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Look at This Rug, She Is So Pretty: Analysis of Anaphoric Use of Pronoun 'She' for Inanimate Objects on TikTok

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1. Introduction

The first recorded instance of the pronoun ‘she’ used to refer to an inanimate object – a ship – dates back to the 14th century (Oxford English Dictionary, 2024). This practice of assigning female pronouns to inanimate objects has persisted for centuries and continues today, manifesting in modern digital platforms like TikTok.

With over 1 billion of active users per month, TikTok is one of the largest social networks worldwide, offering a space for users to create, share, and consume short-video content. (TikTok, 2021). In recent years, TikTok has become a hub for creative linguistic innovations (Calhoun/Fawcett 2023; Azir 2021; Purnami 2022), one of which is the use of the gendered pronoun ‘she’ to refer to a wide range of inanimate objects.

The goal of this study is to explore what drives creators on the TikTok to assign female gendered pronouns to inanimate objects and to investigate what these personified objects have in common. By analyzing examples from TikTok, this study examines whether shared traits among these objects, such as visual properties, emotional attachment, or gender stereotypes, play a role in this linguistic phenomenon, and explores whether it is possible to derive a prototypical case of anaphoric gendered pronoun reference in TikTok discourse.

This research is particularly interesting because linguistic studies on TikTok remain relatively sparse. Existing work has primarily explored areas such as code mixing and switching (Azir 2021; Purnami 2022), identity construction (Darvin 2022), and creative self-censorship (Calhoun/Fawcett 2023). Despite the limited scope of research so far, TikTok seems to be a productive platform for exploring various linguistic research questions.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Gender

To analyze the nature of pronoun references to inanimate objects function in English, it is crucial to understand how gender manifests in Modern English.

Unlike many languages, English does not have grammatical gender through inflections or concord; instead, gender is a covert category, marked only by

anaphoric singular third-person pronouns (Whorf 1956: 90). Gender is typically determined by the intrinsic qualities of the referent, such as biological sex and animacy, a concept often referred to as *natural gender*. Curzan (2003: 17) defines it as a "triple gender system (masculine, feminine, neuter) in which the classification of nouns corresponds for the most part to the real-world distinctions of male animate, female animate, and inanimate." According to this system, one would expect the pronoun 'it' to be used when referring to an inanimate item, and pronouns 'he' and 'she' when referring to humans. Use of anaphoric gendered pronouns ('he' and 'she') for inanimate objects is therefore an exception to this system, as it dismisses the notion of animacy.

There are various perspectives on the phenomenon of gendered references to inanimate objects. Kanekiyo (1965: 235) suggests that apart from sex and animacy, factors such as speaker attitude as well as size and shape of the referent also influence gender assignment. Vachek (1976: 388) argues that male and female pronouns for inanimate objects reflect the speaker's positive or negative attitude toward the object, respectively. Modern linguists generally agree that beyond sex and animacy, speaker attitudes and cultural prototypes influence pronoun selection (Svartengren 1927; Erades 1956; Kanekiyo 1965; Joly 1975; Vachek 1976; Morris 1993). Curzan (2003: 29) further concludes that gender in English is a complex system whose boundaries shift over time, reflecting evolving ideas about sex and gender.

In this study, the use of the pronoun 'she' also encompasses its objective case 'her' and reflexive 'herself.'

2.2 Personification

Personification, defined as a figure of speech, occurs when inanimate objects are characterized with human attributes, allowing them to be depicted as living, feeling entities (Ricoeur, 1977). These attributes can range from physical traits to more abstract qualities, such as emotions, desires, or intentions (Turner, 1987). The humanizing of objects through personification enables one to engage with them on a more relatable level, creating a sense of connection and familiarity.

It is debated whether the use of gendered references for inanimate objects in everyday speech constitutes conscious personification (Curzan 2003: 21). In this study, I do not examine whether personification through anaphoric pronouns is an intentional and conscious use of this rhetorical device, and all inanimate referents

that align with pronouns typically reserved for animate beings will be referred to as personified.

2.3 Previous studies on gendered references to inanimate objects

It has been noted that the majority of gendered references to inanimate objects in Modern English are feminine (Svartengren 1927, 1954; Malone 1985). They have traditionally been divided into two basic types: conventionalized references (such as 'she' for 'ship') and affective references (Curzan 2003: 110, 132).

Svartengren (1927) explores unusual uses of feminine pronouns in vernacular English and identifies three categories of objects that may take the feminine pronoun: (1) items created or worked on by humans, such as machinery, rooms, houses, or roads; (2) actions or abstract concepts, like "whooping her up"; and (3) nature and natural objects not modified by humans (Svartengren 1927: 109). The common thread across these categories is that using a feminine pronoun expresses an emotional connection from the speaker, symbolizing a shared experience of living or working together: "The emotional character is the distinguishing feature of the phenomenon. Consequently, *she (her)* does not so much mark the gender of a more or less fanciful personification – though there are more than traces of such a thing – as denote the object of an emotion" (Svartengren 1927: 109). Curzan, however, critiques Svartengren's view, arguing that by dismissing the role of gender, he overlooks broader patterns of gender usage, such as exceptional instances of masculine and neuter pronouns (Curzan 2003: 24).

2.2 Prototype effects and categorisation

The goal of this study is to explore what motivates a creator on TikTok to use the female pronoun when referring to an inanimate object and to potentially derive prototypical cases of this pronoun usage. To achieve this, it is crucial to understand the concepts of categorization and prototype effects.

Rosch and Mervis (1975) demonstrated that seemingly diverse members of a category, such as furniture, are unified by overlapping clusters of attributes with fuzzy boundaries, where no single attribute is common to all members. Instead, categories are bound by a 'family resemblance' (ibid., 1975), in which attributes interconnect, much like the threads of a rope (Wittgenstein 1978: 32). Labov (1973), in his influential research on the linguistic categorization of household items like cups,

mugs, and bowls, showed that these items could not be defined by rigid criteria but rather by how typical exemplars look and are used. This is referred to as prototype effects (Rosch 1975; Lakoff 1987; Langacker 1987). Taylor (1995) extended Labov's findings, arguing that object categorization relies on an optimum value, not whether an object possesses a particular attribute but how closely it aligns with these optimal standards (Taylor 1995: 41).

For this study, this theory suggests that there may be one or more prototypical objects or object types associated with gendered reference on TikTok, which can be identified by examining their overlapping features.

3. Data & Method

3.1. Data collection

Data was collected from the TikTok's 'For You' page recommendations. Videos were selected based on the creator's use of the feminine pronoun 'she' (or its objective and reflexive forms 'her' and 'herself') in reference to inanimate objects. The gendered pronouns had to appear either in the video's voiceover, captions, or written descriptions.

3.2. Method

To derive a prototype, it was essential to generalize and identify as many features of the referents as possible. The referents were classified into broader categories; distinctive attributes, such as color, shape, purpose, and descriptive words surrounding them were taken into consideration. Additionally, the consistency of speakers' use of anaphoric gendered pronouns was examined.

The data collected was analyzed across several categories: object type, surrounding context, consistency of gendered reference, video type, and the sentence with the anaphoric gendered pronoun itself.

Object type: this included the broader category to which the specific object belonged (e.g., food & drinks, cosmetics, accessories) along with a brief description of the object itself.

Surrounding context: this category focused on the descriptors (mostly adjectives and adverbs) used to describe the object throughout the video and its caption.

Consistency of gendered reference: this examined whether the content creator used only the pronoun 'she' to refer to the object (exclusive usage) or if other pronouns were used as well (non-exclusive usage). If the creator referred to the object with an anaphoric pronoun only once, the consistency of the gendered reference could not be determined, and the use of 'she' was labeled as indefinite.

Video type: this analyzed the category of the video or the way in which the item was depicted (e.g., *Product review*). Analyzing the video type could potentially reveal the purpose of the personification, as it adds context to the video's intent.

Sentences with the anaphoric gendered pronoun: these were the sentences in which 'she' was used to refer to inanimate object. Collecting these phrases enabled the analysis of potential patterns in sentence constructions.

4. Results

For this study, 185 videos were manually collected from the 'ForYou'-page on TikTok over the course of two months from August till October 2024. The data was then analyzed according to the categories defined in 3.2. *Method*.

4.1. Object types

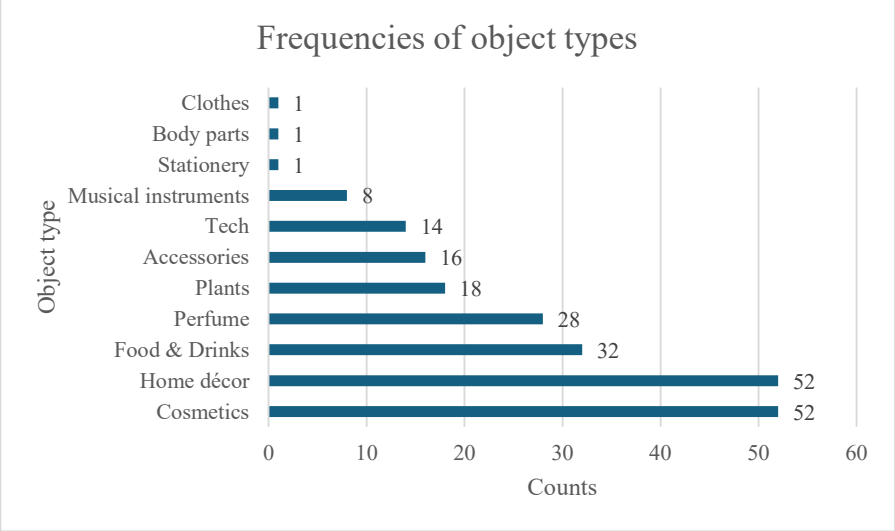

Figure 1: Distribution of object types

As one can see from the Figure **1**, the most frequent type of personified objects is *Home décor* (52 counts). Items belonging to this category contribute to the aesthetics of living spaces, whether it's a rug (example 85), a vase (example 98), or furniture

(example 122). Another most frequent type, *Cosmetics* (52 counts), include makeup products ranging from moisturizers (example 7) to skin tints (example 128). Items belonging to the categories *Cosmetics* (52 counts), *Perfume* (28 counts), and *Accessories* (16 counts) are related to enhancing one's appearance and expressing beauty. Moreover, they are central to self-presentation and personal aesthetics, e.g. through a signature scent (example 43), a makeup look (example 130), or a high-end bag (example 119). Gendered pronouns were also often used for *Food & Drinks* (40 counts), with personified food ranging from caffee lattes in example 11 to noodles in example 117. This use was prominent in recipes, particularly when creators were referring to the finished product. It is not surprising that *Plants* are among frequently personified objects (18 counts), as their need for care and nurturing makes them feel more like living, pet-like companions, naturally leading people to view them as animate objects. Similarly, musicians may develop a deep bond with their instrument over time, seeing it as an extension of themselves and personifying *Musical instruments* (8 counts) to express the feeling of companionship. Tech, especially in color pink, was another frequent category (14 counts) and consisted mainly of laptops (4 counts), keyboards (5 counts), and cameras (2 counts). *Clothes, Body parts,* and *Stationery* appeared only once in the data set and were not considered in the analysis.

It is noteworthy that there are 30 instances of pink items, 14 instances of items having flower decoration or print on them, and 7 instances of items shaped as or containing berries. These characteristics are traditionally associated with femininity (Leinbach et al., 1997; Fagot et al., 1997) and reinforce conventional gender norms through the design of the objects.

A key commonality among most frequent categories is that these items are either crafted (i.e. cooked, made, renovated, organized, decorated etc.) by women or designed to have women as their target audience (make up products and perfume, and pink tech (Koller 2008)). Furthermore, many of these item categories, like luxury accessories, tech gadgets, and expensive home décor, are often associated with status, and owning and displaying them may contribute to a sense of fulfillment.

4.2. Surrounding context

Following figure illustrates the most frequent descriptors that appeared in the surrounding context in the videos. Prepositions, determiners, and intensifiers were removed.

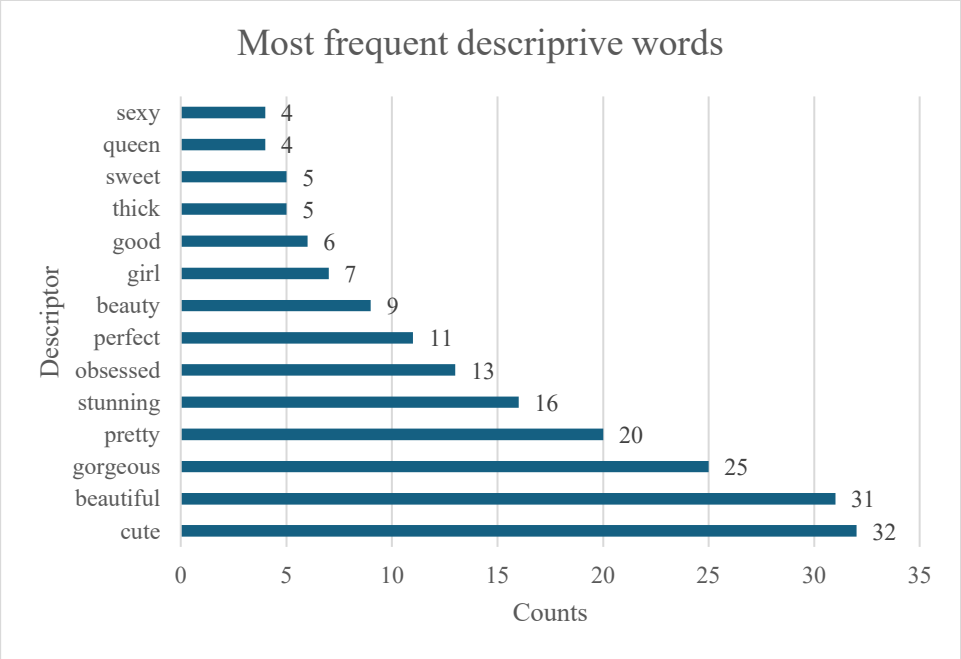

Figure 2: The most frequent descriptive words for personified objects

Figure 2 reflects a trend of emphasizing visually appealing qualities of the personified objects. Descriptors 'beautiful,' 'beauty,' 'gorgeous,' 'stunning,' and 'pretty' reinforce the emphasis on physical beauty and aesthetic qualities, suggesting that creators focus on the appearance of the object when personifying it. 'Stunning,' 'obsessed,' and 'perfect' highlight emotional investment and idealization of the object. Less frequent descriptors 'thick' and 'sexy' may hint towards a sexual, playful tone to highlight an object's physical desirability.

'Girl' and 'queen' are examples of a more direct way of personification. Whereas 'girl' assigns the object a relatable, equal status, as if used to address a close friend, 'queen' elevates the object to a position of power and admiration.

What all of these descriptors have in common is that they express speaker's positive attitude towards the referent, whether through admiring its visual qualities

(‘beautiful’, ‘pretty’ etc.), idealising it (‘perfect’ etc.), or pointing out its desirability (‘good’, ‘sexy’ etc.).

4.3. Consistency of gendered reference

As shown in the Figure 3, in 50% of the data, creators use of ‘she’ in anaphoric references was not consistent. In the data collected for this study, the only other pronoun used to refer to an item apart from ‘she’ was ‘it’. Creators either used the pronouns interchangeably, or referred to the item as ‘she’ on a single occasion, typically in one of the constructions described in the section 4.5. *Analysis of sentences with the anaphoric gendered pronoun*.

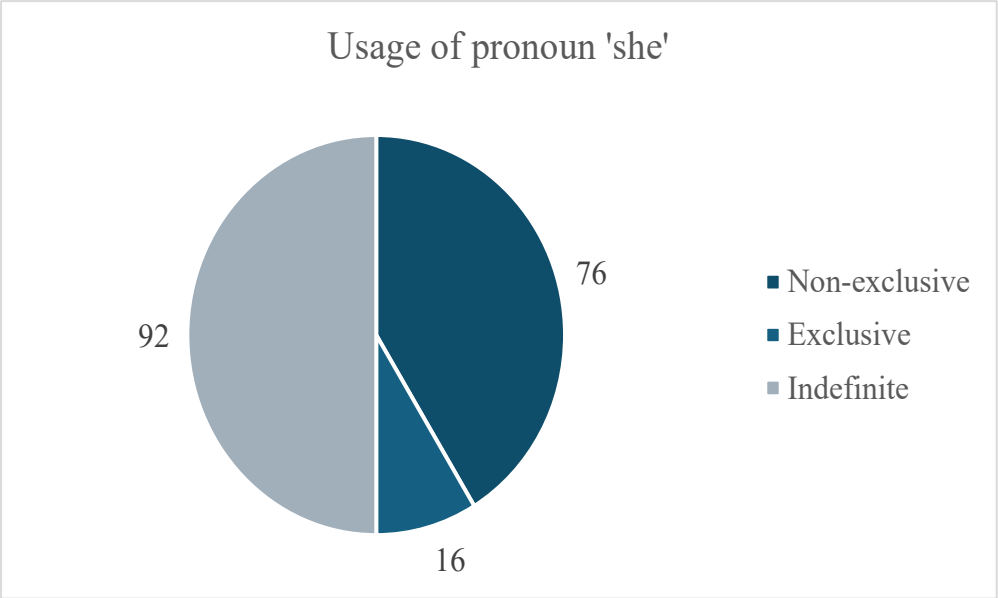

Figure 3: Distribution of exclusive and non-exclusive usage of 'she'

Interestingly, the use of ‘she’ was exclusive in only 9% of the videos. This consistent usage typically occurred when creators were expressing admiration for their favorite items, such as perfume in video 50, a plate in video 108, or an eye shadow palette in video 130. Exclusive usage was also a characteristic feature of instances when the creators' accounts were centered around specific objects, such as cheese in video 12, pumpkins in video 28, and plants in video 157. In 41% of the videos, the anaphoric reference ocurred only once.

4.4. Video types

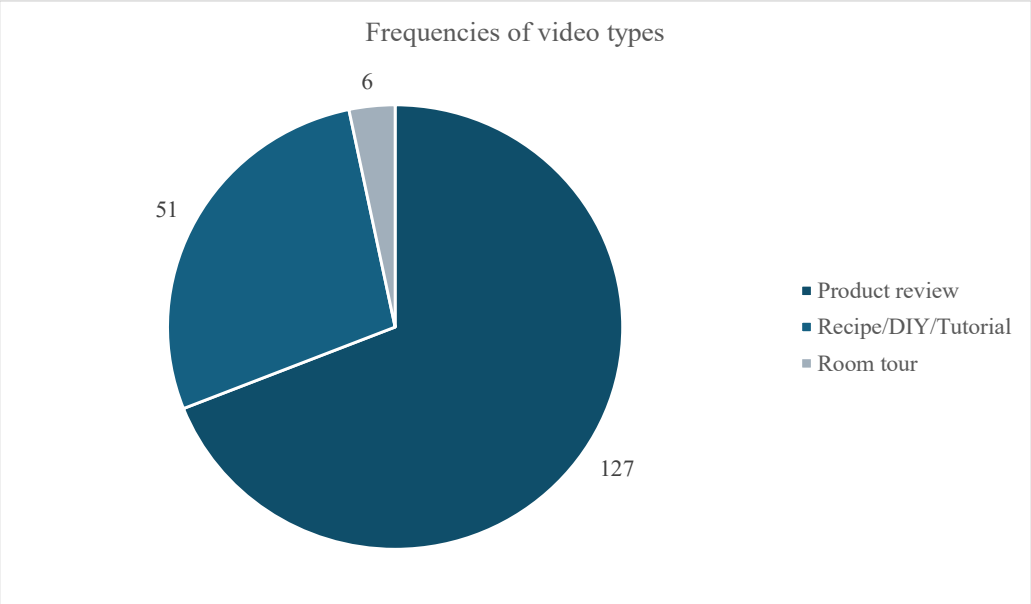

Figure 4: Distribution of the video types

As one can see from the Figure 4, majority of the videos (69%) belonged to the category *Product Review*. In a lot of those videos, creators engage in unboxing newly purchased items (e.g., a Chanel bag in example 139, a drum set in 171, or a dining table in 75). They often recommend or advertise specific products (e.g., as moisturizer in 7, a mechanical pencil in 13, or an eyeshadow palette in 130), or showcase and admire their favorite possessions for the audience's admiration (e.g., a vase in 21 or an apartment in 68).

It is noteworthy that creators sometimes switched from 'it' to 'she' to emphasize their special relation towards an object. For example, creator of the video 55 refers to their perfume as 'it' when talking about perspective of other people: "When the 10th person says your favorite perfume is trash and you're tired of defending it." However, when discussing their own feelings towards the perfume, they switch to 'she':"SHE IS VERY SPECIAL TO ME."

The second most common video type was *Recipe/DIY/Tutorial* (28%). These are videos where creators show how they do certain things, like prepare food, restore furniture, or take care of their plants. Remarkably, in some cases, authors switched from referring their creations as 'it' to 'she' after the the product they were filming was finished (e.g., examples 17, 33, and 96).

The least frequent type of videos was *Room tour* (3%), where creators were showcasing their apartments and expressing their admiration of them.

All three types of videos involve showcasing something that the creator values, whether it's a product, a recipe, or their living space. The creators are not only presenting these items or spaces but are also sharing their experiences and insights, inviting viewers to connect with the objects of their admiration. Another commonality is that videos belonging to these categories serve as recommendations for viewers, guiding them in their purchasing decisions, providing inspiration for DIY projects, or showcasing living styles.

4.5. Analysis of sentences with the anaphoric gendered pronoun

It was noticeable that there were certain constructions reoccurring in the sentences with the gendered pronoun reference. Following patterns were detected (words in brackets are optional in the construction):

“She (is) (so) cute/stunning/gorgeous/pretty/beautiful/a beauty” (128 cases of usage);

“(I’m) (so/kind of) obsessed with her” (14 cases of usage);

“I/we (just/literally) love her (so much)” (13 cases of usage);

“How cute/gorgeous is she?!” and “Isn’t she cute/lovely/gorgeous/beautiful?” (9 cases of usage);

“Look at her” (5 cases of usage).

These frequencies are illustrated in the Figure 5. For the sake of conciseness and structural integrity, constructions were stemmed by replacing the variable components with their respective parts of speech, following Aijmer's (2008) model of stemming.

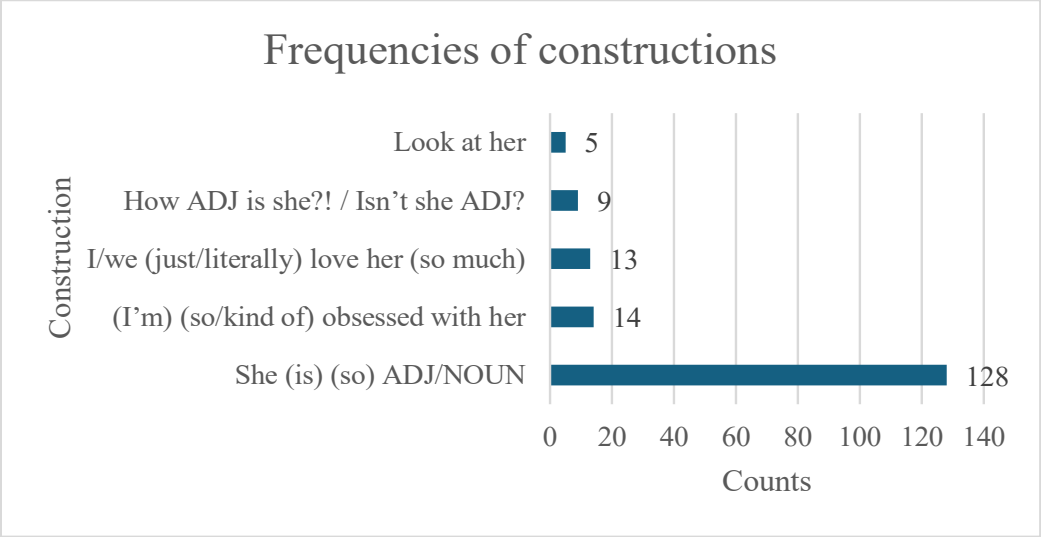

Figure 5: The most frequent construction patterns

Repeated use of these constructions may be a form of entrenchment (Langacker 1987: 100; 2008: 16–17). Linguistic units become entrenched through frequent exposure, which promotes routinization in their access and retrieval, thereby reducing the cognitive effort required for processing a construction. Furthermore, entrenchment is closely associated with the increasing conventionalization of linguistic forms within a speech community (Langacker 2008: 21). Constructions like "She is a beauty" or "How gorgeous is she?!" may be an example of routinization of certain phrases for expressing admiration in the speech of TikTok video creators, considering repeated exposure to certain content patterns due to 'ForYou'-page recommendation algorithm.

5. Discussion

To finally derive a prototypical case of an inanimate object referred to as 'she' on TikTok, it is necessary to analyze the overlapping features of the referents. The first and most important finding was that most of the referents were either crafted by women or designed to be used by women. Then, the most common descriptors surrounding the referents expressed speaker's positive attitude towards the them and emphasized visual or sensory appeal of the object, whether through appearance, taste, or smell. All of the items appeared in videos where the creator was showcasing

or recommending something they value. And lastly, many referents shared features commonly associated with femininity, such as color pink or floral patterns. Taking these features into account, the prototypical case of anaphoric gendered pronoun usage for inanimate objects on TikTok can be defined as follows:

1. Is an object of speaker's affection;
2. Is crafted and/or created to be used by women;
3. Is visually appealing;
4. Has a feature associated with femininity (pink, rounded, has flowers, hearts, berries etc.);
5. Is showcased by the speaker.

The first feature corresponds to the well documented use of gendered pronouns for affective references (Erades 1956; Vachek 1976; Curzan 2003). The second feature vaguely resembles one of three categories of objects that may take the feminine pronoun defined by Svartengren's (1927): "items created or worked on by humans." Presence of features associated with femininity may be a manifestation of cultural prototypes mentioned by Erades (1956), Kanekiyo (1965), Joly (1975), Vachek (1976), and Morris (1993) as a factor influencing pronoun selection. In particular, features like roundedness and thickness corroborate Kanekiyo's (1965) assumption that size and shape of the referent influence gender assignment. The showcasing aspect may be a distinct feature of gendered pronoun reference to inanimate objects in online discourse, particularly due to the nature of the TikTok platform, whose performative format encourages creators to present objects in a way that fosters emotional attachment.

It is noteworthy that there were no instances of 'she' used for coventionalized references to inanimate objects (e.g., for cars, ships, or cities) (Curzan 2003: 110) recorded in the data set. This may be attributed to the fact that these types of objects are less likely to be featured in TikTok videos, where content tends to focus more on topics like makeup reviews or recipes.

Based off the most frequent object types, central categories of the gendered pronoun referents seem to be items of home décor (furniture, lamps, rugs etc.), cosmetics (makeup and skincare products), as well as food and drinks.

It was also possible to establish prototypical constructions, or routines, in which gendered pronoun reference to inanimate objects appears on TikTok:

- "She (is) (so) ADJ/NOUN";
- "(I'm) (so/kind of) obsessed with her";
- "I/we (just/literally) love her (so much)";
- "How ADJ is she?! / Isn't she ADJ?";
- "Look at her."

Interestingly, the findings also indicate a lack of consistency in the use of anaphoric gendered pronouns for inanimate objects, with creators frequently alternating between 'it' and 'she.' This fluctuation suggests that the choice of pronoun may depend on the context of the discussion, e.g., whether it's addressing the object's external perceptions or expressing personal sentiments. The exclusive use of 'she' in a mere 9% of the videos indicates that while personification is prevalent, it is often context-dependent and influenced by the creator's emotional state or narrative intention. This finding alligns well with the conclusion of Erades (1956): "The old schoolbook rule to the effect that a male being is a *he*, a female being a *she* and a thing an *it* only applies when the speaker is emotionally neutral to the subject referred to; as soon as his language becomes affectively coloured, a living being may become an *it*, *this* or *what* and a thing a *he* or *she*" (Erades 1956: 9).

Reflecting on Svartengren's (1927) dismissal of the role of gender in this phenomenon, I believe that it is not possible to not take gender into account in most of these references, as numerous overlapping features, such as being pink, thick or rounded, and having flowers, hearts, and berries, are traditionally associated with femininity (Leinbach et al., 1997; Fagot et al., 1997). These characteristics align with cultural and societal associations with feminine aesthetics, suggesting that gender plays a significant role in why certain inanimate objects are categorized as 'she.' Therefore, dismissing the influence of gender would overlook culturally embedded connections that link these features to feminine identity, both linguistically and symbolically.

One limitation of the data collection was that to save a video as a source, interaction with it was required either by sharing the link or saving it to favorites. This

process might have influenced content preferences, as the TikTok's recommendation algorithm customizes video content displayed on 'For You' page based on previous and continuous user engagement with presented video content through video viewing time, liking, commenting, and sharing (Klug et al. 2021). Consequently, the content displayed likely became increasingly aligned with the behavior of the researcher, potentially skewing the data.

Another limitation of this study is the lack of cross-analysis between categories, such as video types and most frequent descriptors appearing in each of them. Such an analysis could have potentially provided deeper insights into creators' cognitive categorization of items as 'she.'

Lastly, prototyping would be more effective with a larger dataset, as this would enable a more comprehensive analysis of overlapping features and therefore provide a clearer understanding of the factors influencing the use of the female pronouns in reference to inanimate objects.

6. Conclusion

This study sheds light on the linguistic phenomenon of using the pronoun 'she' to refer to inanimate objects on TikTok, a platform on which relatively little linguistic research has been conducted. Through analysis of 185 videos, it was found that the most central categories of personified items were home décor, cosmetics, and food and drinks. The results suggest that apart from well-known use of female pronouns to express emotional attachment, factors like aesthetic appeal and cultural associations with femininity may play significant roles in speaker's categorization of an item as 'she.' Additionally, the showcasing nature of TikTok content may influence these gendered references. A prototypical item referred to as 'she' on TikTok was defined as (1) an object of speaker's affection, (2) crafted and/or created to be used by women, (3) is visually appealing, (4) has a feature associated with femininity and (5) is showcased by the speaker.

The research also highlights the inconsistency in the gendered reference with creators often switching between 'she' and 'it,' indicating that pronoun selection may depend on contextual factors, such as emotional expression or audience engagement.

Additionaly, reoccurring construction patterns in admiration of inanimate items were established, which points towards entrenchment and increasing conventionalization of linguistic routines within the TikTok community. To prove this, further research with a larger dataset and extended time frame is necessary.

Future studies with a thorough cross-category analysis could provide further clarity on the cognitive processes behind gendered pronoun usage in online discourse. Additionally, it would be valuable to replicate Labov's (1973) study by having participants rank objects which they would more likely refer to as ‘she.’ One could make use of the most frequent object types and overlapping characteristics identified in this study to create examples for the items to be ranked.

This study contributes to the understanding of how gendered language is applied to inanimate objects in modern online discourse, reflecting current linguistic trends, underlying cognitive categorization, and gender biases.

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