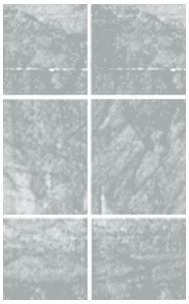
visual communication



ARTICLE

‘Not just a colour’: pink as a gender and sexuality marker in visual communication

VERONIKA KOLLER
Lancaster University, UK

ABSTRACT

This article investigates the functions of the colour pink as a marker of gender and sexuality in cultural models and the multimodal texts they inform. To this end, tendencies suggested by a pilot survey on colour associations are traced in a number of visual texts such as leaflets, advertisements, websites and magazines, where pink functions to gender textual referents, attract female readers’ attention and index both sexuality and sexual identity. Both informants’ associations and the multimodal text analysis show evidence of an emergent schema that relates pink to post-feminist femininity. This is seen as complementing and extending conventional and counter-cultural associations of pink with stereotypically feminine characteristics or gayness, respectively. Ultimately, the author argues for an approach to colour that combines social semiotics with cognitive semantics.

KEY WORDS

cognitive models • colour association • gendered discourses • sexuality • social semiotics

INTRODUCTION

This article has its roots in the culture shock I experienced when I moved from Austria to the UK and found myself faced with many girls and women wearing pink from head to toe, often combining the colour with frills and sequins in an almost theatrical display of femininity. Although the cultural connotation of pink with femininity was not unfamiliar to me, I was still stunned by the extent to which it was used. As is often the case, shock gradually transformed into a strange fascination and I started to look at the phenomenon of pink in a more systematic way.

A number of questions arose in the course of that investigation: Is pink only ever associated with girly softness, or can it have other

Vol 7(4): 395–423 [1470-3572(200811)7:4; 395–423]

connotations as well? What role does post-feminism play, i.e. the belief that women have achieved socio-economic equality combined with a confident self-presentation as unabashedly 'feminine'? How does the colour pink change its meaning when it travels from mainstream culture to subcultures, e.g. gay and lesbian cultures, and their derived visual codes? On a theoretical and methodological level, it is worth asking if social semiotics and multimodal analysis alone can fully account for the many aspects of colour concepts and usage. Can the semiotic model usefully be combined with a cognitive semantics approach? Such a combination could account for how sociocultural connotations are reflected in visual communication and how both impact on mental models of particular colours. Finally, how far can the analyses of multimodal features be related to their application in fields such as marketing?

Taking all these questions into consideration, this article addresses the changing, culturally shaped associations with the colour pink in a British context, the meaning that it is given through its use and functions in visual communication, and the relations between cognitive semantics and social semiotics. To this end, the study links colour associations elicited in a pilot survey to a number of multimodal texts exemplifying the different functions of pink in visual communication. Starting from the hypothesis that colour associations are a window on mental concepts, which in turn follow socio-cultural models (including gender models), a pilot questionnaire was carried out on 169 informants in order to obtain an initial idea of associations with the colour pink. In discussing the results, it will transpire that pink 'contains, generates, and tolerates more contradictions than practically any other colour' (Von Taschitzki, 2006: 64). Thus, it is, unsurprisingly, connected with femininity and its stereotypical features, such as softness and delicacy, with childhood and innocence as well as with vanity and artificiality. However, there are also emergent and less obvious connotations like independence and fun, sexuality and lust. The discussion organizes these findings into semantic fields. Many respondents volunteered information beyond the questionnaire, and it is those responses that are the focus of this discussion.

The main part of the study traces the most frequent associations in multimodal texts, such as advertisements, product packaging, pamphlets, leaflets and websites. This multimodal text analysis draws mainly on the grammar of colour developed by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2002, 2006: 225–38), but also integrates a linguistic analysis of attribution, deixis and gendered lexis. In following up on the colour concepts suggested by the pilot survey, this article argues that in the texts under investigation pink serves to indicate femininity and thus gain women's attention but, related to that, it also indexes sexuality and sexual identity. The analysis closes by introducing the notion of pink as a post-feminist colour.

For a researcher with a background in linguistics, the challenge and particular interest of this study resided in the fact that little has been written on colour as a device working in tandem with language. This gap in the

literature required reading far beyond the disciplinary boundaries of linguistics and even semiotics. The following section outlines some approaches to colour and argues for a theoretical framework that combines cognitive semantics with social semiotics.

APPROACHES TO COLOUR

By its very nature as a physical phenomenon with strong cultural connotations, colour transcends disciplinary boundaries. Thus, it is the object of study in natural and social sciences as well as arts and humanities, and has more specifically been discussed in physics, cognitive psychology, cognitive and socio-linguistics, history of art and design, and (social) semiotics.

Disregarding the field of physics, in which modern discussions of colour date back to Newton's *Opticks* (1704), we can see how cognitive psychology is positioned at the interface between natural and social sciences. It attempts, through lab-based experiments, to account for how colour, rather than being an inherent quality of objects,[1] is experienced by the interplay between the human visual apparatus and visual cognition (Jacob and Jeannerod, 2003; see also Ruskin, 1888: 68). Both have a bodily basis in that visual cognition is ultimately based on neural circuitry in the brain. Crucially, this embodied experience of colour is then theorized to give rise to concepts, or mental representations, of colours, which display a centre-periphery structure, with the centre standing for the most prototypical instance of the colour (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999: 24). Linguistically, this prototype is often realized in collocations such as 'pitch black' or 'blood red' (Philip, 2006: 59). The terminology used to express colour has been studied in various languages, and claims have been made about possible universals in colour terminology across languages as based on human visual perception (Kay and McDaniel, 1978; Kemmerer, 1998; Rosch, 1972). Other approaches have argued for the function of cognitive colour concepts as mediating between embodied perception and linguistic articulation (Wierzbicka, 1990; for an overview of the different positions, see Biggam and Kay, 2006). Concerning the topic at hand, it should be noted that pink, although not a prototypical colour like yellow or blue, or a universal 'colour' such as white and black, is nevertheless a potential basic colour term itself.

Classical cognitive theorists would posit that colour, despite its culturally different associations, cannot be fully or even partially explained by social constructionist accounts (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999: 25). The socially decontextualized methods employed by many cognitive psychologists and linguists betray this scepticism towards social constructivism. The constructivist view on colour maintains that, since colour exists literally only in the eye of the beholder, it has to be explained, in social and anthropological terms, as a cultural practice and system of symbolic values the main function of which is classificatory (Pastoureau, 2004: 12, 87). Classification is achieved because colour functions as a marker of social identity. The colour codes used for and by social groups typically demarcate subcultures (e.g. goth

culture) and also operate along the broader demographic categories of religion or, as this article intends to demonstrate, gender and sexuality. With regard to the latter two, it is not only that colour itself acts as a group marker, but that sensitivity towards colour, and colourfulness itself, have also come to be seen as feminine (Batchelor, 2000; Gage, 1995: 204, 260). With regard to language, the use of colour terms can become an identity marker as well. Thus, Lakoff (2004[1975]) posited that a differentiated colour terminology is typical of feminine speech, a claim that has stood the test of empirical study (Sleight and Prinz, 1982). The association of a differentiated colour terminology with femininity finds a (self-)ironic echo in conversations among gay men who parody the stereotypical gay male sensitivity towards colour (Leap, 1994: 402–6).

It is logical that colour should also play a part in social semiotics, i.e. the study of the ideological function of signs in social formations. After all, social semiotics is based on the notion that 'every phenomenon functioning as an ideological sign has some kind of material embodiment, whether in sound, physical mass, color, [or] movements of the body' (Vološinov, 1986[1929]: 11). Verbal discourse thus comes to be seen as but one system of ideologically vested signs interacting with visual and material systems in complex ways. Starting out from the use of colour in demarcating social groups, Scollon and Scollon (2003) have pointed out how ideology is traceable through the signs observed in three-dimensional space, including writing systems, typography and colour choice. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2002) likewise draw attention to how strategic choices from sign systems convey discourses and ideologies (including particular discourses on femininity). For them, colour qualifies as a semiotic mode because:

- it is 'regular, with signs that are motivated in their constitution by the interests of the makers of the signs, and not at all arbitrary or anarchic' (p. 345);
- it fulfils all three Hallidayan metafunctions in that it 'can clearly be used to denote specific people, places and things as well as classes [thereof]' (ideational metafunction), it is further employed to 'do things to or for each other' (interpersonal metafunction), and in its textual metafunction, it 'can also help create coherence in texts' through colour coordination (pp. 347– see also Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006: 229–30);
- it forms a system of elements that can be combined with each other in a potentially infinite number of possibilities, but 'grammar' rules operate upon appropriate combinations (p. 352).

For our present purposes, we can summarize that, in a cognitive semantics perspective, individuals form structured colour models as an effect of visual perception. It is important to note that chromatic information is complex, involving different, more or less prototypical shades of a colour, as

well as overlapping colour concepts. These concepts are reflected in colour terminology and other colour-related language use. However, it seems counter-intuitive to assume that colour concepts are based on individual perception alone, without being related to any socio-cultural associations with particular hues and shades. After all, people are culturally socialized into colour meanings. What is associated with a colour or shade is indicative not of the colour itself but of the cultural and historical formation in which it is constructed as having particular characteristics and being suitable for particular social groups. As such, colour classification is motivated by the interests of the social group establishing the classification. Historical accounts of the use of colour in art and design (Gage, 1995; Nemitz, 2006) show a vast array of associations with colours across time and cultures. Moreover, social classification by colour is more complex than simply using colour X to mark social group Y; brightness and saturation of a particular colour, as well as its combinations with other colours, can all change what is associated with it. In the case of pink, for instance, one informant remarked that:

> There are very different pinks: powdery baby pink; and deep, luscious or shocking pink. I associate the first with girlie-baby cuteness and the second with feisty, lively girl-power.

Apparently, the chromatic information stored in memory is associated with mental models of both concrete and abstract entities. Combining the cognitive and the linguistic, the relations between structured chromatic information on the one hand and abstract models such as gender on the other are reflected in semantic fields. These are defined as groups of lexical items of related meaning that form structures of inclusion and hierarchy (e.g. *emerald* as a subcategory of *green*, or *warm colours* as a – metaphoric – hyperonym for terms such as *orange*, *red*, *yellow*). At the surface level of language, items from one semantic field tend to co-occur in texts, just as colours linked to the same semantic field tend to visually collocate.

In methodological terms, social semiotic theory translates into multimodal text analysis (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006; Lassen et al., 2006). Features under investigation include layout, i.e. the organization of a page or screen in terms of relative size and position of visual components, vectors, position of the viewer through gaze and angle, as well as typography and colour. Various treatments of colour have stressed the fact that the phenomenon cannot be analysed in terms of hue alone, with brightness and saturation usually being added to the mix (Cacciari et al., 2004: 170; Lichtlé, 2002: 30).[2] For other cultures, such as the Japanese, additional salient features apart from hue would be the matt or brilliant appearance of the colour (see Pastoureau, 2004: 182), while in medieval Europe, hue was secondary to light and shade (Gage, 1995: 69–78). In their grammar of colour, Kress and Van Leeuwen (2002) elaborate on these colour features, by not only discussing hue, value (brightness) and saturation, but also purity, i.e. the degree to which

a colour is the mixture of other, 'primary' colours, differentiation through combination with other colours (see also Ruskin, 1888: 68) and modulation, i.e. the degree to which colour is either 'textured with different tints and shades' (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2002: 356; see also Goethe, 1963[1808]: 184) or 'flat'. In a second analytical step, the visual elements and their significance are set in relation to the verbal components of the multimodal text to see if and how the two reinforce, modify or explain each other.

In the remainder of the article, I seek to analyse how one particular colour – pink – features in visual texts such as commercial advertisements, non-profit organizations' websites and pamphlets, as well as magazines, and how its use is reinforced or contradicted by the texts' linguistic components. This multimodal analysis supplements the provisional results of a pilot questionnaire survey on associations with the colour pink. This combination of methods and data, if extended, can explore the links between cultural determinants of colour use and cognitive colour schemata that are in turn connected with mental models of abstract categories such as gender. Rather than merely describing multimodal texts in semiotic terms, then, the subsequent analysis combines Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2002, 2006) framework of visual analysis with an interpretation of the cognitive colour concepts reflected in the texts. Bearing further in mind that 'language habits . . . affect the speaker's, and the language community's perception of [a] colour' (Philip, 2006: 88), the analysis extends to linguistic features and their relation to visual components. Finally, the applications of colour codes and connotations in marketing are also discussed. The next section elaborates on culturally shaped colour associations.

PINK: FEMININE AND FLUFFY, GARISH AND GAY

To get an initial impression of colour associations, an explorative questionnaire survey was carried out that represents an adapted replication of the one conducted by Heller (1989) in the German cultural context. After having been tested on seven people of different ages and genders, a revised questionnaire was snowballed through a number of private and professional mailing lists and was also made available on the author's homepage. A total of 169 questionnaires were returned and subjected to chi-square tests using SPSS.[3] The pilot questionnaire comprised a list of 202 concrete and abstract categories to be associated with the colours pink, green or both, representing semantic fields that are hypothesized to map onto culturally shaped colour concepts. Due to the strong gendered associations with pink in Western culture, green was chosen as a 'red herring' – and disregarded in the analysis – to avoid bias in the results by betraying the research focus underlying the survey. (Such is the strength of those associations that even so, one informant reported that he had at first thought that 'pink was for girls and green for boys'.) An alphabetical list of categories (including near-synonyms for control purposes) was preferred to semantic differentials as the latter scale associations in relation to the extremes of semantic fields rather than identify

the associations with components of those fields themselves. Many respondents commented on the strong interest they had in the topic of colour, and the further associations and observations they volunteered are at the centre of the following discussion.

Just like all questionnaires operating with lists of lexemes, the present one, too, is limited by the fact that there is no accounting for individual understandings of particular concepts. It is most likely that the mere words 'pink' and 'green' trigger different chromatic information in informants' cognition.[4] In acknowledgement of this fact, no colour samples were provided in order to keep the chromatic information and hence the associations as unrestricted as possible. The culturally shaped associations triggered by a particular colour are different from the meanings that uses of particular kinds of pinks in particular situations transfer to the colour. Nevertheless, the subsequent analysis of pink as it is employed in visual communication shows that the producers of multimodal texts seek to tap into cultural associations in the way they use pink. Apart from asking about which categories were associated with pink, green, or both, the pilot questionnaire also included a final category of 'other' for informants to list additional associations if they wished.

In terms of demographics, the age of informants ranged from 17 to 96, with a median age of 27. Several informants reported that they could not recall a pink-for-girls craze in the 1970s like the one that can be witnessed at the time of writing, so age would be another interesting factor to look at in future studies. As for gender, just under 70 per cent of respondents identified as female and just under 30 per cent as male.

Given the small sampling basis, the survey is intended as a pilot investigation that can identify possible tendencies to be tested in a larger-scale study. Bearing in mind that no generalized claims are possible, the following overview of cultural associations with the colour pink incorporates the main tendencies suggested by this pilot survey.

Pink is not a particularly cherished colour: independent of cultural background, only 7.7 per cent of informants rated it as their favourite colour, while 10.1 named it as their least favourite colour.[5] There are possible gender effects in that no men named pink as their favourite colour, but every fifth male informant gave it as his least favourite one. Given their cool reception, shades of pink are surprisingly ubiquitous as visual markers, and it takes no genius to realize that the colour is associated with femininity: from the iconic Barbie dolls to girls' clothing, flower bouquets for Valentine's and Mother's Day and birthday cards for girls and women, consumer goods targeted at a female market are suffused with pink, usually combined with rounded shapes and rather static perpendicular vectors. By contrast, male consumers are addressed with a range of angular blacks and blues combined with dynamic diagonal vectors, as evident in cosmetics packaging (Hardt-Mautner, 1994), toys (Caldas-Coulthard and Van Leeuwen, 2002) and magazine covers (see Figures 1a and 1b):

Figure 1a Gendered visuals in magazine covers (feminine): *More* magazine cover reproduced with the permission of Emap plc.

Indeed, the cultural status of pink as a femininity marker is such a commonplace that it regularly surfaces in popular culture, such as in Jim Jarmusch's film *Broken Flowers* (2005), in which the search for the unknown mother of his son sets the main character off on a trail of pink. The stereotypical association also gives rise to parody as, for instance, in the queer-themed films *Pink Flamingos* (John Waters, 1972), *Ma Vie en Rose/My Life in Pink* (Alan Berliner, 1997), *But I'm a Cheerleader* (Jamie Babbit, 1999) and *A Touch of Pink* (Ian Iqbal Rashid, 2004).[6]

It is perhaps in the context of clothing that the gendered nature of pink is most obvious. Colour plays a vital role in clothing's function as the quintessential social code, establishing taxonomies for grouping individuals and positioning them in relation to society as a whole (Pastoureau, 2004: 82,

Figure 1b Gendered visuals in magazine covers (masculine): *360* magazine cover reproduced with permission. © 2007 Imagine Publishing.

223). With regard to gender, the relevant taxonomy is a binary one, classifying people into male and female. These attempts at classifying and shaping identities are most vigorously pursued with children, adding to the clichéd but very much alive choice of pink clothing for little girls. The arbitrariness of this convention is betrayed by the fact that in Western culture, pink was the predominant colour for little boys until around 1920 (Heller, 1989: 116–18; Pastoureau, 2004: 26–8). Pink and powder blue were used as lighter versions of red (the 'masculine' colour of blood and fighting) and blue (the iconographic colour of the Virgin Mary). This colour code

persisted not only in Catholic countries until the First World War, when changing gender roles and increasing secularization led to the decentring of the quintessential maternal figure of the Virgin Mary. The colour blue consequently came to signify male professions, most notably the navy, rather than being an element of religious iconography. Although the respective shades of blue differ, hue proved to be the overriding factor so that blue became associated with masculinity. By extension, pink, which was already available as its counterpart, was established as the mark of femininity, so that the gender binarism could stay intact. Marketing and consumer culture helped disseminate the new colour code across almost all Western cultures, including Britain. In this context, recent attempts by menswear retailers in the UK to position pink as a colour for men to tap into a new market (Moss Bros Group, 2007) indicate that the marketing wheel has come full circle. However, women and girls remain the main target group for pink clothing, and marketing efforts continue to anchor pink as feminine, building up a schema for little girls that helps them construct their fledgling identity by linking it to a particular colour. Children are thus likely to make schema-consistent colour choices; having been socialized into a particular colour range from birth onwards, they will only later, if at all, develop more ambiguous attitudes towards pink. For parents, it can be difficult to balance political awareness with the wish not to expose their children to peer group ridicule through colour choice.

The association of pink with femininity is also suggested by the pilot survey results, where an overwhelming 76.3 per cent of informants made the connection, with no statistically significant differences between women and men. The strong links between pink and femininity can be seen as evidence for the claim that the more a single colour is predominantly associated with a social group, movement or idea, the less tolerant the ideology supporting it will be (Sassoon, 1990: 177). As the quintessentially feminine colour in Western culture, pink has associations with other implicitly gendered concepts as well. In the pilot survey, 77 categories were ticked for pink by more than 10 per cent of respondents, with the top 10 listed in Table 1.

An even clearer picture emerged when the categories that attracted more than 10 per cent of responses were combined into semantic fields. It should be noted that these fields were based on intuition and may therefore be open to debate. In Figure 2, the juxtaposition in rows indicates mental proximity, while some individual categories act as links between fields.

This tentative grouping into semantic fields suggests an extremely wide range of associations with pink, where positive connotations can easily tip over into negative ones (witness the progression from childhood via naivety to stupidity). Semantic fields can even contradict each other, as is the case with lust vs innocence. This can be explained by different shades of pink carrying different connotations. The pattern seems to be that an increase in brightness and saturation promotes sexual connotations and negative ones of artificiality and cheapness, which index working-class femininity. By contrast,

Table 1 Pilot survey results: most frequent associations with pink overall

Associations with pink	Frequency (%)
Femininity	76.3
Romance	55.6
Sweetness	52.1
Softness[1]	50.9
Love	50.3
Cheekiness[2]	49.1
Delicacy	47.3
Dreaminess	42.6
Childhood	40.8
Gentleness	40.8

Notes:

1. The synaesthetic association of pink with softness is also reflected in the collocation 'pink and fluffy'. This phrase is entrenched enough to be used metaphorically; out of 19,141 sample concordance lines generated by the WebCorp software, 68 feature 'pink and fluffy' as a metaphoric attribute of persons, films, computer games, etc. In implicitly gendered terms, it is occasionally ascribed to 'soft wimps', counselling teams or anti-war protesters, and contrasted with military operations and 'blue steel' approaches to personnel management.
2. This particular association may well have a literal basis, in that 'white' people's skin turns pink when flushed with blood. As such, it seems related to health, which 13.6 per cent of all informants associated with pink. See also the idioms 'in the pink' and 'tickled pink' (Ammer, 1992: 119–20).

adding white to the shade triggers cultural associations of innocence, which in turn is culturally equated with an absence not only of guilt[7] but also of desire and sexual experience.

Another window on associations with pink was the open category asking about other associations. Interestingly, some informants used unprompted association to repeat an item from the list that arguably was most prototypical for them. These repetitions include femininity, lightness, luxury and lust, all of which were repeated by one respondent each. Other unprompted associations transformed nouns from the list into adjectives (delicate, soft), and often added a negative value judgement: childish, false femininity, too sweet (all mentioned once).

A number of the categories ticked by more than 10 per cent of respondents show a correlation with the informant's gender. No cells had expected frequencies of less than 5 and the results can thus be regarded as significant. Not only are most of the items in Table 2 positively connoted, but it was the female informants who were statistically more likely to associate pink with these positive values. The reverse, however, does not hold true; for example, despite 20 per cent of men naming pink as their least favourite colour, men were not more likely to associate pink with negatively connoted categories. In fact, they were not likely to associate pink with anything much at all. Where there is a statistically significant difference, male informants invariably showed lower percentages and indeed 0 per cent for many

softness (50.9)
sweetness (52.1)
delicacy (47.3)
gentleness (40.8)
tenderness (33.1)
sensitivity (23.7)
mildness (13.6)
politeness (11.2)
quietness (12.4)
dreaminess (42.6)
imagination (13.6)
thoughtfulness (10.7)
cosiness (31.4)
warmth (22.5)
being soothing (17.2)
calmness (13.6)
relaxation (13.6)
harmony (12.4)
summer (10.1)
childhood (40.8)
innocence (35.5)
youth (29.6)
naivety (27.2)
stupidity (13.6)
simplicity (10.1)

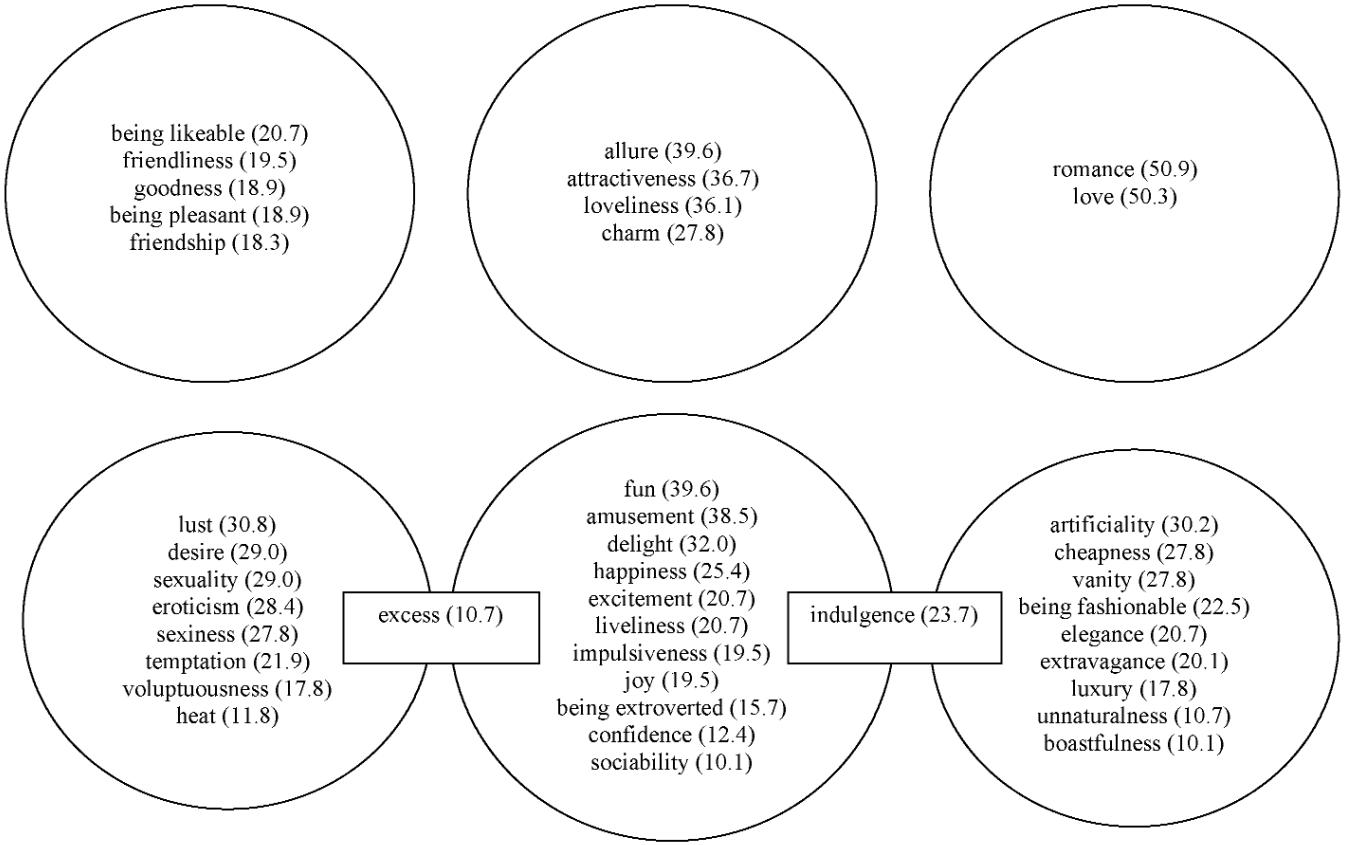


Figure 2 Pilot survey results: semantic fields associated with pink (%).

Table 2 Pilot survey results: gendered associations with pink

Associations with pink	Female informants (%)	Male informants (%)	*p*
Cheekiness	58.1	30.0	.001
Delight	40.2	14.0	.001
Luxury	23.9	4.0	.002
Joy	25.6	6.0	.004
Amusement	45.3	22.0	.005
Innocence	42.7	20.0	.005
Excitement	26.5	8.0	.007
Harmony	17.1	2.0	.007
Friendliness	24.8	8.0	.013
Smallness	11.1	0.0	.014
Goodness	23.9	8.0	.017
Stupidity	17.9	4.0	.017
Closeness	20.5	6.0	.020
Friendship	23.1	8.0	.022
Charm	33.3	16.0	.023
Happiness	30.8	14.0	.023
Summer	13.7	2.0	.023
Confidence	16.2	4.0	.029
Allure	45.3	28.0	.037
Being likeable	23.9	10.0	.038
Optimism	12.0	2.0	.039
Sweetness	57.3	40.0	.041

categories, i.e. they ticked fewer categories overall. This could suggest that the cultural associations between femininity and pink translate into women having a more differentiated schema for the colour. Given cultural colour associations, it would be interesting to see if men have an equally differentiated view of blue.

There is one exception to the pattern of women associating positive values with pink, namely the category of stupidity. This unexpected finding is perhaps best explained as a rejection of conventional femininity, epitomized by the colour pink. Anecdotal evidence suggests that gay women in particular dislike pink; one respondent said that it was only the association with gay men that 'ennobled' the otherwise rejected colour for her, and that she had '"[come] to terms" with pink very recently when it became part of gay men's fashion'. Corroboration is provided by the fact that the colour can act as a contextual cue for teasing in lesbian conversations (Bland, 1996: 79–80).

The unprompted associations also yielded 'camp' and 'drag queen' (once each) and 'gay' (four times). The link between gayness and pink derives from that between femininity and pink: hegemonic discourses on gender and

sexuality assume that biological sex unproblematically gives rise to gender identity, with heterosexuality as one defining characteristic of 'appropriate' gender identity. The function of these discourses in shoring up the basis of patriarchal societies has been theorized extensively (Connell, 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Kimmel, 2001; Steinberg et al., 1997); the point here is that a violation of the heterosexual norm is consequently equated with gender inappropriateness, i.e. gay men are assumed to be feminine and gay women to be masculine. One of the most disturbing manifestations of this discourse was gay male prisoners of Nazi concentration camps being forced to wear pink triangles (while lesbians were branded 'asocial'). Gay liberation after 1969 reclaimed not only terms of abuse such as 'queer' but also the pink triangle for self-reference. Although this symbolism has since been eclipsed by the less overtly political rainbow flag, expressions like 'the pink pound' to denote gay spending power, organizations like Citypink (an association of lesbian professionals) and the gay news publication *Pink Paper* continue this tradition. In an intertextual play on Oscar Wilde's famous definition of romantic affection between men as the 'love that dare not speak its name', philosopher Jean Baudrillard (quoted in Pastoureau, 2004: 83) has referred to combined colours such as pink as 'colours that dare not speak their name'. Indeed, the cultural association – both ascribed and claimed – of male homosexuality with femininity means that pink mostly relates to gay male culture. As one informant put it:

> I've always tended to think of the colour pink in terms of being more symbolic of masculine gayness . . . it could be seen to represent the feminine side claimed by gay men . . . I consider purple to be more of a symbol of feminine gayness which is probably to do with social and cultural links to [Alice Walker's novel] *The Color Purple*, [lesbian rock band] Indigo Girls etc.[8]

On an anecdotal level, gay informants reported different associations with pink, including ambiguity, cheapness, excess, being extroverted and, obviously, pride. Although it is both gay women and gay men who were most likely to make these culture-specific associations, the image conjured up is that of a garish campness that is not only ascribed to gay men but also endorsed by some as a confident expression of gay culture.

To sum up, pink is associated with femininity and conventional feminine traits, and is also linked to sexuality. In gender terms, female informants seemed to have a more differentiated schema of pink than men, and tended to overwhelmingly associate positive values with it, including fun and independence. It seems that pink informs the interrelated semantic fields of gender and sexuality in complex ways. The next section traces how these associations are linked to the meanings given to pink in visual texts.

FUNCTIONS OF PINK IN VISUAL TEXTS

In this section, I argue that pink fulfils the two main functions of gendering textual referents, thereby attracting female readers' attention. Related to its gendering function, pink also indexes sexuality and sexual identity. Less obviously, pink has an emergent new meaning that indicates post-feminist femininity. Let us start with the most pervasive function of pink, i.e. signalling femininity.

Gendering

Given the cultural association of pink with femininity, the first and most basic function of the colour is to denote something as feminine. This can be observed for stereotypically feminine products, services and events, where shades of pink in a redundant fashion reinforce the gendered nature of what is being offered. Examples include traditional advertisements for pregnancy tests, a now defunct high street shop in Lancaster called Pink that was painted in dark shades of the colour and sold bath bubbles and other cosmetics, as well as a flyer announcing the 2005 Christmas concert of the Manchester girls' choir that combined shades of silvery pink and purple on high-gloss paper. Interestingly, the opposite also holds true; the less traditionally feminine a product is perceived to be, the more pronounced the usage of pink becomes, both quantitatively (for example, more space on the page or the screen being coloured pink) and qualitatively (for example, central elements like slogans appearing in pink). Two advertisements, for the Mercedes Smart car and the 'poppy' edition of the Siemens CL75 mobile phone, illustrate the point: the first features a pale pink Smart car against a pale pink background, under the silver caption 'Shrinking violet, never really was our thing'. Using a white background, the mobile phone advertisement shows a silver phone with a dark, textured poppy petal, surrounded by other such petals and next to the sentences 'Most phones are from Mars' (in grey) and 'This one's from Venus' (in pink).

The gendering achieved through the colour code is reinforced in the language. In the Mercedes ad, 'shrinking violet' acts as a dual word play: it simultaneously refers to the small size of the car and draws on the conventional metaphor WOMEN ARE FLOWERS.[9] In the survey, unprompted associations with pink also included 'blossom' and 'flowers'.[10] The conceptual links between source and target domain of this metaphor are likely to be sweetness, softness and delicacy. (However, there may also be a bodily basis to the metaphor in that female genitalia resemble flowers.) It is noteworthy that the proverbial modesty of the shrinking violet is negated in the text; the post-modification ('never was our thing') to some extent rejects modesty as a stereotypically feminine trait and replaces it with the self-confidence allegedly signalled by pink. The first person plural possessive pronoun ('our') invites the reader and potential customer to identify with this stance. The hackneyed WOMEN ARE FLOWERS metaphor is thus paradoxically reified and called into question at the same time. The Siemens ad likewise capitalizes on

the metaphor, but uses it in a more conventional fashion. Its visual representation of pink petals is echoed in the pink letters used to refer to the product and thus lends cohesion to the visual text. In a classificatory move, this is set apart from the alleged greyness of masculinity by intertextually integrating the title of a book propagating binary gender differences (*Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* by John Gray).

In the two advertisements, we thus find an interplay between colour coding and language, illustrating that the 'written mode and the visual mode reinforce each other . . . both sets jointly provide a semantic–semiotic environment that frames and predicts the meanings of the colours that appear' (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2002: 362). In the earlier examples, pink means femininity. Ideationally, this is positioned as the opposite of masculinity and linked to notions of softness and delicacy in different ways.

Attracting attention

One aim of gendering products is obviously to attract the attention of female consumers so that they will buy the product for themselves or for their daughters and other girls. (A similar function can be observed in posters advertising gay and lesbian events, see later.) That this strategy pays off is demonstrated by the following account of Jo Hall, commercial director at Woolworth's, who talks about the impact of a range of pink-coloured technical gadgets:

> We launched the pink range as a trial two years ago, we launched with a TV, mobile phone and boom box and literally we could not keep them on the shelves. We were absolutely staggered at the response . . . When we got the first phone over from the manufacturers, I was walking down Richmond High Street and [this] lady ran after me and I thought I was gonna be mugged for it. (*Today*, BBC Radio 4, 1 December 2005)

What makes grown-up women behave in such a manner? In her discussion of colour coding of 1950s domestic interiors,[11] Sparke (1995: 198) suggests that 'pinkness reinforced the idea that femininity was a fixed category in the lives of women from childhood onwards and by surrounding themselves with it women could constantly reaffirm their unambiguously gendered selves.' If pink is cognitively and affectively linked to a feminine identity at an early age, this association may prove persistent throughout a woman's life, and women are not only addressed by the colour but also likely to position themselves in relation to it in various ways. At the same time, pink comes to index childhood, a life phase that is often retrospectively glorified as carefree. To contemporary women, many of whom find themselves in a situation of shouldering multiple demands and responsibilities, pink artefacts may offer an escape to the allegedly less burdened days of girlhood. Through pink, women can become little girls again, and marketing is quick to capitalize on this desire.

In product design and packaging, pink is also combined with other gender markers to attract women's attention. One example is a low-fat cheese

called 'heartfelt'. The packaging is dominated by dark pink, featuring the information '5% fat, 100% taste' in the shape of a heart as well as a picture of a young woman measuring her waist. Its unconventional dark pink wrapping is in line with findings that consumers associate bright pink with sensory–social rather than functional products (Bottomley and Doyle, 2006). While it has also been suggested that consumers prefer typical over atypical colours in products, this mostly holds true for high-involvement products such as cars or holidays. In low-involvement goods, such as dairy products, overall colour preference may be more important than whether the colour is perceived as typical of the product (Grossman and Wisenblit, 1999). So pink packaging for cheese not only attracts attention because it is atypical, but may at least not discourage sales, by virtue of the low-involvement nature of the product. Also, the already low price of the product does not lead to an inappropriate inference of inferior quality and prestige of products packaged in saturated colours (Lichtlé, 2002: 31). Given that more women than men name pink as their favourite colour, the wrapping may even hold some attraction for female consumers who identify strongly with pink. In case it does not, the marketers have built in redundancy by reinforcing the notion of femininity both visually and verbally. Thus, pink is complemented by other 'feminine' semantic fields such as health ('5% fat') and dieting, as shown in the picture of a woman measuring her waist. Verbally, we find a word play on 'heartfelt' as combining emotion and health.

The function of pink as gendering and attracting women's attention operates in a non-commercial context as well. A number of texts aimed at women show predominant usage of the colour, with doctor's leaflets on breast awareness and contraception for women as well as the website of the Breast Cancer Campaign all being coded in a pastel shade of pink. The leaflets on contraception combine pink with blue to index the heterosexual audience, while the Breast Cancer Campaign website (http://www.breastcancercampaign.org/, consulted 18 August 2008) draws on associations of both femininity and health in its colour choice. Other examples are the leaflets and stickers issued by Lancaster District Women's Aid, a charity offering 'support and advice for women suffering domestic abuse'. Pink is here used as a functional colour to highlight key information. The female target group is multiply represented, both visually through a childlike drawing of a woman and child, and verbally through the charity's name and lexical repetition ('by women for women', 'women's aid', '1 in 4 women'). These gender markers are linked to the female reader through direct address in the form of second person pronouns and imperatives.

So far, we have seen that pink is used ideationally to feminize texts and their referents, and interpersonally to attract women's attention. In this function, the colour is reinforced through other visual and also verbal markers of femininity. The next subsection traces the second main function of pink: indexing sexuality and sexual identity.

Indexing sexuality and sexual identity

There is clearly a continuum from the emotional concepts of romance and love to their physical aspects, as, for example, demonstrated by the Italian idioms *letteratura rosa* ('pink literature', i.e. romantic fiction) and *scandalo rosa* ('pink scandal', i.e. an extramarital affair that attracts public attention) (Philip, 2006: 87). To understand the connection between pink and sexuality, it is worth looking at what types of pink are used in visual communication. As for its purity, pink itself is a mixed colour, with its different shades combining either red and white, or red, white and blue. In the texts under consideration, it tends to be used on its own, with different values. In terms of value or brightness dark pink dominates and is sometimes combined with a paler shade or with pale purple. In terms of saturation, the same shade is mostly a highly saturated, 'shocking' pink perceived as 'positive, exuberant, adventurous, but also vulgar and garish', in contrast to the 'subtle and tender' effects of low saturation (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006: 233). Saturation seems to override brightness in effect: while both Kandinsky (1994[1912]: 179) and Goethe (1963[1808]: 153) claimed that darker shades seem to retreat from the viewer, the latter also observed that highly saturated bluish red had an unnerving and disquieting effect (p. 172). Indeed, the laboratory-generated magenta (Finlay, 2002: 167) typically found in consumer goods and related texts is mostly perceived as artificial, garish, aggressive and 'in your face' (Pastoureau, 2004: 139–42). This quality is enhanced by the flat, untextured modulation of pink in many texts, which therefore include an 'abstract' pink not usually found in natural objects (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2002: 357).

It may be this dark, saturated and 'flat', non-textured pink, its 'exaggerated, aggressive tone [and] obvious exhibitionist intentions' (Sassoon, 1990: 181) that make for its association with sexuality, and especially with an 'exaggerated image of feminine sexuality' (Sparke, 1995: 198). (Again, there may be an embodied basis in that all sexually relevant organs and orifices, so to speak, are indeed pink, at least for 'white' people.) The fact that in patriarchal cultures sexuality is mostly defined from a heterosexual male perspective leads to the sexualization of women in language and popular culture, up to the point where the female is over-determined as the sexual. This is particularly noticeable in Japanese culture, where pink not only signals the *cho-kawaii* ('super cute') girl culture of romantic mangas and Hello Kitty accoutrements, but also indexes sex work (with 'blue movies' literally becoming 'pink movies', see Von Taschitzki, 2006: 70). It comes as no surprise then to find that artefacts (e.g. the pink 'porn star' edition of the Nokia 3315 mobile phone) and visual texts often use pink to combine femininity and sexuality. This is most noticeably the case in visual communication targeted at women. Thus, lingerie seller Victoria's Secret as well as women's sex shops Sh! and Exclusively Eve all colour code their texts and product packaging in pink and purple.[12] The same colour coding, with additional rounded shapes, floral writing, hearts and lipstick kisses in the

layout, can be observed at a website with erotica for straight women (http://www.sssh.com/, consulted 18 August 2008). Texts that feature women as the object of desire show the same colour coding; the websites and fan sites of lad magazine icons all feature lush pink shades.[13] By contrast, websites addressing lesbians or both heterosexual men and women tone down the feminine effect of pink by combining it with black.[14] However, pink features only very rarely in gay male erotica; the associations of pink with gay culture do not seem to carry over into the sexual realm.

Moving from sexuality to sexual identity, we can see that texts targeted at a gay readership use the colour pink in complex and sometimes contradictory ways. Thus, pink can feature both as a conventional marker of femininity, as in the health pages of gay magazine *Out NorthWest*, which are

Figure 3 Use of pink in a lesbian magazine. Reproduced with permission from *Curve* magazine.

laid out in pink and powder blue along traditional gender lines. However, the same edition (February 2006) features a pink triangle on its cover to announce a story on Holocaust Memorial Day. A similar tension can be observed in lesbian magazine *Curve*, which features highly feminine visual markers, including pink, next to depictions of female masculinity (Figure 3):

These examples convey how gay subculture, while having developed its own visual codes, is nevertheless influenced by its host culture, with marketing to gay consumers promoting this transfer. The dominant meaning of pink not only colonizes gay subculture by being juxtaposed with counter-readings; in fact, the dominant meaning is needed to understand the subcultural meaning in the first place. After all, the latter draws on the former by way of re-appropriation and semantic revaluation – as in the case of the pink triangle – as well as irony, e.g. the tongue-in-cheek reference to stereotypes of effeminate men that can be seen in a pink flyer advertising Oldham Pride 2006, complete with images of flowers and butterflies. In that dominant meanings are indispensable for the appreciation of secondary meanings, the functions of pink in gay culture are an illustration of the double-edged nature of ironic recontextualization, which always both destabilizes and re-instantiates dominant meanings. In doing so, the subcultural visual code mirrors Halliday's (1976) notion of 'anti-language' as not only parallel to, but in fact dependent on, mainstream language.

Returning to gender, this study closes by discussing an emergent function of pink.

Post-feminist pink

It was suggested earlier that the many positive associations with pink can easily tip over into negative associations such as naivety and stupidity, and in the pilot questionnaire, the unprompted associations with pink betrayed a tendency for negative value judgements ('too sweet', 'false femininity'). Also, many associations will be perceived as clichés of femininity, such as gentleness and politeness (see Lakoff, 2004[1975] on linguistic politeness markers as a stereotypical characteristic of women's speech). These negatively connoted semantic field items are undoubtedly the reason why some female respondents rejected pink. Commenting on pink gadgets targeted at women, author Carol McQuinn states: 'Personally, I find it patronizing. If the mobile phone only came in pink and it was the best mobile phone around I'd still struggle to carry it around with me' (*Today*, BBC Radio 4, 1 December 2005; see also Bevan, 2006). However, another highly relevant semantic field was that of fun and amusement. There seems to be a tendency to reclaim pink and redefine it as the colour of women who regard themselves as having achieved equality in social and economic terms and are therefore able to embrace pink as a marker of their femininity. While such post-feminist thinking rests on false premises – even a cursory glance at any statistics on income gaps, violence against women and eating disorders shows that women have *not* yet achieved socio-economic equality – it

nevertheless constructs a new brand of femininity; the 'fun fearless female' (as *Cosmopolitan* magazine calls the type). And she comes clad in pink.[15]

In this framework, pink is used to communicate fun and independence, financial and professional power without conforming to masculine norms, as well as femininity and self-confidence. Closely linked to consumerism, post-feminism sees the empowerment of women as a positive value but seeks to set itself apart from malicious stereotypes of feminists as humourless and mannish (Lazar, 2006). A prime example of the post-feminist woman is pop singer Pink, who uses this stage name to make scathing comments on contemporary gender politics and ideas of femininity. Economic independence is a cornerstone of post-feminist identity and much celebrated as an achievement – even if the role of the bedevilled 1970s feminists in it is often not acknowledged. Another commentary on pink gadgets for a female target market makes the point concisely:

> [Women] have more disposable income and they have more careers so they're taking more control of their lives and their purchasing habits so you're seeing that they're buying laptops, mp3 players and they're quite confident as well in using that technology . . . and the design of the products is changing to accommodate their new owners. (Anne Skinner, Walkman product manager for Sony UK, quoted in *Today*, BBC Radio 4, 1 December 2005)

Pink gadgets are mostly marketed around Valentine's Day in February and, less traditionally, Breast Cancer Awareness Month in October, with the latter usually seeing part of the sales go to charities.[16] Indeed, cross-marketing involving for-profit and non-profit organizations is most notably tied to breast cancer organizations and, as such, seeks to capitalize on emergent associations of pink with female independence and empowerment. One example would be taxi company Pink Ladies, which offers an all-female transport service intended to ensure women's safety by customers making use of a fleet of pink vehicles and part of the fare price going to Breast Cancer Campaign (Snow, 2007). A further, anecdotal instance of the post-feminist mindset is a colleague of mine, who, although definitely not the girly type, has a bright pink plume pen in her otherwise sober office, which she uses for the sole purpose of signing grant proposals. Likewise, an email call for a network of 'postgrad's [sic] working and researching in UK universities who identify as third wave feminists' was quite markedly lettered in pink (Gormley, 2006).

A final example (Figure 4) illustrates the function of pink as a post-feminist colour in visual communication. The advertising campaign for car insurer Sheila's Wheels comprised TV commercials and print ads, all of which played variations on the theme of the independent woman enjoying her life. The visual semiotics of the campaign rely heavily on the linked notions of kitsch, camp and (hyper-) femininity. The exaggerated femininity

Figure 4 Pink as a post-feminist colour: Sheilas' Wheels advertisement. © esure Services Limited. Used with permission under licence.

of the models is signalled by the retro sixties styling of clothing, hair and make-up, as well as by body language and the colour pink. This is again reinforced verbally, by using 'Sheila' as the generic (and slightly derogatory) term for women in Australian English, by reference to handbag cover (which, although a genuine offer, the copy writers would no doubt claim to be ironic), to 'superstars' triggering notions of the alleged female obsession with

celebrity gossip, and last but not least the reference to 'ladies'. However, 'ladies' features as the grammatical actor and, as such, is complemented by the possessive pronoun ('ladies who insure their cars'). Together, these two linguistic features convey the idea of economic independence and female agency. The Sheilas' Wheels example then links back to the first one for the Mercedes Smart car, which already negated conventional, powerless femininity. In this sense, post-feminist pink '[breaks] away from the bounds of a moralistic and misogynous society – even at the cost of an almost caricatural redesigning of women's image' (Sassoon, 1990: 182). While it is debatable whether post-feminism can achieve real social change, it has at least constructed a new type of confident, hedonistic femininity that defies notions of subservience and dependence.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown how 'colour [acts] as the sign of complex discourses around femininity' (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2002: 363). Pink in particular can be seen as an example of a semiotic resource that draws on complex discourses and mental models of femininity to both reproduce and challenge gender ideology. While associations with pink still overwhelmingly make a connection between femininity and its stereotypical values, as well as with sexuality, an emergent concept is that of fun and confidence. In artefacts and visual texts, pink is seen as gendering textual referents and as attracting female readers' attention, often in tandem with verbal components. A second function of pink is to index sexuality and sexual identity, both of which are related to concepts of gender in complementary but also contradictory ways. Finally, the emergent associations of pink with fun, independence and confidence find their visual reflection in the use of pink as a post-feminist colour indexing economically independent, hedonistic femininity.

It is those latter associations that can predominantly be found in media constructions of pink and the wider societal trends these new connotations indicate. This observation was corroborated when an earlier version of this article met with a fair amount of media interest at the regional and national level. Perhaps predictably, the research was reported upon in the lifestyle sections and programmes of mostly tabloids and local radio stations, where it often seemed to function as an academic fig leaf to more or less obvious advertorials promoting a range of products aimed at a female market, such as clothing and handbags. The accompanying verbal text predominantly elaborated on the alleged power of pink to increase both men's and women's attractiveness on the heterosexual dating market, with pink as worn by men again functioning to attract women's attention. The heavy use of proverbs ('Fancy being tickled pink?', *Scotland Weekly News*, 16 September 2006), rhyme ('Pink to make the boys wink', *Lancaster Guardian*, 25 August 2006) and expressions based on a GAME metaphor ('[Pink] scores in the dating game', *Daily Star*, 24 January 2007) conveys an overall playful and flirtatious impression. Verbal and visual components are not only combined to lend cohesion

to the texts (textual metafunction), but are also linked in constructing notions of gender identity (ideational metafunction) and positioning readers as (hetero)sexually active consumers (interpersonal metafunction).

The notion of post-feminist pink shows that both discourses and mental modes are susceptible to change. In the case of pink, this change may well be related to the transition from second- to third-wave (or post-) feminism. (For Westernized countries, the 1990s can be seen as a transitional period.) Generally speaking, discourses both reflect and shape mental models in a cyclical way, anchoring and reinforcing certain associations in the minds of discourse participants. These associations are structured in mental models which, in the case of colour associations, are linked to chromatic information. Supplementing the analysis of colour meaning and function in multimodal texts with research into colour associations combines social semiotics with cognitive semantics and allows for inferences to be drawn about how cognitive models are reflected in multimodal texts. Repeated exposure to those texts is in turn likely to reinforce colour concepts. Since particular genres, such as advertisements, appeal to emotions, such colour concepts also have an affective component. In short, multimodal – and in fact any – discourse cannot be analysed without recourse to the cognitive. Or, as the advertisement for the Smart car puts it: 'Pink isn't just a colour. It's a state of mind.'

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to all informants who shared their views, suggestions and observations with me. Moreover, I wish to thank Charles Alderson, John Heywood, Rodney Jones, David Machin, Theo van Leeuwen and Ruth Wodak for their helpful comments and suggestions on earlier versions of this paper. I am also indebted to the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments.

NOTES

1. See Byrne and Hilbert (2003) for a minority view on colour as inherent in objects.
2. Brightness rather than hue is also the criterion at work in consistent synaesthetic associations between colour and sound or shape (personal communication with Peter Walker, 23 March 2006; see Kandinsky, 1994[1912]: 163 for an association of relative darkness with roundness).
3. I am grateful to Alexandra Polyzou for carrying out the statistical analysis of the pilot survey.
4. Two potentially relevant factors that were disregarded were synaesthesia and colour vision defects. Various forms of these phenomena affect roughly 1 in 200 people for synaesthesia (Ramachandran and Hubbard, 2001: 6), and 1 in 12 men or 1 in 200 women for defective colour vision (IET, 2007). These figures translate into a likelihood of

synaesthetic informants, or those with defective colour vision, of less than 10 per cent, and were hence regarded as negligible.

5. The one colour named most often as favourite was blue, at 28.4 per cent. While this figure is lower than the 38 and 50 per cent given by Heller (1989: 20) and Pastoureau (2004: 178), respectively, it still corroborates the status of blue as the most popular colour in Western culture.
6. Incidentally, a women's fragrance by the name *touch of pink* is described in almost ridiculously feminine terms on its producer's website (Procter & Gamble, 2006).
7. The multiple affordances of pink as signalling innocence and vulnerability were utilized by British culture secretary Tessa Jowell, who in March 2006 was embroiled in a financial scandal solved by separation from her husband. At this critical moment in her career, she confronted the press wearing pastel pink and soft fabrics.
8. The perception of purple as a 'lesbian' colour shows the historical links between lesbians and feminism, as the androgynous lavender is also symbolic of the latter. The allocation of pink to gay men and purple to gay women is also evident in Vienna's Lesbian and Gay Centre being called 'Pink and Purple House' (Rosa Lila Villa).
9. Following the convention in cognitive semantics, conceptual metaphors are indicated by small capitals.
10. See also the common etymological roots of the Arabic words for 'flower' (*zahra*) and 'pink' (*zahrī*).
11. The Americanization of Western culture in the wake of the Second World War also saw a bright and saturated shade of pink being exported linguistically; thus, the word *pink* entered both the German and Japanese languages to denote that particular shade, complementing the colour terms *rosa* in German (a cognate of 'rose') and *momo iro* in Japanese ('peach colour').
12. See http://www.victoriassecret.com, http://www.sh-womenstore.com and http://www.exclusivelyeve.co.uk, all consulted 18 August 2008.
13. See, e.g., http://www.Jordanfanclub.co.uk and http://www.carmen electra.com, both consulted 18 August 2008.
14. See, e.g., lesbian erotica site http://www.onourbacksmag.com and the sex shop targeting a straight market, http://simplypleasure.com/. However, the German equivalent to the latter is colour-coded in red and black (http://www.beate-uhse.ag/index.php?h=1). All websites consulted 18 August 2008.
15. Witness also the probably ironic comment posted on a blog featuring a pink flower design: 'As I am indeed pink and fluffy and my head is full of stuff and nonsense then it follows that I live my life by the rules of Cosmo' (http://sunshinepixie.blogspot.com/2004_04_01_sunshine pixie_archive.html, consulted 14 March 2007).
16. Many thanks to Costas Gabrielatos and Dianne Wall for providing me with samples and pictures of pink artefacts, including technical gadgets.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

VERONIKA KOLLER is senior lecturer in the Department of Linguistics and English Language at Lancaster University. Her research focuses on cognitive metaphor theory and the multimodal analysis of corporate discourse, as well as on issues of language, gender and sexuality.

Address: Lancaster University, Department of Linguistics and English Language, Lancaster LA1 4YT, UK. [email: v.koller@lancaster.ac.uk]