Containing femininity?: reading against sexualised constructions of leading women in the news media.

7th BAAL Gender and Language Special Interest Group Event (GaLSig): Gender, Language and the Media

Professor Judith Baxter; j.a.baxter@aston.ac.uk
What’s in a title?

Containing femininity: Sexualised constructions of leading women in the news media.

Containing femininity?: reading against sexualised constructions of leading women in the news media.
Why Britain's sexiest MP (who wants to be the new Mrs T) is flaunting her wibbly bits on TV tonight

INTERVIEW by Jane Fryer

Born and brought up in Doncaster, Penny Mordaunt has always been a keen lingerer. Her husband, Michael, says she is "the most beautiful woman I've ever met." Penny was a model before she entered politics, and has appeared in campaigns for Marks & Spencer and Freesia's, a lingerie company. She has also been a regular on The Daily Mail's Saturday Life section, where she featured in a bikini shoot. Penny and Michael met on a blind date in 2008 and have been married for five years. They have two children, a son and a daughter, and live in a house near the Commons. Penny is known for her energetic and enthusiastic approach to politics, and has been a strong advocate for women's rights. She is also a keen dancer, and has been seen in a number of theatre productions. In 2014, she was appointed as Minister for Equalities, and has been a vocal advocate for the rights of women and girls around the world. Penny and Michael have been together for ten years, and are planning to celebrate their anniversary by going on a romantic break to the Caribbean.
Many dismiss her as a mousy hausfrau. But, with ruthless cunning, Angela Merkel has made Germany master of Europe in a way Hitler and Kaiser Wilhelm only dreamt of. The implications are frightening…
Don’t be fooled by her angelic looks, she’s as ruthless as she’s corrupt

A withering portrait of Ukraine’s ‘saviour’ by EDWARD LUCAS, a Russia expert who knows her well
How possible is it to read gendered news media texts against the grain?
Parametres of the talk

- Women political leaders:
  - Angela Merkel
  - Yulia Tymoshenko

- The Daily Mail
  - The feature article

- A feminist post-structuralist approach:
  ‘reading the text against itself’ (Eagleton 1983)
Why women leaders?

- Historically, women leaders are a comparatively recent phenomenon.
- G&L theorists (e.g. Angouri 2011; Baxter 2010; Holmes 2006; Schnurr 2009) argue that the ‘think leader, think male’ principle remains active.
- In the news media, women leaders are constructed as ‘different’, the exception, often deviant.
- Kanter (1993): women leaders forced to take up gendered and often sexualised subject positions.
Kanter (1993) and her theory of ‘tokens’

‘deviant because they are women in a man’s world and second because they inappropriately aspire to the privileges of the dominants’ (p. 225)

‘tokens become encapsulated in limited roles that give them the security of a ‘place’ but constrain their permissable or rewarded action’ (p. 231)
The Pet

The seductress

The mother/hausfrau

The iron maiden/battle-axe
Ways of reading news media texts

- **Gendered readings**: the most obvious, surface, inviting, ‘common sense’:
  - Accept,
  - Enjoy
  - Collude

- **Feminist readings**: critiquing the ‘false consciousness’ of gendered texts; the way texts naturalise and legitimise gendered practices

- **Post-feminist readings**: different levels of reading: ‘it is perfectly possible to derive political pleasure from representations which one may wish to politically critique’ (Gill 2007: 16).

- **Poststructuralist/deconstructive readings**: looking for gaps, fissures, inconsistencies, contradictions in texts (e.g. Derrida 1976)
Reading ‘against the grain’: strategies (e.g. Culler 1982; Derrida 1976; Eagleton 1983; Kristeva 1986; Mills 2008; Pauwels 1998; Sunderland 2004)

1. **Lexical**: e.g.:
   - reappraising words like ‘bossy’, ‘pushy’ and ‘scary’
   - comparing the connotations of the same word when used about a female and a male: e.g. *determined; ruthless*

2. **Textual**: e.g.:
   - seeking out positive constructions
   - deconstructing binaries: e.g. good/evil; love/hate

3. **Representational**: e.g.:
   - crossing/ transcending (Kanter’s) roles or stereotypes
   - using roles or stereotypes as active resources

4. **Discoursal**: e.g.:
   - multiple and competing gendered discourses
   - range of shifting subject positions
The two news media texts


1. Lexical: reappraising lexical choice (Tymoshenko)

- ‘The truth is that her determination is terrifying. Nobody and nothing gets in her way.’

- ‘Nobody would doubt her entrepreneurial zeal. Raised by a single mother in the gritty conditions of the provincial Soviet Union, she proved herself formidably resourceful.’
‘in her country, the German chancellor has become a public hate figure with protestors regularly likening her to the war criminals in the Third Reich’

‘Yet in her native Germany, Mrs Merkel is hugely popular…her countrymen (sic) applaud a Chancellor who lectures the rest of Europe about their failings’
3. Representational: crossing stereotypes: Tymoshenko

- ‘Mrs Tymoshenko’s immaculate blonde tresses and sometimes kittenish ways have led many macho politicians in the Ukraine – and abroad – to underestimate her.’

- ‘When she needs to she is prepared to use her undeniable magnetism…her body language, her eyes, coquettish tosses of the head and cooing tones are almost hypnotic…..’

- But she is also capable of explosive anger. I have seen her shriek and curse in terrifying eruptions of rage: the kitten turns into a tigress’. 
Discoursal: occupying different subject positions (Baxter 2010; Mullany 2007; Sunderland 2004)

Identified discourses:

1) Dominant/mainstream:
   - ‘I’m just an ordinary woman’
   - female emotionality/irrationality
   - ‘women beware women’
   - demonised female

2) Resistant/contestive:
   - female success/equal opportunities
   - postfeminist: ‘empowered femininity’
‘But the stark reality is that Angela Merkel has succeeded where so many of her predecessors, with their strutting militarism, peaked helmets and soaring rhetoric have failed. She has made Germany the undisputed master of Europe.

Not bad for a pastor’s daughter from rural Brandenburg. But as her career has shown, Merkiavelli always has the last laugh.’
To conclude.....

How possible is it to read gendered news media texts against the grain?


