

# **Advertising and/ Is Educating: the use of neutral language in advertising campaigns and its reflection in the construction of an egalitarian society**

Gabriela Fiorin Rigotti<sup>1</sup>

Verena Carla Pereira<sup>2</sup>

## **Abstract**

*The objective of this article is to discuss how gender narratives have been used in the field of advertising, seeking to understand the textual and imagery aesthetics involved in them and how they would act in the process of educating consumers on the issue. Communication and education are "volatile" fields of study, with seasonality and changing conceptualizations; thus, each new analysis represents not a theoretical objectivism based on the search for truth, but rather an addition, to the market and to the world, of a new way of thinking, understanding, and above all, transmitting messages. With this in mind and to support the theoretical discussion undertaken, two case studies of advertising campaigns were conducted, one of them international, of L'Oreal and the other, national of Avon brand, both using neutral language, in order to understand how and with what results the commitment to use this type of language acts in consumers' ways of thinking and acting towards a more inclusive and egalitarian society.*

**Keywords:** advertising; neutral language; egalitarian education.

## **1. Introduction**

Among the various patriarchal structures present in our culture, one is directly related to language. Dépeche (2007) points out that language is like a symbolic-ideological machine which works from, before and according to the prevailing social imaginary, reiterating it. In this way, language would fit into systems of oppression, but in a soft way, insofar as it constrains without the use of brutal violence. Even so, as suggested by the author, language is also physical, concrete, since speaking and writing represent acts of responsibility and choice of each subject and are only not totally free because they depend on the views of man, of the world, and of society that each one of us carries; that is, the education, imagery and textual, from which we all descend and act to maintain or break.

In this sense, it can be said that language is alive and the discussion about language structures should go beyond a passive exercise of metalanguage, entering the issue of education as a cultural practice, that is, as a development process inseparable from the cultural set of which social, artistic, behavioral and, therefore, communicational and linguistic manifestations of individuals and their groups are part. If we apply this precept to discussions of gender, as Fernandes and Woitowicz demonstrate

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<sup>1</sup> Centro Universitário Padre Anchieta, Brazil. <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1964-1601>

<sup>2</sup> Centro Universitário Padre Anchieta, Brazil. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7666-0828>

By understanding the construction of differences through cultural systems, gender studies represent a productive terrain for investigations into the logics, habits, and meanings that involve culture. The discussion about the existence of singularities that permeate gender differences motivates us to think about several aspects that involve the construction of masculinities and femininities, also considering the differences within these representations. In this sense, the pertinence of problematizing the concept of gender is also in the search for understanding the various faces assumed by these differences, in the midst of the power relations that mark social life. (Fernandes and Woitowicz, 2015, pg. 6)

But what would it mean to distance gender, sex, and sexual orientation? Is it possible to have a universalized conception of genders or pre-discursive factors that would denote similarities in same-sex identity and mode of action? What would be the causes of these identity distinctions, which may sound somewhat arbitrary in the face of contemporaneity? To these questions, common sense would soon impose a logical path that starts from the distinction between bodies, an obvious cause as a sensorial reality, to justify the symbolic reality of personality. But it is precisely this apparent logicity that Bourdieu (2002) denounces in "The Masculine Domination"

The biological appearances and the very real effects that a long collective work of socializing the biological and biologizing the social has produced in bodies and minds combine to invert the relationship between causes and effects and make one see a naturalized social construction (the "genders" as gendered habitus), as the in natura foundation of the arbitrary division which is at the beginning not only of reality but also of the representation of reality and which is sometimes imposed on research itself. (Bourdieu, 2002, p.10-11)

The author brings, as the object of this study, a synoptic of the Kabyle people, a people who note semantic oppositions grouped together and organize attributes according to a supposed cosmic and pre-social order: if on one side is put "dry", on the other side is put "wet"; if something comes to us "open", it is because on the other side is "closed"; and so on. This cognitive experience, seen by some as pre-discursive and aprioristic, is reconsidered by Bourdieu, in order to displace the dichotomous look to see it within a historical and socio-cultural perspective.

It is the concordance between objective structures and cognitive structures, between the conformation of being and the forms of knowing, between the course of the world and the expectations about it that makes this reference to the world possible. (...) This experience apprehends the social world and its arbitrary divisions, beginning with the socially constructed division between the sexes, as natural, evident, and thus acquires a whole recognition of legitimation. (Bourdieu, 2002, p. 17)

Gender differentiations and categorizations, it is important to say, are not natural and proper to human cognition, as one might think; they are learned and legitimized throughout life by images and words, they are socio-cultural constructions. By the action of the most diverse symbolic consecrations, such categories become truths through the use of structures such as language, or the lack of it: medicine itself, in the anatomical studies recorded in times before the Renaissance, did not have names to describe women's organs, named until then only as the opposite of the masculine, a negative, contrary version.

This toxic, associative experience was - and still is - the pillar for validating discourses of domination. The "masculine", as Beauvoir (1970) points out, is associated with the "universal", normal, uncharacterized, while the feminine is singular, particular, relative, the "rib taken from Adam". This association is also present in the linguistic structure, as Bourdieu suggests

It is not the phallus (or the lack of) that is the foundation of this worldview, but it is this worldview that, being organized according to the division into relational genders, male and female, can establish the phallus, constituted as a symbol of virility, of a characteristically masculine point of honor (nif); and establish the difference between biological bodies in objective foundations of the difference between the sexes, in the sense of genders constructed as two hierarchical social essences. [The particular strength of the male sociodicy comes to him from the fact that it accumulates and condenses two operations: it legitimizes a relation of domination by inscribing it in a biological nature that is itself a naturalized social construction. (Bourdieu, 2002, p.32)

If, for Butler (2003, p.200), gender is "instituted through internally discontinuous acts, [...] a performing realization in which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, comes to believe, exercising itself in the form of a belief," transgeneracy sheds light on the binary structure and socio-constructed diffusion of gender roles. The possibility of assuming an identity composed of diverse symbolic attributes does not fail to denounce its own contingency: by assuming as a form of expression a gender, whatever it may be, the transgender person articulates a discourse that is proper of the heteronormative institution. And if performance is presented as a fundamental condition of an expression, it is corollary to note that any individual who assumes one of the imposed genders is dressed up: in clothes, attitudes, postures, languages, educations, notions of power and domination. The ritualized everyday experience of "gendered identity" is therefore nothing but a parody, or rather, a pastiche. Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a unique or peculiar style, it is wearing a stylistic mask, speaking a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of mimicry without the ulterior motivation of parody, without the satirical impulse, without the laughter, without that still latent feeling that there is something normal compared to which what is imitated is supremely comic. Pastiche is parody emptied, parody that has lost its humor. (Jameson, 1985, p. 18-19)

In order to better elucidate the question, it is worth mentioning that the reflection on the role of language in the specific theme of the representation of the feminine began only in the 1970s, and one of the landmarks of this line of thought the essay "Language and Woman's Place", by Robin Lakoff. In it, the author discusses how language impacts and is impacted by socio-historical and cultural phenomena through various prisms, among them the intonations and speech behaviors and the linguistic structures involved.

(...) there is the description of a language of women, a sexlect, whose linguistic characteristics are: specific vocabulary ("women's things"), empty adjectives ("divine", "wonderful"), interrogative intonation in contexts where one would expect assertive intonation, discourse markers as defense strategies (epistemic evidence, adversatives, etc.), care for the correctness of the language, politeness, no use of profanity, and seem to speak emphasizing everything at all times. (Lakoff, 1972, p.23).

Corroborating what the author claims, different strands of feminism have already discussed, in different ways, the use and impact of language on gender relations. According to Freitag and Severo (2015), there would be at least three fundamental perspectives in this literature: the deficit perspective, the dominance perspective, and the difference perspective. In the first approach, derived from Lakoff (1972), traits of women's speech are understood as an impression of weakness and non-assertiveness; therefore, as if women's language were deficient. The dominance approach is the one already seen in Bourdieu (2002), which argues for the existence of a socially constructed relationship, sustained by both parties, male and female, as embodiments of social roles where the man has what the woman lacks. In this approach, language is seen as ennobling and therefore complementary to the issue itself, even though the idea is that social transformation should precede language and education, so that language and other forms of symbolic intermediation could also change. Coulthard (1991), one of the arguers of this strand proposes:

Some feminist linguists propose that by changing language, one can change the inferior status of women. However, as we have seen, language use is merely a reflection of social relations. Only when there is social equality will women and men be able to use the same interactional style. (Coulthard, 1991, p.74)

The last approach, the difference approach, is the one supported by authors such as Mieli (1980) and which assumes the existence of a truly distinct culture for men and women. In this approach it is understood that the power game exists anchored in political strategies, in a dialectic that, within this perspective, would be capable of reorganizing the whole gender issue by attributing to the masculine and feminine another connotation than that of opposition, but of individualized specificity. This point of view is based on the assumption seen in Butler's (2003) writings that gender itself does not exist; on the contrary, language is itself understood as educative, as the means for creating and sustaining identity, which is contingent and incidental.

Regarding the last approach as presupposition, the proposal of this article is to relativise this structure of difference between genders, which presents itself as mediating not only powers in its inter-subjective character, but also in its power to present delimitations for subjectivities, since it is on this platform that the ideology of neutrality is sustained. A more recent idea in literature and marked especially by the representation conquered by feminist and queer currents in the media, especially in digital environments, the use of non-binary language and the reflexes of this use in the ways of thinking, living and, therefore, being of those who have contact with it is the object of the analysis to be presented here. For this, two recent advertising campaigns will be the object of study, seeking to analyze the phenomenon of the appearance of this genderless language and its diffusion and social reception, as a structure on which changes in the orders of power can be made possible.

## **2. Discussion**

The methods used to analyze the phenomenon of the appearance of neutral language within advertising start, first of all, from a bibliographical research. Through the reference bibliography, we sought to understand the premises, the claims of the non-binary movements and the forms of appearance

of neutralized language, as well as concepts that explain its use in communication and certain reflections, already possible to be seen in such a recent reality, of this use regarding the social imaginary about the divisions and differences between genders. Thus, through a gradient of subjects, the study contextualized the most important guidelines for the understanding of the examples presented, allowing the considerations to be extracted with coherence and fluidity.

Having the theoretical reference of the introduction already presented as a basis, two examples of the use of neutral language in advertising were analyzed. These are real campaigns broadcast through digital media (websites and social networks, especially Facebook and Instagram), with audiovisual pieces. The analysis proposed by this study focuses on the aesthetics of the pieces, both textual and imagery, in an attempt to understand how this aesthetic uses neutral language and how this neutrality, used for advertising and marketing purposes, could impact the way consumers think about gender issues.

The choice for materials coming from social networks is explained because the dynamics of the Internet enables the emergence and growth of identity groups in a faster and more organic way than in other media and, thus, it ends up working in favor of constantly relating concepts, shifting focuses and issues and even creating polarizations. The political assertions and beliefs espoused via digital environments are found in a system where information is abundant and opinion emerges from various points, flowing independently to the entire network. The idea is that the propagation movement, being for or against something, generates reactions, and this is fundamental to reflect on the most varied debates in digital environments

Despite its obvious influence, connectivity is often underestimated as a mere application of technology that marketers need to deal with. Viewing connectivity from a purely technological standpoint can often be misleading. In the context of strategy, many marketers see connectivity only as an enabling platform and infrastructure that supports the overall direction. A broader view of connectivity prevents marketers from falling into this trap. (Kotler, 2017, p.18)

The increased speed of production and dissemination of knowledge via the Internet brings out more clearly the pressures generated by consumers for brands to be more transparent and engaged and for a change of mentality to take place, which comes up against controversial issues. In this context, Net-activism, consumerism, and cyber-activism emerge, movements that, in short, empower consumers by giving them a voice to act on the networks, charging and confronting brands on equal terms, causing profound impacts in various sectors of society, especially in the market itself. Thus, new ways of doing communication arise and, consequently, of thinking, speaking, acting, among others; attitudes and thoughts arise and may enable the presence of themes that once would not even be considered debatable, as Brandão (2018) argues:

With digital social networks, the game of economics is changing and the first and most important rule of this new game is its social dimension. To understand this rule, it is necessary to understand the meaning of the word "social". Social means interaction of people with people, not company-person or person-company. Social means relationship, achievement, engagement, ethics, respect and transparency, "being part of something", distributing control. Understanding this is the first step to understanding the dynamics of online social media and the factors that have leveraged socialnomics. (Brandão, 2018, p. 30)

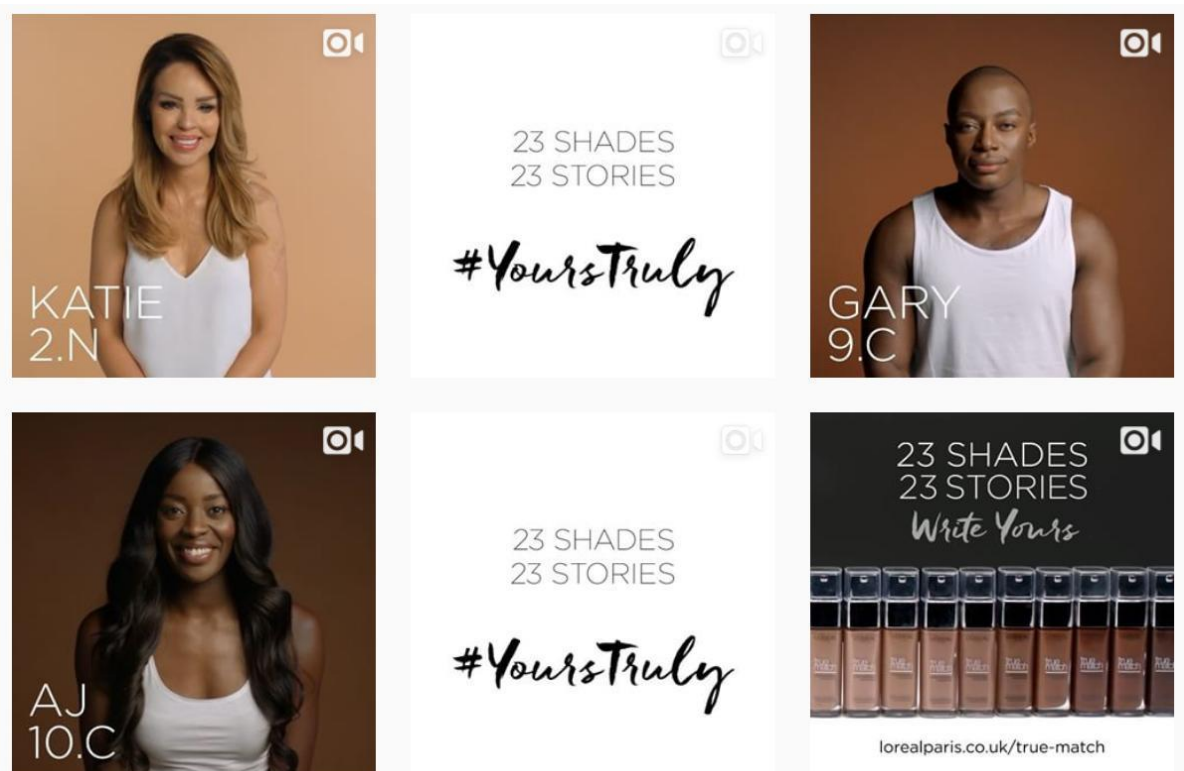
It is in this context that the proposition of a non-binary language in digital advertising emerges. But what in fact does this new textual and imagery aesthetic represent for advertising, especially in marketing terms? How is it being used? Under what circumstances, contexts and for what motivations? How is it being received by the market and, therefore, by the surrounding world? What are the impacts of this reception on social ways of thinking and living? Answers to questions like these are what we aim to seek with the subsequent analyses.

### 2.1 L'Oréal Campaign - #YoursTruly

L'Oréal is a French company founded in 1909 by Eugène Schueller, after the successful sales of his hair dyes. The company's value proposition is, according to the description found on the French website, in innovation: "with this, the founder of the group forged the first link in what is still the DNA of L'Oréal: research and innovation in the service of beauty". The company does not have a Brazilian profile on Instagram, presenting more than one account, each for a segmentation of products: L'Oréal Hair (@lorealhair), L'Oréal Professional (@lorealpro), L'Oréal Makeup (@lorealmakeup) and L'Oréal Skin Care (@lorealparisbrasil), and specific pages of countries like England and France, all in English. On the social network Facebook, there are two Brazilian pages: one (@lorealbeautyforallbrazil) that brings only institutional content, information about events in which the company participated or sponsored and some information about the internal team; and another (@lorealparisbrasil) with advertisements and photos of different brand products.

In 2016, the Youtube channel "L'Oréal Paris UK & Ireland" promoted, with mirroring and dissemination on the Instagram page of the same name, a campaign for the "True Match" line of foundations that soon became known worldwide. In this campaign, for each of the 23 shades of the brand's makeup, a video was made with the most different personalities.

Figure 1: Instagram posts - Campaign #YoursTruly



From: Instagram L'Oréal Paris UK & Ireland, 2016

Gary Thompson, professional makeup artist and British youtuber responsible for the channel "The Plastic Boy", was chosen to represent the 9.C foundation. In the video, the influencer introduces himself and tells a little of his story, narrating his journey of self-knowledge and liberation when he discovered who he really was and stopped worrying so much about what others might think. At the end, he talks about the importance of having a good foundation to elaborate the make-up and about his preference for the "True Match" line.

As in the other campaign videos, the background color was designed to create harmony with the model's skin color, and the music is booming, bringing a very emotional tone of affective appeal to the narrative. The framing, in order to convey closeness and personality, alternates between close-ups and foreground shots.

Figures 2 e 3: Frames from the video Campaign #YoursTruly



From: Cosmetic Design-Europe website, 2016.

The total duration of the piece is 1 minute and 25 seconds and in it, in summary, Gary Thompson extols the importance of being himself, of being unique and accepting himself, using the neutral language at least 3 times throughout the video and reiterating, thus, not only the message of the campaign, but also the messages that he disseminates daily on his Instagram account (@plasticboy).

## **2.2 Avon Campaign - #FeelItOnYourSkin (#SintaNaPele)**

David H. McConnell, the founder of Avon, was born in 1858, and at the age of 16 he was already selling books door-to-door. As, at that time, a form of advertising in which the salesman offered gifts to the buyers was popular, in a short time he stopped selling books to sell the gift, a perfume. Thus was born Avon, which, in a short time, spread its sales methods through resellers all over the world and made the door-to-door selling of cosmetics to grow. The fact that Avon is a company that has employed countless women from the late 19th century until today is still an argument often used as an adjective for the brand, as the text on its American website points out:

On the heels of the Industrial Revolution in the United States, women were mainly confined to jobs in agriculture, domestic service and manufacturing, not exactly glamorous lines of work; [...] McConnell, a bookseller-turned-perfume entrepreneur, would offer women the opportunity to create and manage their own businesses through what later became known as direct selling.

Avon settled in Brazil in 1958, a country it represented until 2020, when the brand was incorporated by Natura, its largest sales force, according to the incorporating company's website. In its networks, one can notice a great difference between the brand's marketing communications in the different countries where it operates, revealing distinct positioning and voices in each region: Avon in the United Kingdom (@avon\_uk) and Turkey (@avonturkyie), for example, do not work in the format of disclosure of specific campaigns; on the Brazilian profile (@avonbr), as well as in Chile (@avoncl) and Argentina (@avonarg), there are discussions expressed on agendas such as those of the LGBTQIA+ community, and it can be perceived in the national profile a greater concern in the choice of models based on the issue of representativeness, be it of gender or color.

To publicize the foundations of the makeup line "BB Cream Matte", the Brazilian Avon launched in 2016, the campaign #SintaNaPele (#FeelItOnYourSkin), which brought as its slogan the phrase "Para TodEs", both in the campaign video and in the graphic pieces disclosed on the website and social networks. Among the campaign models were Elke Maravilha and members of the "Salada das Frutas (Fruit Salad)"<sup>3</sup> project, such as Liniker, Tássia Reis and members of the band "As Bahias e a Cozinha Mineira (The Bahias and the Mineira Food)". For about a month, the campaign had 20 video pieces on Facebook, including 5 lives from a concert of the mentioned project and 72 photos, including advertising pieces, images of the event, covers and avatars. On Instagram, there were 33 posts, two of them in video format.

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<sup>3</sup> The Project named "Salada das Frutas" was a junction among artists Liniker, As Bahias e a Cozinha Mineira, Rico Dalasam and Tássia Reis. "A meeting of attitudes, political positions, social contexts and the celebration of the pride and identity of each individual", according to an interview given by the artists to the newspaper Folha de São Paulo on 07/09/2016.



Figures 5 e 6: Images - Campaign #SintaNaPele



From: AVON Brasil website, 2016

With a quite different aesthetic from that used by L'Oreal, the Avon campaign's flagship video is short, 30 seconds long, and features no lines or statements, but only a soundtrack that refers to electronic music and repeats the phrase "come on, come on / come, come / come on, Baby! The participating artists appear together, dancing in open plan, and also separately, in close up and half planes, wearing brightly colored clothes that match the scenery that, through cracks in the walls, lets sunlight pass through in the form of rays. At the end of the video, the phrases "For TodEs (For all)" and "Feel it on your Skin" are read, just before the cosmetic base closes the video prominently.

### 2.3 Analysis

What can be noticed, when analyzing the materials of the two brands, both comparatively and separately, is an aesthetic difference, both imagery and textual, in the way of presenting the neutral language. L'Oreal's campaign, more restrained, refers the public to a certain formality and a very emotional tone, both by the concise speech of participants such as Gary Thompson in relation to the narration of their personal stories and the choice of neutral colors for the composition of the pieces. Avon, on the other hand, brings movement, energy and vibration, not saving on colors nor on the use of non-binary language - which appears in writing both in the slogan and in the publicity piece itself.

It is clear that Avon, with a campaign created specifically for its Brazilian audience - formed, according to a survey conducted in the first half of 2020 on the occasion of Avon's purchase by Natura<sup>4</sup>, by classes B and C, mostly female and young - seeks to reach a different audience from L'Oreal, since the latter has as its priority market segment a female audience as well, but of more mature and slightly more affluent women. The question that remains, however, refers to how much campaigns like these, impact not only on the market success of brands, but mainly on what would be the receptivity of the public to them. Could we, finally, evaluate that the use of neutral language and different aesthetics, and yet aimed at the same goal, that of propagating the end of the dictatorship of the binary division between genders, has achieved its purpose?

If we evaluate them in terms of market success, we can point to the poor performance of the use of this type of language in terms of concrete sales conversion, especially in Brazil. Data released by the Jay Chiats Awards - one of the biggest references in business planning awards in the world - on the occasion of the 2017 campaign awards, claimed that L'Oreal managed to exceed by more than 50% the expected sales goal for the campaign's target makeup; however, it must be considered that this increase did not come strictly from the way gender was portrayed and communicated, but also, or mainly, by the massive presence of black personalities in the campaign, as the global award itself leaves exposed on its website. As far as Avon is concerned, it obtained a tiny sales increase with the campaign linked to the use of non-binary language, which, among other causes, culminated with the incorporation of the company into Natura. As reported by *Valor Econômico* magazine in March 2021, the use of several other strategies and campaigns by Avon's division in Natura is still essential to maintain the brand, which achieved a productivity increase of around 5% last year.

However, if we analyze the repercussion obtained by the campaigns regarding the various socio-cultural reflections of the use of neutral language, we can say that they were both very successful! Also according to data from the 2017 Jay Chiats Award, the acceptance and positive repercussion of L'Oreal's campaign, measured through interactions with the public through social networks and specifically with regard to non-binary audiences, jumped from 21% in a previous campaign to 42%, a 100% increase in just over 2 years. According to studies by Dantas (2019) and also based on research developed by Fucape Business School (2020) - both studies analyzed a wide range of aspects such as the approval of the visibility message of gender minorities; the appreciation of the brand positioning from the campaign; the positive propagation of the message; and also possible reservations in the approval of this positioning

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<sup>4</sup> Studies conducted during the "Digital Marketing and Multiplatform Content Production" course, taught by Doctor Professor Gabriela Fiorin Rigotti to the students of the sixth semesters of the Advertising and Business Management and Innovation courses during the second semester of 2020.

- Avon's campaign was extremely positive not only to position the brand in front of the queer public but also to echo the premise of the non-existence of gender division in society.

#### **4. Final Considerations**

*Beauty doesn't just come in  
shade pale' women for no reason.  
Why is this representation still  
a problem in the beauty industry?<sup>5</sup>*

By the analyses made, it can be noted that, yes, language is alive and is changing the world, just as it is modified by it. Language is part of communication and, both of them, of the education of the subjects, an education that is multiple, constant, and subjective, although historical and socio-cultural. In this sense, the use of new terms, new words, new intonations opens cracks to new ways of thinking, feeling and acting, working towards social acceptance and the diffusion of ideas previously considered thoughtless.

Still, intelligibility is a complex issue surrounding this debate. After all, one of the main reasons why minorities have gained visibility, language, becomes a two-way street for those who defend the idea of the non-binary as an identity. What is the limit between making the neutral understandable and limiting neutrality itself within new attributes? How to represent and communicate with the idea of the non-binary while dealing with the existing linguistic limits? Finding a middle ground between the masculine and the feminine, relativising "genderisms" or finding new attributes that characterize this way of being? For now, communicational actions resort to the former. And this does not seem to be a problem. In Butler's eyes (2003), performing itself will take care of bringing such questions to the surface and putting into the popular repertoire the notion of the becoming of personality as such. It is up to companies that seek to contribute to this agenda - or at least to profit from it - to take a close look at the claims and, if possible, to hire opinion leaders who can argue in their own way, seeking legitimately in their representation, as the brands analyzed here did. Even if the marketing return is tiny, or at least uncertain, one can gain in market positioning what sales conversion does not yet bring as a result.

Still, one must keep in mind that ostentatously in representation may not be ideal or desired. The very neutralization by replacing gender agents in nouns is not a consensus; it is, in fact, a practice condemned by numerous strands who argue about the difficulties this brings to people with visual impairments or reading difficulties such as dyslexia, for compromising accessibility. There already exist, however, other ways to remove genderisms from verbal language, and certainly, alive as it is, language will soon try to make others appear.

The fact is that this is not a simple agenda and research on it has barely begun. This study, in particular, sought, within its possibilities, to discuss education from a non-binary communication in advertising, and may even be useful to guide strategies for companies that, of their own free will, are in favor of an activist advertising: it is up to the professionals of the area to understand the right occasions

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<sup>5</sup> By Harrison McCann, in a speech for the best campaign award won by "True Match/L'Oreal" at the 2017 Jay Chiat Awards. Accessed on 1 October 2021, < <https://www.aaa.org/4as-reveals-winners-2017-jay-chiat-awards-strategic-excellence/>>.

and contexts for the use of genderless language, analyzing the reality of the company and the target audience to act with efficiency and consistency. Whatever the case, for marketing purposes or not, keeping an open mind on this subject will be important for the present and the future, and may help everyone in their personal and professional development, as a way to act towards a more just and egalitarian society, requiring, for this, to be deeply aware of the realities and truly willing to see the beauty that exists in each and every one!

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