

CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS:
COSMOPOLITAN/ NOVA AND THE
CREATION/MAINTENANCE OF A CONSERVATIVE
VIEW OF FEMALE SEXUALITY

Débora de Carvalho FIGUEIREDO (UFSC)

Abstract: In this work I investigate how the female gender, especially concerning sexuality, is constructed by the discourses used in Cosmopolitan magazine. Based on the British theories of Critical Discourse analysis, which consider both linguistic and socio-cultural characteristics of a text, I argue that Cosmopolitan offers its readers the pleasures of voyeurism, transgression and escapism, among others, while at the same time it creates and reinforces conservative, sexist and prescriptive notions about sexuality and gender relations.

Introduction

The present work is a summary of my Master's dissertation, presented at the Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina. It is based on the theories of Critical Discourse Analysis (or Critical Language Awareness), and it carries out a linguistic analysis of texts collected from the British and the Brazilian Cosmopolitan magazine. This critical approach to language aims at revealing the hidden connections between language, power and ideology. Critical linguists analyse texts to find evidence of how social practices determine the choice of linguistic elements,

and what effects these choices have on social structures and social practices (bi-directional nature of discourse).

I analysed texts that dealt either with sex or male-female relationships, in order to investigate how these texts help to shape the social concept of female sexuality and gender relations. I argue that the discourses used in Cosmopolitan help to establish and propagate a certain model of female sexuality. This model establishes what is correct and incorrect, acceptable and not acceptable for women in terms of their sexual behaviour. Cosmo offers its readers the pleasures of voyeurism, transgression, fantasy, escapism and consumerism, and at the same time it creates and reinforces sexist, prescriptive and conservative notions of gender relations and sexuality.

To carry out my investigation, I analysed three categories of linguistic elements: vocabulary; modality; and hortatory discourse. In the following sections, I will present each one of them, as well as some general conclusions.

1. Vocabulary

In this section I analyse the ways in which the language and the vocabulary used in Cosmo help to organize and divide the world into categories, and how these categories are evaluative and judgmental. I look at how sex and relationships are represented in Cosmo's texts, and I discuss their implications. Four main representations were found in the data:

- 1) *Sex as power for women*
 - a) The power of sex

- b) Women as Seductresses/Temptresses
- c) Men as Prey/Victims of Women

2) *Instrumental role of sex*

3) *Sex as game/hunt*

4) *Sex and Control*

- a) Good x bad sex
- b) Consequences of improper sexual behaviour

1) *Sex as power*

a) The power of sex: Through this representation women, usually powerless in real life, get a compensation in their sexual lives, where they are pictured as all-powerful. Below there are some examples. The first describes the giving of oral sex as a form of power for women; the second describes sexuality itself as women's power:

- As [the women interviewed] warmed up ... they spoke more passionately about how *powerful* they felt when performing *fellatio*. "It's *the ultimate power*". (A Brief History of Sex)

- Nowadays we know it by its real name, and we're not afraid to say it: *sexual power, the most immediate, the most basic and the rawest source of power the world has ever know*. In a world dominated by men, this has been the one area in which women have *reigned supreme*. (The Use and Abuse of Your Sexual Power)

This representation offers the readers the illusion that they can be powerful in bed, but does not threaten in any way the real imbalance of power between the genders that is the norm in real life. Real power relations between men and women remain unchanged and unharmed.

b) Women as seductresses/temptresses: According to Cosmo, one way a woman can exercise her sexual power is by being seductive, tempting, sexy, as we can see in the examples below:

- For centuries, *sexy dress and coy flirtation* have been our gender's most powerful weapon in the *game of seduction*. (The Lure of the Sexually Aggressive Woman)

- The power we have over men ... *the capacity to distract, bedazzle, bewitch*. (The Use and Abuse of Your Sexual Power)

The subject position of a seductive, tempting, sexy woman, again, offers no real threat to the asymmetrical power relations between men and women, as it conforms to the traditional stereotype that women should do their utmost (including objectifying their bodies) to attract male attention.

c) Men as prey/victims of women: Another fantasy offered by Cosmo to its readers is the notion that men can become the victims of our sexual power, as these examples indicate:

- Man after man *falls prey* to [the] primal force of sex.
(The Use and Abuse of Your Sexual Power)

- Think of the men who have *succumbed* to the sexual power of women throughout history, from Edward VIII to John F. Kennedy. *In thrall to a woman*, a man may lose his job, his mind, his home, his wife, his seat in government, his future, when he feels that power. (The Use and Abuse of Your Sexual Power)

This is another consolation offered to Cosmo's readers: some women, at least, have been able, in stereotypical ways, to destroy or harm men through their sexual power, and the reader can fantasize herself in that strong position.

2) *Instrumental Role of Sex*: In the texts analysed, women are frequently encouraged to use sex as a tool, a means to an end, a way of getting what they want. They are encouraged to do that in the traditional way, conforming to the role of the seductive, sexy woman, as I argued before. Look at these examples:

- *A woman's sexuality ... was her passport to the top. Trading sex for self-advancement* when women had so few opportunities was *a strictly practical thing to do*. (The Use and Abuse of Your Sexual Power)

- Harness [your *sexual power*] *to help you get your way in a difficult situation*. (The Use and Abuse of Your Sexual Power)

This instrumental use of sex eliminates the potential sexuality has for self-knowledge, emancipation and development, and it helps restrain any changes in female sexuality. This is a form of delimiting sexuality, of determining how women should experience and express their sexual selves.

3) *Sex as a Game/Hunt*: Another common way to represent sex in Cosmo was through the metaphors of a hunt or a game, and these two metaphors are closely linked to the other representations discussed above. Since Cosmo describes sex as a form of power and manipulation, and as an instrument, it is not surprising that the magazine also compares sex to a game, implying that women should know the rules of the game and play by them. Some examples of these metaphors are:

- [*Fishing*] teaches you *the art of the chase*. It teaches you seductiveness, because only through the selection of the correct *lure or fly* can you appeal to *a fish's predatory nature*. (Flirt Like a Grown-Up)

- Any fleeting survey will show clear *winners* and clear *losers* among *the players of this game*. *Winners* are those who know what they have, and what they are dealing with as well. (The Use and Abuse of Your Sexual Power)

In these representations sex is reduced to a set of rules and techniques the modern woman has to master in order to be a 'good' lover. Human (and especially female) sexuality is described as immutable, following rules women

cannot and should not negotiate, but merely follow and abide by.

4) *Sex and Control*: The changes that have been taking place in female sexuality in the last 30 years (such as the use of contraceptive methods, casual sex, a greater number of partners along a woman's sexual life, abortion, etc) present a threat to the traditional view of men as the dominant partners in male/female relationships, and could be seen as the source of a crisis between men and women.

We can see traces of this crisis in the pages of Cosmo. The magazine takes the side of the male establishment and, under the guise of giving women suggestions on how to improve their relationships, tries to regain or to maintain for men their traditional powerful position. To fulfill this social function, the magazine establishes modes of 'proper' and 'improper' sexual behaviour for women; on top of that, it also prescribes the forms of punishment for women who behave 'inadequately'. These are some forms of 'correct' and 'incorrect' sexual behaviour stressed by Cosmo:

a) Going too fast/being too easy/ showing previous sexual experience:

- *Recusar sexo não é sinônimo de carência, ou de perder o futuro parceiro. Os homens, aliás, preferem que o sexo venha depois de um contato maior, um pouco mais de intimidade entre os dois. (Guia de Nova para Quem Está de Namorado Novo)*

- É bem verdade que *alguns homens têm medo de ficar em desvantagem, por isso preferem mulheres menos familiarizadas com a arte do amor ... Apenas tenha jogo de cintura para não parecer uma professora de educação sexual, leve seu namorado com jeitinho*. Quanto a seus conhecimentos em *outros terrenos*, fale de um em especial que ele pouco domina - *sentimentos* - e vai admirá-la mais ainda. (Guia de Nova para Quem Está de Namorado Novo)

Faced with the fact that men fear women who are sexually experienced, Cosmo does not encourage its readers to try to negotiate freely with their partners; rather, it encourages the readers to pretend to be coy and pure, and to remain in the realm of feelings, i.e., the private world, the proper place for women.

b) Casual sex is another great taboo for women in Cosmo's view, as these examples indicate:

- The impersonal sex that flourished in the singles bars of the Seventies was the byword of the age. (A Brief History of Sex)

- [In the first years of the sexual revolution] women were free at last to try out the *one-night stands; the conquests; the high-sensation, low-emotion sex*. (A Brief History of Sex)

These two examples emphasize the impersonality and the lack of emotion connect with casual sex. They also imply that sex for women should necessarily be linked to

romance and the search for a steady, permanent relationship. The implied message is that women who have casual sex run the risk of being called 'sluts' and therefore jeopardizing their chances of finding a permanent partner. Again, the implication is that sexual behaviour is mechanical, manipulative, and not a form of construction of the self.

c) Another form of female sexual behaviour which is discouraged by Cosmo is sexual assertiveness. The magazine at first describes it as a new way of attracting men (since many men dislike passive women). But in general the articles analysed describe sexual assertiveness as something very dangerous, which can frighten and send men away. Some examples:

- Some men are *scared off by women who take charge*; others may welcome an assertive stance - but *only after they're well past the initial stages of courtship*. (The Lure of the Sexually Aggressive Woman)

- A passividade leva a desencontro na cama. Você tem que dar pistas para ele seguir. Mas *com sutileza, porque homem detesta receber ordens na cama. A habilidade feminina conta muito*. (Guia de Nova para Quem Está de Namorado Novo)

So, according to Cosmo, neither passivity nor aggression are features of a woman's sexual identity, but techniques she should use to please the other, that is, man.

However, the magazine points out not only the 'incorrect' forms of female sexual behaviour, but it also

gives the readers the recipe for 'correct' behaviour, that is, women should be seductive, sexy, mildly aggressive, romantic, deferent and diplomatic. Diplomacy, according to Cosmo, is a great asset for women, especially in bed. Here are two examples:

- E se na hora H ele se recusar a usar a camisinha? ...
É sábio ir com calma nesse momento delicado e até concordar com o parceiro - afinal, ele tem razão quando acha desagradável fazer amor usando preservativo. Só que tem que usar ... *Desarme-o com descontração.* (Guia de Nova para Quem Está de Namorado Novo)

- *Pega bem* convidá-lo para sair se realmente gostar dele? ... Se ele também estiver atraído por você, *o mais natural é que tome a iniciativa de convidá-la* - até prefere que seja assim. *Não estamos defendendo a passividade, mas, às vezes, é mais inteligente e menos desgastante nadar em direção da maré.* (Guia de Nova para Quem Está de Namorado Novo)

As I said before, Cosmo presents not only the 'proper' and 'improper' modes of sexual behaviour, but also the punishment for women who 'misbehave'. According to Cosmo, promiscuity is one of the things that can bring about terrible consequences for women:

- Sara, a 20-year-old secretary, spoke of both *shame and anger* - *shame* because she has had sex with more than 50 men; *anger* because she must hide this aspect of her life or risk . (A Brief History of Sex)

- In one questionnaire survey that I distributed, well over half the men (university students) who replied said that they wouldn't want a woman who "had been *around the block too many times*"; that a woman who did was "*a slut*".

As I mentioned before, Cosmo describes female sexual assertiveness as another form of behaviour that can lead to negative consequences, both psychological and physical:

- *Healthily aggressive women* act from libido, not from *neurosis*. (The Lure of the Sexually Aggressive Woman)

- Angry demands may even result in your partner suffering from *impotence* or *premature ejaculation*. (The Lure of the Sexually Aggressive Woman)

- "Scaring men out of bed finally got me into *therapy*." (The Lure of the Sexually Aggressive Woman)

The words highlighted in the examples above are related to sickness or disease (anger, shame, healthily, neurosis, impotence, premature ejaculation, therapy). Through them, Cosmo seems to be describing female sexuality as either healthy or sick: the healthy sexuality is the one we can see in sexy, romantic, non-aggressive, diplomatic women, the ones who do not disrespect traditional gender relations; the unhealthy type of sexuality is the one shown by the 'slut', the promiscuous, aggressive, unromantic woman, who disregards her expected social role.

2. Modality

In this section I deal with the concept of modality, that is, the part of discourse that indicates the writer/institution's position towards herself/itself, towards the world and towards the readers. According to Halliday, modality "refers to the area of meaning that lies between yes and no - the intermediate ground between negative and positive polarity" (1985:335). The analysis of modality helps to indicate the affinity of the writer with her propositions, and the relations the writer establishes with the reader. To investigate modality, I looked at the modal verbs and adverbs used in the Cosmo's texts. Through this analysis, I argue that Cosmo uses modality to construct an apparently friendly and intimate discourse, and therefore hide relations of power between writer/institution and reader.

The data was divided into two sections: the first includes examples of how the writers of the texts analysed positioned themselves in relation to the truth or likelihood of their propositions. The examples collected from Cosmo's texts varied in terms of the degree of truth or likelihood of their versions of reality. Some were less certain, some showed an intermediate degree of certainty, and some expressed absolute certainty. Here are some examples:

Lesser degree of certainty

- What *may* look like a remake of the old sexual conservatism is *at least partly* the consequence of women

coming to terms with their sexuality in ways which are quite new. (A Brief History of Sex)

- Telling him to "give it to me like a man" *may immediately* kill desire. (The Lure of the Sexually Aggressive Woman)

Intermediate degree of certainty

- The women who *can* [make their sexual power work for them] *will* have the world at their feet. (The Use and Abuse of Your Sexual Power)

- Women *need* to respect their lovers; men *don't*. *It's enough just* to love them. (Practically) Everything You Need to Know in Life)

Absolute certainty

- A man *won't* mind showing off for you. (Let's Get Down to Oral Sex)

- *It's not* beauty that **is** the problem, but the admiration it inspires. This, *of course, is extremelly* difficult to avoid. (Why Beautiful Women Make Lousy Lovers)

The second section of modality includes examples of how Cosmo's texts establishes obligations and grants permissions to the readers. In this section, the use of modality also varies from more to less mitigated obligations and permissions. These are some examples:

More mitigated obligations/permissions

- Women who blossom in adulthood are the ones we *should* envy, as they have all the advantages of good looks but are rarely spoiled. (Why Beautiful Women Make Lousy Lovers)

- Good sex requires that the relationship *should* be equal. (Why Beautiful Women Make Lousy Lovers)

Less mitigated obligations/permissions

- You *must* decide what's right for you. (Let's Get Down to Oral Sex)

- You *have to* know what you're inhibited about. (Let's Get Down to Oral Sex)

At the end of this paper I will present some general conclusions regarding each one of the categories of analysis discussed here (vocabulary, modality and hortatory discourse). In the next section, I will discuss the use of hortatory discourse in Cosmo's texts.

3. Hortatory Discourse

To further investigate the links between Cosmo's discourse and relations of power and control, I applied to the data the concepts of hortatory and procedural discourse. According to Longacre (1983/1992), procedural discourse is the one that aims at telling us how to do things or how things were done ('how-to' discourse); hortatory discourse, on the other hand, is the one that aims at influencing conduct by getting the receivers of the text where it is used to start doing something they are not

currently doing, to stop doing something they are doing, or to change their behaviour in some way. Longacre points out that hortatory discourse is characterized by the use of the imperative, or some socially mitigated substitute for the imperative. This discourse is comprised of four typical moves, which are (Longacre 1992:110-1):

- 1) establishment of the authority/credibility of the text producer
- 2) presentation of a problem/situation
- 3) presentation of commands, which can be mitigated to suggestions
- 4) presentation of motivation (predictions of undesirable results, and promises of desirable results)

The data in this section was also divided into two parts. The first part contains texts which I have called Type 1 texts; they usually start with a narrative, then move on to an exposition of the problem, and finally establish for the reader modes of sexual behaviour. The text below (The Lure of the Sexually Aggressive Woman) is an example of Type 1 texts:

Problem/situation (move 2)

- The sexually aggressive woman has no ... such inhibitions: she propositions men as easily as most of us play coy, never hesitates to tell her partner what she needs.

- Not all such women are acting out of healthy desire. Some are motivated by a deep-rooted hostility towards men.

Suggestions/commands (move 3)

- You're better off playing by the old rules of seduction - at least until your romance develops.

- *Be* as demanding as you can ...

- *Don't be* timid ...

Motivation (move 4)

- Men have a much better time in bed when a woman let's herself go. [desirable result of sexual aggression]

- Angry demands may even result in your partner suffering from impotence or premature ejaculation. [undesirable result of sexual aggression]

The second part of this section contains texts which I have called Type 2 texts. These texts are openly hortatory (they do not disguise their wish to influence the reader's conduct), presenting basically only commands and suggestions concerning women's sexual and romantic behaviour. The text below (100 Coisas que os Homens Amam e Odeiam nas Mulheres) is a good example of a Type 2 text:

Problem/situation/motivation (moves 2 and 4)

- Sei que sou meio chato, mas se as mulheres soubessem o que realmente agrada a um homem as coisas poderiam ser bem mais fáceis [desirable result]. Por isso decidi fazer esta lista de 50 coisas que adoramos e 50 coisas que odiamos.

Author's authority/credibility (move 1)

- Fique certa de que a maioria dos homens pensa como *eu*.

Commands (move 3)

Homens amam

- lingerie de seda

- saber o que as mulheres
mulheres
pensam

- mulher que se dá bem
com nossos amigos

Homens odeiam

- fantasias de dançarina
de cabaré

- ouvir o que as
pensam

- mulher que dá para
nossos amigos

4. Concluding Remarks

Discourses produce and are produced by social practices and social structures. This process, which can be called reproduction, may be basically conservative, reproducing structures with virtually no change, or in slightly modified forms (Fairclough 1989:39). Cosmopolitan is living proof of the process of reproduction of social practices and social structures with little or no change. Cosmo intends to address the modern female reader of the 1990s, a woman who is described as young, independent and sexually liberated. However, the view of gender identities, gender relations and sexuality presented in the magazine does not challenge the traditional position of men as the dominant partners in male-female relationships. Rather than encouraging women to have real control over their bodies and minds, and to try to negotiate

their interactions with their partners and the world, Cosmo works to reinforce stereotypes and the traditional male establishment.

The representations of sexual behaviour constructed by Cosmo (and the vocabulary used in them) helps to divide the world into categories and classes of concepts, sometimes in a relation of structural opposition, such as the division of women in 'good girls' (the ones who are sexy, romantic, deferent, diplomatic) and 'sluts' (the ones who are aggressive, unromantic, promiscuous, etc). Categorizations such as this are the basis for discriminatory practices, not only against women, but also against other groups such as blacks, gays, ethnic minorities, etc.

The topic sex is explored in the pages of Cosmo as a way to increase sales. The sexual liberation of women, and the new forms of experiencing and expressing sexuality that have been made available in the last thirty years are appropriated, criticized and trivialized. The imbalance of power between men and women is presented as unproblematic, that is, beyond the reach of questioning, criticism or change. By representing sexuality either as a bait women should use to attract men, or as an instrument to manipulate and please their partners, Cosmo functions as a form of control against the changes that are taking place in intimacy. On top of that, by describing sexuality in prescriptive and conservative ways, Cosmo helps to keep alive evaluative and discriminatory meaning systems (such as healthy x unhealthy sexual behaviour, pure x lost women, winners x losers).

In order to impose and reinforce its view of sex and gender relations, Cosmo modalizes and mitigates its propositions to create a friendly and apparently democratic

discourse. This intimate, conversational discourse hides the powerful subject positions the magazine establishes for itself, and the powerless positions established for the readers (commander x commanded; confessor x confessing; advisor x advised; knowledgeable x inexperienced).

Finally, the language used in Cosmo's texts fit very well the description of hortatory discourse, that is, it works to influence the readers' conduct by establishing modes of 'correct' and 'incorrect' female sexual behaviour, and by urging the readers to abide by them. In short, Cosmo contributes not only to keep gender relations unchanged, but also to maintain an imbalance of power between readers and the press in general.

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