WINTER 2016 WINNER

Susannah Meyer

INSTRUCTOR’S FOREWORD

This World of Words assignment was an exercise in enhanced lexical analysis and applied analytical thinking. Drawing upon the skills, insights, and research methods rehearsed over a series of short writing assignments, students were asked to compose a five-page analysis of a selected lexeme that examined its past and present histories, as well as its future possibilities.

In “The ‘Feminine’ Ideal,” Susannah presents a compelling argument that one cannot understand the term’s social inflections without first engaging its lexical history: its grammatical origins, its ongoing and mutually constitutive relationship to the term “masculine,” the various terms with which it is commonly associated, etc. Drawing upon a range of source materials—all while exhibiting an appropriate sensitivity to differences of register—Susannah never gets overwhelmed by the data amassed; rather, her ability to synthesize such information, and deploy it in support of an elegant, nuanced, and persuasive argument, testifies to her skill as a writer and thinker of the highest quality. Throughout, this close attention to detail allows Susannah to glean rich insights from even the shortest of passages. For instance, her analysis of historical collocates (“touch” and “ideal,” followed by “strength” and “wisdom”) provides persuasive evidence in support of her larger contention: that a rising lexical consciousness regarding the term’s “traditional” connotations has shifted contemporary usage patterns.

While Susannah’s strengths as a scholar and writer are evident, her greatest achievement lies in the intellectual ambition evinced throughout the piece. Advancing beyond the data, so to speak, she grapples with a range of questions at the heart of this Thinking Matters course: what do words “do”? Who gets to decide what words mean? How should we handle terms that possess loaded or derivative connotations? In addition to those already noted, this essay explores questions of semantic value, descriptivism vs. prescriptivism, the role of lexicographers in concretizing gendered “ideals” and ideologies, and the importance of feminist lexical critique. This ability to think with and beyond a given assignment exemplifies precisely the type of advanced thinking we hope to foster in World of Words.

—Stephen Spiess

The “Feminine” Ideal

Susannah Meyer

Feminine: whether it describes a man, a woman, a voice, an appearance, or even a word, the adjective itself brings light to social perceptions that are rooted in its history of usage. For years, children have been brought up, often unknowingly, to consider femininity and masculinity as two separate entities with defining characteristics for women and men that should not overlap. However, feminine did not always carry the same weight it does today, and it may not continue to do so looking to the future. The word feminine can be traced back to both the Old French word femenyn, “of the female sex,” and the Latin femininus, coming from femina, literally meaning “she who suckles.” In the first recorded sense of the word from around 1390, feminine referred not to men, women, or people, but rather to language: “designating the gender to which words classified as female on the basis of sex or some arbitrary distinction, such as form” (OED I.1.a). In this way, feminine did not always carry the same weight it does today, and it may not continue to do so looking to the future. The word feminine can be traced back to both the Old French word femenyn, “of the female sex,” and the Latin femininus, coming from femina, literally meaning “she who suckles.” In the first recorded sense of the word from around 1390, feminine referred not to men, women, or people, but rather to language: “designating the gender to which words classified as female on the basis of sex or some arbitrary distinction, such as form” (OED I.1.a). In this way, feminine referred directly to the mechanics of language and was even assigned to words based on some arbitrary characteristic, which largely opposes many modern uses of the word that draw on pre-assigned traits.

About 30 years following the development of the grammatical definition, feminine began to take on meanings related to physical gender to describe people. In 1425, the word came to mean “of a person or animal: belonging to the female sex” (OED II.2.a). Almost purely a biological distinction, this meaning still stood rather neutrally as a matter-of-fact definition. After this point, though, the semiotic value of the lexeme feminine, as Ferdinand de Saussure has defined value, was beginning to be shaped by the value of the lexeme masculine. In 1450, feminine picked up
the definition of “designating an object deemed to be of the female sex, typically on the basis of some perceived or assigned quality considered particularly female. Often contrasted with a corresponding object deemed to be male and designated masculine” (OED II.2.b). This marks the significant assignment of characteristics to men and women in a mutually exclusive way, recorded through a shift in meaning. Where feminine now described traits “appropriate to the female sex” or “womanly,” the corresponding and contemporarily developed meaning of masculine described traits “appropriate to the male sex” surrounding “strength or activity,” synonymous with “vigor” and “powerful” (OED II.3.a “feminine”; II.4.a, II.5.a “masculine”). In this way, while masculine underwent amelioration, feminine remained as a neutral term on its way to pejoration. The use of these definitions, then, while inarguably descriptive, might have also been dangerously prescriptive. Exclusivity and separation are implicit in the categorization of characteristics as either feminine or masculine. And so, defining feminine qualities as a set of characteristics that contrasts with a corresponding set of masculine qualities boxes gender roles.

Shortly thereafter, feminine started to describe men: “of a man’s qualities, actions, or appearance: characteristic of or befitting a woman” (OED II.4). Interestingly enough, while the corresponding definition of the word masculine to describe women is not marked in any negative way, this definition is marked by the Oxford English Dictionary as “depreciative,” a clear mark of pejoration. The contrast in connotation that began to develop here has followed the idea of femininity to the modern day. It creates a dichotomy between men and women as described by what qualities they should embody, assigned by those that are masculine and those that are feminine, respectively. This is a great divergence from the arbitrarily gendered words used to structure grammar. From here, two modern senses of the word were created, namely the concepts of effeminacy and conventional femininity. The word effeminate, which comes from the word feminine, is most often used insultingly to describe men. Looking down on men who adopt qualities that have now been deemed as exclusively feminine creates a society of heteronormativity and builds a stigma around gender fluidity.

The notion of tradition with respect to gender is well described by a definition of feminine that came up in the 19th century: “having characteristics conventionally associated with the female sex, such as prettiness and delicacy” (OED II.3.d). In fact, Noah Webster, an influential reformer of American English and specifically American English spelling, defined feminine as “belonging to the female; effeminate, kind, tender, soft, delicate, weak” in his 1808 English dictionary (Webster). The seemingly permanent act of publication from these two sources with considerable authority in the preservation of English could have the power to justify rigid convention. If two linguistic authorities define feminine in this way, won’t women feel discouraged from shaping personalities outside of these boundaries since their identities as members of the female sex apparently rest on what is feminine? An analysis of words that appear often with feminine in the Corpus of Historical American English describe this precise notion of convention. The most frequent collocate, masculine, shows the decisiveness and persistence of the dichotomy between what is viewed as masculine and what is viewed as feminine (CoHA). Other collocates like charm, touch, weakness, grace, softness, and tenderness, are used in adjective-noun phrases with feminine, where it emphasizes these rather passive nouns as innate to femininity. For example, “a feminine touch” is a phrase often equated to meaning “a gentle manner.” Another collocate, ideal, expresses the convention of what a woman should have epitomized, as in an example like, “She became his ideal of feminine loveliness” (CoHA). Here, “feminine loveliness,” referring to a woman, is an object belonging to a man.

However, while feminine is still used to describe similar convention today, the acceptance of this convention appears to be fading out of use. A look at collocates for feminine in the Corpus of Contemporary American English shows this gradual yet apparent shift. While feminine still most frequently collocates with masculine preserving the gender binary, there are far fewer words in the top 10 most frequent collocates that refer to qualities categorized as conventionally feminine (CoCA). This statistic in and of itself suggests that feminine is used less often to emphasize divisively non-masculine qualities, and, in turn, that such qualities are less commonly assigned to femininity. The addition of collocates like strength and wisdom hint at word usage of feminine that is growing positively. Further, the appearance of traditional and traditionally as more frequent collocates in this corpus is a very important and subtle distinction. The acknowledgement of something as traditionally feminine means that perceptions of both tradition and femininity are changing; the recognition perhaps further implies a rejection of tradition.

Comparing the usage of the same collocates across time brings even greater shifts to light. The word touch in context with feminine is no longer used to emphasize a weak or gentle manner; rather, it is used in a somewhat positive sense: “I think in this business a lot of us are very…in touch with our feminine side” (CoCA).
In this way, a man admitting to adoption of traditionally feminine behaviors is celebrated. However, the acknowledgement of a “feminine side” still creates a line between femininity and masculinity as social convention. A large jump in the roles of feminine in the two corpora appears with the collocate ideal. In more modern usage, a “feminine ideal” is not simply a man’s object of desire in any sort of positive or passive light. Instead, this ideal is a hazard: “Women are exposed to images of the feminine ideal, which causes them to feel insecure, and that promotes eating disorders” (CoCA)\(^5\). Thus, the feminine ideal is something to avoid, hinting at the dangers of dictionary definitions that set standards. This is a clear rejection of tradition that comments on the dangers of strict social assignments to gender. In other words, the divide in meaning between feminine and masculine is a prescriptive condition that can dictate behaviors to fit on a corresponding side of that divide.

Building on this shift in collocates for the word feminine from the CoHA to the CoCA, it appears that the more accepted modern usage of the word feminine is leaning toward a rejection of conventional femininity and gender assignments. Looking ahead at the future of feminine, I predict that total rejection of convention will prevail; the concept of femininity will ameliorate and expand, but the word feminine as a marker of strict prediction will undergo a pejoration and potentially fall out of use. This pattern, I believe, has already begun, and the start of its growth can be traced to second-wave feminism in the United States. Mystique, a very frequent collocate for feminine, refers to The Feminine Mystique, a 1963 book by Betty Friedan (CoCA)\(^6\). In her book, Friedan discusses the discontent of women in the mid-19\(^{th}\) century with their pre-assigned roles of marriage and housewifery. “Feminine mystique” refers to the misconception that women are fulfilled by devoting themselves to their husbands and living their lives passively. In fact, Friedan used the word unfeminine to describe women with non-traditional aspirations: “…unfeminine, unhappy women who wanted to be poets or physicists or presidents… Truly feminine women do not want careers, higher education…” (Friedan). This mainstream start of female empowerment ascribed a certain power and active voice to women, where before there was an ascription of weakness and passivity. Although gender roles are now becoming much more flexible, feminine still carries the weight of narrow rules for women; uses of the word in the CoCA in phrases like “feminine ideal” and “traditionally feminine” support this. In this way, feminine might even become an insult and, to an extreme, become obsolete by way of taboo if tolerance of traditional femininity continues to decrease. So, while women and men alike might celebrate femininity as their attachment to free expression and female empowerment, feminine may continue to denote the restrictive past.

WORKS CITED


Webster, Noah. A Compendious Dictionary of the English Language. New Haven: Sidney’s, for Hudson & Goodwin, 1806.