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Race*

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“Reading Is What? Fundamental!”: Reversed (im)politeness in *RuPaul’s Drag Race*

ABSTRACT:

Reading is a drag term that refers to the common practice among drag queens of “confronting someone with witty and creative language that serves to cut or put someone down” (Jones 2007: 83). Linguistically, it can be considered a form of impoliteness aimed at attacking the addressee’s positive self-image (Brown and Levinson 1987; Culpeper 1996 and 2011). Nevertheless, this study is based on the assumption that drag impoliteness does not divide but unites members of the drag community by establishing “ambivalent solidarity” (Harvey 1998) and entertaining audiences. A small corpus containing transcripts of the reading mini-challenges in *RuPaul’s Drag Race* (2009-ongoing) will be examined quantitatively and qualitatively, either manually or using #LancsBox, a new generation software for the analysis of digitalised texts developed at Lancaster University. Impoliteness among drag queens is thus not to be seen negatively, as the (im)politeness system – similarly to other linguistic features of drag lingo – is reversed in comparison to what happens in the heteronormative society. The better a drag queen is at inventing impolite expressions, the more successful and respected she will be. It should be borne in mind that this study investigates a fictional representation of drag lingo, and that impoliteness, as used in telecinematic discourse, serves other purposes when compared to reality (Dynel 2017; Lorenzo-Dus 2009). Therefore, any generalisation should be made carefully.

KEYWORDS: impoliteness theory; drag queens; sociolinguistics; queer studies; fictional language.

1. Introduction

RuPaul's Drag Race (2009-ongoing, hereafter *RPDR*) is a Netflix reality television series hosted by drag mother RuPaul Charles, in which a group of drag queens compete for the title of “America’s Next Drag Superstar.” The show has become a popular phenomenon, which shows mainstream audiences the dynamics of 20th century drag ball culture – though a sanitised version, considering the nature of the show – where rival drag houses competed for trophies and prizes. While *RPDR* is a *reality* programme, it is actually a fictional representation of drag culture where everything is scripted and very little is kept to improvisation and naturalness. The language analysed in this study is a fictional reproduction of natural drag lingo, and any generalisation should be made very carefully. Ferguson (1998) defines the study of fictional languages as *ficto-linguistics*, i.e. the study of languages that occur in fiction rather than in society. Fictional language differs from natural language in that it “has been scripted, written and rewritten, censored, polished, rehearsed, and performed. Even when lines are improvised on set, they have been spoken by impersonators, judged, approved, and allowed to remain” (Kozloff 2000, 18).

Nevertheless, the show portrays many rituals of drag culture in the style of the documentary film *Paris Is Burning* (1990), such as lip-sync battles and the linguistic phenomenon of *reading*, which refer to the practice of “confronting someone with witty and creative language that serves to cut or put someone down” (Jones 2007, 83). Dynel has analysed the use of impoliteness in telecinematic discourse, and has claimed that on television “impoliteness is shown to serve entertainment, being performed primarily for the viewer’s pleasure and even humour experience” (2017, 360) and quotes Lorenzo-Dus’s (2009) definition of impoliteness on television as “incivility-as-spectacle”, a strategy used to give the show dynamism and engage the audience.

1.1 *Aim and methodology*

This article intends to investigate the linguistic phenomenon of *reading* in *RPDR*. It examines a small sample (4298 words) including the transcripts of the original dialogues from Season 2 to Season 13 (2010-2021), containing *reading* instances; Season 1 was not included in the sample because *reading* challenges were introduced only in Season 2. *Reading* challenges are the most popular mini-challenges in the show. In every season there is one episode that revolves

around drag reading; in this episode, the contestants have to show their reading skills and be as irreverent and impolite as possible. The data were obtained by watching the episodes containing the reading challenges and transcribing all the passages included in them. They were manually transcribed in different Word files, each file corresponding to one episode so as to allow comparisons with #Lancsbox. The tools included in the software that will be used in this study are KWIC and Words, since this research will be based on the analysis of positive keywords – i.e., words that occur more often in the specialised sample than in the reference corpus – and their relative frequency per 10k tokens. The use of positive keywords sheds light on what the content of fictional drag reading is, whereas their relative frequency tells a lot about what elements of drag reading as it is portrayed in *RPDR* are predominant. Besides, seen the relatively smallness of the sample, it will also be interpreted and analysed manually, thus also considering elements that only a human being can notice.

This study lies in the field of Language and Sexuality Studies, and the framework that will be taken into account is (im)politeness theory (Culpeper 1996 and 2011). While research on impoliteness among queer people has been abundant (Murray 1979; Heisterkamp and Alberts 2000; Perez 2011, among others), research on impoliteness within a drag context is relatively scarce, with McKinnon being one of the few linguists to study impoliteness among drag queens, claiming that reading is aimed, among other things, to “building a thick skin for each other to face a hostile environment from LGBT and non-LGBT people” (2017, 90).

2. Drag lingo

In the light of the performative turn introduced by Butler with her pioneering research *Gender Trouble* (1990), the concept of gender has been theorised outside of the rigid binary system of women and men, in that gender is a social construct that people perform ceaselessly. Drag queens and their lingo are a fierce critic towards the fixed heteronormative binary system, as the features that are commonly attached to men’s and women’s languages are intermingled in a quite unique way. Barrett (2017) is of the opinion that oppressed groups, such as drag queens, appropriate and re-signify the language of the heteronormative culture to create their own secret lingo. The use of the “prestigious”, heteronormative form does not mean that drag queens want to align themselves with the groups that use that kind of language; on the

contrary, they want to mock them. Drag lingo, therefore, has allowed drag queens to develop their own identity and create subcultural communities where they feel accepted and understood.

Reading has much to say about drag queens, and is quite representative of their controversial nature. Drag queens are not only men who wear feminine clothes and exaggerate feminine behaviour; they are primarily men – but not necessarily, since *RPDR* has also hosted male-to-female transsexual people – performing a parody of heteronormative gender binarism. Oostrik (2014) claims that the femininity of drag queens is a performance of an exaggerated representation of gender that ridicules restrictive gender roles and sexual identification. Indeed, drag queens intend the performance of femininity as an ironic and political critique of the rigidity of heteronormative gender roles, which are based on the “assumption that everyone is heterosexual and the recognition that all social institutions [...] are built around a heterosexual model of male/female social relations” (Nagel 2003, 49-50). Anything that deviates from perceived heteronormative norms is considered a deviation, and dragqueenism is a socially engaged art that satirises heteronormative social conventions. Drag queens are usually mentioned in Gender Studies as they clearly embody the difference existing between biological sex and cultural gender, the former being fixed and determined by an individual’s genitalia, the latter being a “free-floating artifice” (Butler 1990, 10) that is determined by the repeated actions of an individual. Gender is performative, and language is an instrument through which people perform their gender identities.

My claim is that reading is one of the ways drag queens have at their disposal to construct their gender identity through language. The lingo created by drag queens reflects their gender fluidity and is one of the means that they have to create their collective identity. Drag queens are members of a speech community, a group whose members are “in habitual contact with each other by means of language, either by a common language or by shared ways of interpreting linguistic behaviour where different languages are in use in an area” (Swann *et al.* 2004, 293). Drag lingo creates a sense of drag “sorority” in which they can identify and support each other. It is an expression of the “umbrella” linguistic variety known as camp talk (see also Harvey 1998; 2000; 2002; Bronksi 1984; Core 1984) which is characterised by the co-occurrence of linguistically contradictory features, as a way to mock heteronormative gender binarism. Barrett (1995) claims that drag queens convey their queerness “by

skilfully switching between a number of linguistic styles and forms that stereotypically tend to denote other identities” (cit. in Kulick 2000, 25). Indeed, drag lingo is extremely creative, and this creativity reflects drag queens’ “ability to play with language, create inside jokes, catchphrases, and neologisms. [...] They create their own vocabulary, one that sets them apart from mainstream English language users” (Libby 2014, 52). Creativity is also evident in the term “reading” itself, which is a standard noun that has been appropriated and creatively reconceptualised to mean something new in drag lingo.

3. Drag reading

Linguistically, reading is a kind of insult and can therefore be considered a form of impoliteness. Following Brown and Levinson’s argument (1987), linguistic impoliteness originates from Face Threatening Acts (FTAs). People have an identity face that they try to preserve and promote in their social relationships. Impoliteness originates when at least one FTA is used to attack people’s face. In Culpeper’s framework, negative impoliteness is defined as “the use of strategies designed to [...] scorn or ridicule, be contemptuous, do not treat the other seriously, belittle the other, invade the other’s space, explicitly associate the other with a negative aspect” (2011, 41). Insults, as in the case of drag reading, are instances of negative impoliteness in that they threaten people’s desire to be valued and recognized. An FTA occurs when this desire is not respected, and the speaker does not care about the positive self-image of the addressee. Culpeper adds that impoliteness only occurs when the speaker intentionally communicates the face attack, and the hearer perceives the FTA as intentionally face-attacking. The term identity face, furthermore, encompasses both the quality and the social face that people have, the former referring to people’s personal characteristics (e.g. drag queens’ physical appearance or personality), the latter referring to how individuals deal with the characteristics of social groups (e.g. drag queens’ professionalism).

Minority groups, however, may also use impoliteness for other purposes, such as “ambivalent solidarity” (Harvey 1998, 301-03), which is fundamental to the construction of a shared identity, as both the sender and the receiver of the FTA are mutually affected by it. Culpeper asserts that, generally, mock impoliteness “takes place between equals, typically friends, and is reciprocal” (2011, 215). This is particularly true of non-heteronormative people, who may use homophobic insults towards other non-heteronormative people as a form

of cultural reappropriation of heteronormative derogatory terms and of mock impoliteness, equally highlighting both speaker's vulnerability to the same threat. This is the case of drag queens, who, as members of the LGBTQI+ community, may use negative impoliteness for completely different purposes when compared to other members of the heteronormative society. The intention behind drag impoliteness is reversed, since they do not wish to discredit the addressee *tout court*, but in so doing they construct a sense of belonging to the same drag community. Moreover, the use of impoliteness among drag queens is not to be seen negatively, as the (im)politeness system is reversed, and the better a drag queen is at inventing impolite expressions, the more successful and respected she will be. The inversion of the (im)politeness system is in line with the controversial nature of drag queens, which is epitomised by the gender identities that they perform, and the linguistic features that they use. If we consider – erroneously – drag queens as authentic representation of femininity, then the use of reading is at odds with the linguistic features of women's language, as were discussed by Lakoff (1975); however, drag queens do not intend the performance of femininity authentically, and the use of direct and insulting expressions epitomises their desire to subvert rules of gender.

Reading, however, is not to be considered a kind of genuine impoliteness, since it should not be taken seriously by the addressee. Unlike genuine impoliteness, mock impoliteness¹ is positively evaluated by the participants in the conversation. Mock impoliteness involves the positive evaluation of an insult directed at a target as supportive of interpersonal relationships; it is impoliteness that remains on the surface, since it is understood that it is not intended to cause offence. The contestants in the *RPDR* expect to be *read* by their rivals, and especially when reading is delivered in the context of a mini-challenge, they do not consider it offensive as they are required to be as *shadier*² as possible to win the challenge. Haugh and Bousfield claim that “such threats to person and relationship(s) with others can also be treated as ‘allowable’ if participants orient to the offence as being relationship supportive [...] and also as being in line with the interactional practice in which the participants are currently engaged” (2012, 1103). In addition to building in-group solidarity,

¹ For a detailed analysis of mock impoliteness, see Leech 1983; Culpeper 1996, 2011; Bernal 2008; Haugh and Bousfield 2012.

² The drag adjective *shady* means disrespectful.

mock impoliteness is also used as a practice in which the addressee is insulted for the entertainment of the others (Culpeper 2011). In S5E7, Michelle Visage explains that “when reading, some people can take it personally [...] if it's not funny. But if it's funny, you're almost forgiven. It's, like, given a pass.” Drag queens are performers and for their performances to be successful they have to be entertaining, irreverent and funny; their greatest fear in the reading mini-challenge and in other challenges (e.g. Snatch Game maxi challenge, where the contestants have to impersonate famous people) is to not be able to make RuPaul, the judges and the other contestants laugh. When reading is not delivered successfully, an awkward and uncomfortable silence descends on the studio, often highlighted by the sound of crickets in the background.

4. Language and Sexuality Studies & Corpus Linguistics

The language to be examined in this study is contained in a small, specialised³ sample of 4298 tokens. The data comprised in a specialised sample is compared with *OANC* reference corpus, which is a larger corpus that is chosen because it has some similarities with the sample under scrutiny. Research on corpus linguistics⁴ and sexuality is relatively sparse. Motschenbacher (2018) and Baker and Brookes (2021) provide brief overviews of the ways corpus linguistics has studied sexuality. Motschenbacher (2018) claims that the use of this methodology in language and sexuality studies is still limited, and he also denounces the fact that previous corpus linguistic studies on language and sexuality have focused on the discursive construction of sexual identities rather than on the language in use to index the speaker's sexuality; in other words, they lament the fact that corpus linguistics has more often than not been interested in describing how language is used to speak about non-heterosexual people (Bolton 1995; Baker 2005; Bachmann 2011; Morrish and Sauntson 2011; Baker and Love 2015; Baker and Brookes 2021) rather than describing the way language is actually – and allegedly – used by non-heterosexual people to communicate (King 2009 and 2015; Caskey 2011; Bogetić 2013).

³ This is a specialised (or purpose-built) sample because it is only representative of the linguistic variety spoken by a particular social group, at a particular time and place (Hunston 2002).

⁴ For detailed accounts of the field, see Hunston (2002), McEnery *et al.* (2006), McEnery and Ardie (2012) and Biber and Randy (2015).

5. Analysis

As *Figure 1* shows, a careful examination of the dialogues has revealed that drag reading in *RPDR* can be organised into six major categories depending on the content of the insults; physical appearance, professionalism and personality seem to predominate. These macro-categories have been established by analysing the texts manually and noticing common trends in them.

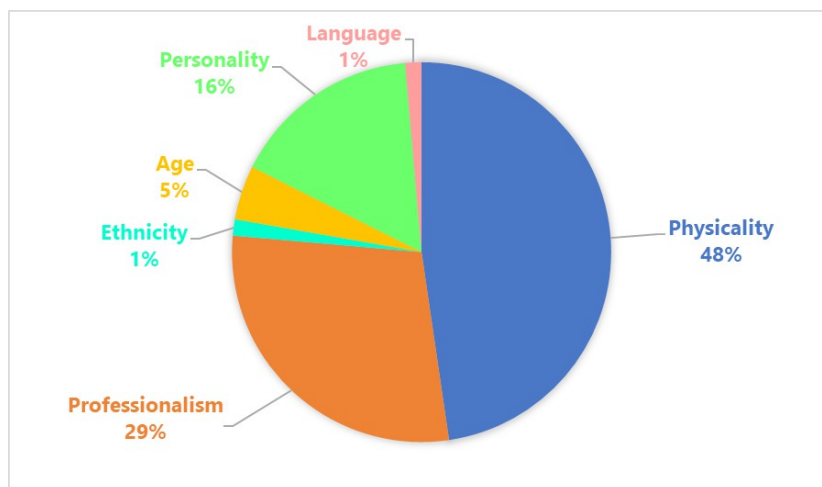


Figure 1.
Reading in RPDR

The following sections will discuss more extensively each of the categories visualised in *Figure 1*, and will provide some examples to get a clearer idea of how drag reading works.

5.1 Physicality

Physicality is the reading category that appears more frequently in the show (48%), representing almost half of the reading instances in *RPDR*. This is based on taking a physical element of a drag queen and exaggerating it in order to make it entertaining. Physical reading is mainly based on aspects of the body that are considered negative for a drag queen, such as excessive weight and

masculinity. The more feminine a drag queen looks, the *fishier*⁵ she will be considered. This kind of insult also includes drag queens’ white teeth, which is apparently of great importance among the contestants, as many readings throughout the seasons focus on the contestants’ smiles. Teeth are important because drag queens are above all lip-sync performers, and during their performances they tend to show their teeth a lot as a way to be more expressive and dramatic. Some of the physical reading referring to drag queens’ teeth are listed below:

- (a) Smile for me. Don’t smile. (S2E7)
- (b) Miss Tyra, was your barbecue cancelled? Your grill is fucked up. (S2E7)
- (c) Jiggly, here’s my dentist’s card. Use it. (S4E7)
- (d) Rob-bie Turn-ter! I know you’re a big fan of classic movies and television. May I recommend one of my favourite classic TV shows? “Flipper.” (S8E6)
- (e) Asia O’Hara, you get your tights from Amazon, you get some of your outfits from Amazon, and apparently they sell teeth, too. (S10E7)

The previous examples focus either on the low quality of dental veneers (d, e) or on the crooked teeth that the contestants have (a, b, c). It is interesting to notice the reference to the cartoon Flipper, as well as the reference to Amazon, which is in line with the recurring references to pop culture, typical of drag lingo. This may be in line with citationality, which is one of the features of camp talk – and drag lingo may be included in this umbrella term – according to Harvey (1998; 2000; 2002).

Botulin is another common trend in physical reading, since many drag queens seek help from cosmetic surgery to get a feminine backside, increase the volume of their lips, cheekbones or just to refresh their look, often with dubious results, as is shown in the following examples:

- (f) Honey, just go jumping in the ocean. You won’t drown. Silicone floats. (S3E8)
- (g) Willam, honey, your face is made out of marble. Shit don’t move. (S4E7)
- (h) Jiggly Caliente, B.M.W., Body Made Wrong. (S4E7)
- (i) Detox, is Amanda Lepore your mother? ‘Cause there’s a lot of silicone going on there. (S5E7)
- (j) Detox, you’re so seductive, but unfortunately, it’s illegal to do it with you because most of your parts are under 18 years of age. (S5E7).

⁵ *Fish* is a drag term for “feminine.”

These few examples show how entertaining drag reading can be, turning extremely impolite statements into something funny. If they are not entertaining, though, reading can turn from mock into genuine impoliteness.

This is perhaps the most immediate and least refined kind of reading, since it is merely based on the physical appearance of a drag queen.

Figure 2 includes the data obtained from comparing the specialised sample and the reference corpus with the Words tool included in #LancsBox. Figure 2 is a visualisation of three of the most recurrent positive keywords in the sample. The high relative frequency (per 10k tokens) of the keywords “fat,” “body” and “smile” may be a signal of the fact that most of the impolite language used in the reading mini-challenge in *RPDR* is body-based.

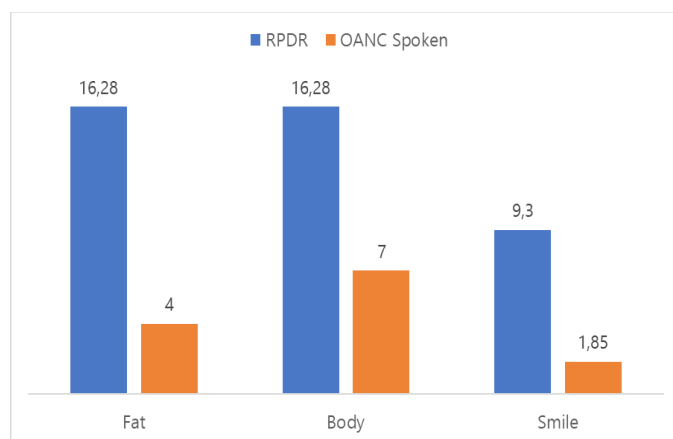


Figura 2.
Keywords and relative frequency in RPDR.

With the only aim of providing a few instances of this kind of reading, it is worth remembering drag queen Jjubee (S2E7) who, referring to Tyra Sanchez’s teeth exclaims “Miss Tyara, was your barbecue cancelled? Your grill is fucked up;” Alaska Thunderfuck (S5E7), when referring to Detox Icunt, who is remembered for her abuse of Botulin, exclaims “Detox, you’re so seductive, but unfortunately it’s illegal to do it with you because most of your parts are under 18 years of age,” hinting at the fact that many parts of her body have been subject to cosmetic surgery.

Figure 3, furthermore, is based on the data obtained by crossing the occurrences of physical reading and their distribution in the sample; it shows that since 2009, when the show was launched in the USA, there has been a tendency towards gradually reducing – with its ups and downs – the instances of reading based on physical appearance, which may be due to the fact that body shaming is becoming a sensitive topic of discussion in the last years. Even though body shaming in the show is delivered as a form of mock impoliteness, it may still promote a negative response to the body in the global society, thus its gradual disappearance from the show. Furthermore, “if reading is masterful insult, then reading a queen for her size [...] is seen as boring, insulting and deeply inadequate” (O’Halloran 2017, 220), as insulting somebody on the basis of their physical appearance is too immediate and simple.

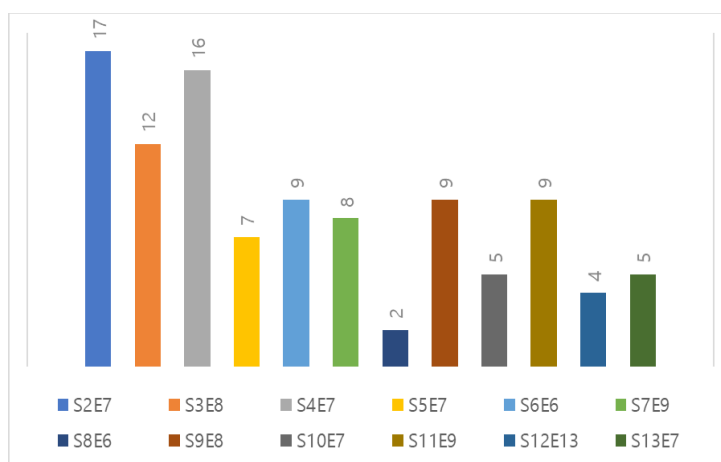


Figura 3.
Physical reading

5.2 Professionalism

29% of the reading instances in *RPDR* are based on the professional skills of the contestants. Professionalism includes mainly the stage clothes a contestant has or is able to sew, the ability to walk down the catwalk and to make-up (or *to beat*, as drag queens say); references are also made to previous mini and maxi challenges where the contestants proved to be particularly unsuccessful, thus becoming the object of scorn. Figure 4 shows that three positive keywords in the sample refer to professionalism; they are “talented,”

“fashion” and “make-up,” which are considerably more recurring in the specialised sample than in *OANC Spoken*.

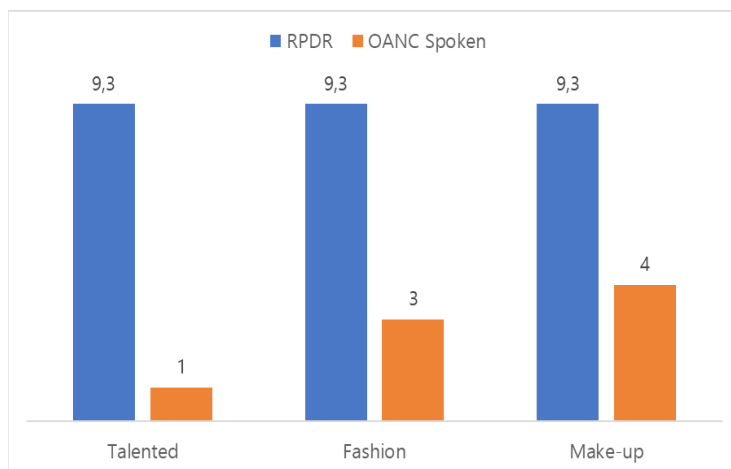


Figura 4.
Keywords and relative frequency

Some of the instances including reading based on professionalism are the following:

- (a) For someone who calls themselves a top, you sure do like being on the bottom. (S5E7)
- (b) Jinx Monsoon, ashes to ashes, dust to dust, you're great at the challenges, but on the runway, you're a bust (S5E7)

Reading (a) is based on the double meaning of the words “top” and “bottom,” which among queer people are used to refer to, respectively, someone who likes giving anal intercourse to other men, and its opposite. What the contestant is referring to is that for as much as her colleague likes to define her sexual role as active, she seems actually to enjoy being on the bottom of the charts as one of the worst contestants in the season. Reading (b) is a semi-quotation of the *Book of Common Prayer* to create the rhyme dust-bust.

5.3 Personality

This category comprises all the instances of reading addressed towards the contestants' real and drag personalities. They mainly allude to silliness, excessive loquacity, narcissism and promiscuity. These are all characteristics that can be

commonly found in *RPDR*, since the drag queens in the show are required to be as loud and extravagant as possible in the interest of their visibility, but also of the programme and entertainment. Joslyn Fox in S6E6 addresses Adore Delano by saying “you know you’re from the West Coast because it’s a four-hour delay before you finally get a joke;” Adore Delano is often mocked for her slow-wittedness, which is often associated to the stereotype of the Valley girl from L.A. In the same season, Darienne Lake refers to Ben De La Crème by saying “you remind me of a Russian doll – full of yourself,” which refers to her egocentrism; in S11E9, Brooke Lynn Hynes addresses Plastique Tiara by declaring “I’m looking for a new apartment. How much are you charging for the vacant space between your ears?,” which is another creative instance of reading based on someone’s silliness. These are just a few examples of the many instances of reading based on drag queens’ personalities.

5.4 Other

Quite a significant number of reading instances are based on the age (5%) of the contestants. They are used to insult drag queens who are considered either too old or too young to be in the show. This is the case of Robbie Tuner (S8E6) who claims “Naomi, I’m gonna give you some advice, darling. No one’s gonna take you seriously if you were born after Windows 95 came out,” to which Naomi replies “Robbie Tuner, we know you’re a vintage queen, but do you have to smell like mothballs, too?” An extremely little number of insults is based on ethnicity and language (1% each). Racial commentaries are addressed mainly towards Black, Latino and Asian contestants, as is the case of Tyra Sanchez (S2E7) who addresses the Laotian American drag queen Jujubee by saying “we have an under-grown orangutan,” which would make the audience’s flesh creep if it were pronounced today, twelve years after. One reading is addressed towards two white drag queens, who are insulted for not being able to twerk like Black people; this is the case of Denali (S13E7) who addresses Olivia Lux in order to read two other drag queens, “Olivia, your teeth are whiter than Utica and Gottmik trying to twerk to disco,” which hints at the Caucasian ethnicity of the two contestants and their inability to twerk as Black drag queens do. This insult is delivered by a white drag queen towards two other white drag queens, thus establishing “ambivalent solidarity.”

Discrimination on the basis of linguistic skills is another very common trend in *RPDR*, as drag queens are expected to be extremely quick and smart in the language they use. Foreign drag queens or anglophone drag queens speaking

non-standard varieties of American English are often put down by the other contestants and penalised in many challenges in the show. The instances of reading based on language are certainly many more in the show, but if we consider the reading mini-challenge only, they represent only 1% of the reading instances. They are mainly addressed towards Yara Sofia (S3), who is from Puerto Rico, Nicky Doll (S12), who is a French drag queen, and Adore Delano (S6) and Gottmik (S13E7), who are from Los Angeles. It is interesting to notice that the Valleyspeak – i.e. the sociolect used mainly in California – is generally associated to dumbness, as it has often been used to portray silly girls in sitcoms, also known as Valley Girls. Denali (S13E7) addresses Gottmik by saying “Gottmik, you are so L.A., even your farts have a vocal fry,” mentioning the typical nasal sound and breathiness of Valleyspeak.

6. Conclusions

The title of this article is a motto repeated by RuPaul and her daughters when “opening the library” for the reading mini-challenge to begin. Reading is fundamental in the drag community in its etymological sense: it is one of the foundations of the community itself, in that it has always been a common practice among drag queens, a way to create a sense of belonging in a subcultural world that is becoming gradually more mainstream thanks to audiovisual products like *RPDR* and *Pose* (2018-ongoing). For the first time and with a considerable success all over the world, these series bring the dynamics of the drag ball room culture to the attention of the mainstream audiences. Reading is an interesting phenomenon for sociolinguists, as it can be categorised as impoliteness, but it actually is not. Reading uses the same strategies of impoliteness, but its effect is not that of creating distance between the parties, nor that of attacking the addressee’s face. Similarly to other characteristics of drag queens, such as their gender identities and linguistic features, impoliteness is reversed. The gender that drag queens perform is the opposite of the gender that heteronormativity would attach to them. Following Butler’s argument, fluidity implies that gender is not a consequence of sex and vice-versa. For instance, if a person was born with male genitalia, it does not necessarily follow that this person will behave, wear clothes, style his/her hair, and talk like a man. The linear association of sex and gender is promoted by heteronormativity, which is based on the “assumption that everyone is heterosexual and the recognition that all social institutions [...] are built around

a heterosexual model of male/female social relations” (Nagel 2003, 49–50). Heteronormativity implies that all people can be classified into the binary system male-female, and that heterosexuality is the only acceptable sexuality. To use Peppermint’s (*RPDR*, S9) statement, “the entire point of drag is to give the middle finger to rules of gender.” This is reflected in some drag linguistic features, such as gender inversion – i.e. the use of female gender markers like pronouns, adjectives and vocatives to refer to men – but also the intermingling of linguistic features that are commonly associated to women with others associated more to men.

Reading follows this same line, in that it takes impoliteness as it occurs in the heteronormative society and turns it into its opposite, i.e. something positively evaluated, something that one has to aspire to rather than avoid. Of all the reading instances in the reading mini-challenges in *RPDR* (S2-S13), three categories occur more significantly than the others, i.e. reading based on drag queens’ physical aspect, professionalism and personality. Following the previous distinction between quality and social face, it is interesting to notice that although physical aspect and personality may be categorised as quality face in that they refer to personal aspects, they seem to be actually addressed towards drag queens’ social face. If we consider dragqueenism as performance, then every aspect of drag queens should be referred to their social face, that is their face as members of a community of drag performers. Mock insults delivered against drag queens’ ugliness, weight, or other physical aspects that are commonly seen negatively, but also negative sides of their personalities, have an inevitable negative impact also on their professional lives. This study has sought to find common trends in the sample and categorise the reading instances on the basis of positive keywords and relative frequency, as well as the dispersion on the sample.

Interestingly, every aspect of a drag rival is potentially something that can be criticised in the reading mini-challenge. It could be the drag queens’ teeth, which are either too yellow or too white, or their lips, which are either too thin or too full, or their bodies, which are either too slim or (to use a politically incorrect adjective) too fat. They are either too young or too old, too discreet or too loud, too white to twerk like a *real* black woman. This is because the most skilled drag queens always know how to read their competitors, and they have the ability to focus on a single feature of a drag queen and exasperate it so that it becomes the basis of their mocking insults. If it is true that the sample is characterised by a significant presence of readings based on physicality (see also

the positive keywords in the sample compared to the *OANC Spoken* reference corpus in *Figure 2*), then it is also true that their distribution in the sample gradually decreases over the years, as can be seen in *Figure 3*, in line with the increased attention paid to body shaming on TV. A further common characteristic of the reading instances in the sample is the denigration of unnaturalness, which is a paradox if one considers dragqueenism as an unnatural exaggeration of femininity. Unnaturalness underlies every aspect of drag art, be it physicality (e.g. exaggerated cosmetic surgery), personality (e.g. flamboyant behaviour for visibility) or professionalism (e.g. excessive make-up). After all, the use of reading in *RPDR* is subject to telecinematic requirements, for it is a means of attracting the audience's attention and entertaining them. Mock impoliteness in the form of drag reading becomes a spectacle, a necessary ingredient to captivate the audience.

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