within this premises.

- v. *Provocative Woman*: We can imply and assume that the woman here has the ability to provoke strong emotions of anger or lust.

Conclusion

This research has been an attempt to present the sexist paradox in the names of female perfumes from a critical stylistics perspective. We set out to prove that the names of female perfumes are sexist and objectify women and at the same time, these names bequeath power to women presenting them as agents and not patients /direct objects. This conclusion is a paradox as it contains two opposite ideas that might seem unlikely. We can further infer that this stylistic technique as encapsulated by the idea of nominalization being mysterious is employed to drive cosmetic brands which would be selling 'sex' and at the same time selling the strength of a woman as traits to be proud of condition the mindset of consumers. The study also revealed the meaning of these perfume names using textual conceptual function tools particularly naming and describing and implying and assuming. We also established how linguistic patterns assigned power to women and at the same time objectivised them. Overall, the study revealed how two distinct ideologies have been stylistically merged to drive marketing campaigns.

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