

# Language Frameworks: Gender



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# Acknowledgements

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## Credits

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Every effort has been made to obtain permission to reproduce texts included in this PDF download resource:

- *Hard to Handle* by Jessica Ayre (1983) published by Mills and Boon (0-263-74312-8)
- *Introducing Discourse Analysis* (1993) by David Nunan published by Penguin Books (0140813659)

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# Introduction

This *Language and Gender* pack is the first in a series of short resources designed to develop and extend knowledge and skills from the *Language Frameworks* download by exploring a single topic. Each of the satellite packs will focus on a different area of language study, offering you a set of classroom-friendly texts, questions on those texts and a set of suggested answers. This pack is focused on language and gender, covering both texts which represent gender, and texts which involve gender as a potential factor in interaction.

As with the original *Language Frameworks* download, the focus is on understanding and applying linguistic frameworks in order to explore how the texts work and how meanings are created. With each text, certain key frameworks have been highlighted and these are then explored in more detail through the initial questions and then more detailed questions.

Because these texts move into wider topic areas concerned with the study of language, suggestions for further reading have been offered, both in the form of student-friendly articles from *emagazine* and in references to academic texts and student textbooks.

# Text 1

## Shower gel for women

This text appeared on the side of a bottle of Anatomicals rose and jasmine body cleanser shower gel aimed at women.



**look at that, the blooming man in your life has left the toilet seat up again. and he's blooming well dropped his dirty towels on the floor. wouldn't you know it, he's also squeezed the blooming toothpaste from the top again. oh, and aren't those his blooming pants behind the door? why can't he just put them in the blooming laundry basket? never mind, at least you can enjoy a shower with this floral body cleanser. heavens, he's only gone and blooming used it all to wash himself.**

**we only want you for your body**

## **Which frameworks would be best to analyse this text?**

We would suggest:

- Lexis and semantics
- Phrases and modification
- Structure and rhetoric
- Ideologies and discourse.

## **Initial questions?**

1. What types of reader knowledge does this text assume?
2. This text was found on the side of the shower gel bottle? How might this have influenced the kinds of linguistic decisions the text producer made?

## **Detailed questions**

1. How does this text represent males and females?
2. Why do you think the text makes such extensive use of the intensifier 'blooming'?
3. How is this text structured?
4. What is the effect of the final statement 'we only want you for your body'?
5. Look for other examples of health, beauty and grooming products that are specifically aimed at either men or women. What kinds of language and persuasive strategies do they use? How do they represent gender? Are there any patterns that you can see in your data? And any interesting exceptions?

# Commentary on Text 1

## Shower gel for women

This text appeared on the side of a bottle of Anatomicals rose and jasmine body cleanser shower gel aimed at women.

### Which frameworks would be best to analyse this text?

We would suggest:

- Lexis and semantics
- Phrases and modification
- Structure and rhetoric
- ideologies and discourse.

### Detailed questions – with commentaries

#### 1. How does this text represent males and females?

Generally speaking, males in this text are portrayed as being untidy and behaving in stereotypical ways around the house (leaving the toilet seat up, leaving clothes on the floor) as well as being selfish (using the shower gel with no thought for their wife/girlfriend). Women on the other hand are portrayed as concerned about cleanliness and tidiness (another stereotype). The anonymous narrator of the text speaks to the implied female audience as a friend, representing females as keen to talk about domestic and relationship topics (yet another stereotype).

#### 2. Why do you think the text makes such extensive use of the intensifier 'blooming'?

'Blooming' is considered a very mild expletive – some might argue it's no longer an expletive at all. A similar point could be made about the word 'heavens' (in the final sentence of the text in white), which would once have been considered a profanity. 'Blooming' could be used for several reasons. It could point in a humorous way to another commonly held stereotype that women only use mild expletives (as suggested by Lakoff in *Language and Woman's Place*). And/or it could – through repetition – emphasise the talkative nature of the female narrator and females in general, which is of course yet another stereotype.

#### 3. How is this text structured?

The text is structured like a conversation with discourse markers that mimic face to face conversation e.g. 'look at that' and others that are phatic in orientation e.g. 'wouldn't you know it' and 'never mind'. These evaluative points frame a series of 'domestic crimes' that the reader's husband/boyfriend has committed. The climax to the text offers a powerful irony: the male, who up to this point is not interested in cleanliness and tidiness, uses all of the shower gel. Depending on how you read this, it could be down to pure selfishness (less ironic reading) or being overcome by the quality of the 'floral body cleanser (more ironic reading).

#### 4. What is the effect of the final statement 'we only want you for your body'?

This really depends on who you see speaking these lines. Some possible ideas are:

- The male – emphasising the male stereotype as lacking interest in cleaning but here using the shower gel either because it's easy to do so or he is curiously drawn to it (the 'body' here could be that of the female or the richness (the 'body') of the shower gel.

- The female: who only wants her husband/boyfriend for his body, especially once he uses the 'floral body cleaner', i.e. not his unclean and unattractive ways and habits. There are several possible ironies here.
- The company: who only want customers for their bodies i.e. as users of their product and are really not interested in the domestic situation and gossip they portray.

This could provoke some interesting discussion!

5. Look for other examples of health, beauty and grooming products that are specifically aimed at either men or women. What kinds of language and persuasive strategies do they use? How do they represent gender? Are there any patterns that you can see in your data? And any interesting exceptions?

### Additional concepts and theories relevant to this text

- Mary Talbot (2003) 'Gender stereotypes: reproduction and challenge' in *The Handbook of Language and Gender*, Blackwell: This is interesting in respect of this text since Talbot explores how **stereotypes persist in the representation of male and female speech** in a range of texts (including advertising material). Drawing on a range of research findings and popular 'self help differences between the sexes' type books, she looks these have persisted in perpetuating the 'women talk more' belief but now do so in a way that marks the less talkative male – and by consequence his behaviour – as somehow deficient.
- Vivian de Klerk (1992) 'How taboo are taboo words for girls?'; *Language and Society*, Volume 21: An interesting research finding to challenge Lakoff. De Klerk found that **women used a range of very strong taboo terms/expletives** and that they had a particularly large number of expletives and derogatory terms they used to refer to men!