Compliments that Undermine and Reprimands that Flatter:
Locating and Defining Cryptosemes in Beauty Talk

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Abstract

A cryptoseme is a mixed message in communication that appears to have a singular meaning, while actually hosting obscured dimensions of content that act to undermine the "positivity" or the "negativity" of the statement. The subversive meaning dwells not in what is articulated but in what is overtly left unspoken and taken for granted as true and normal. There exist compliments that are constructed on less-than-favorable premises as well as insults built on flattering assumptions but because we frequently exchange these messages mindlessly, the cultural double-standards they conceal go unacknowledged and unaddressed. I argue that cryptosemes are a manifestation of conflicting cultural beliefs internalized by the members of a given society, and that their continued use helps promote the normative status quo. To illustrate the cryptoseme, I draw on examples from the current public discourse in the US on the topic of female beauty and highlight the "mythologized" gender biases that summon cryptosemic expression to existence.

Key words: cryptoseme; mixed messages; culture; beauty; meaning making; semiotics; social norms

Introduction

Picture the following scenario: two women run into each other at a social function and exchange greetings. While one speaks of how much she likes her friend's hair because it frames her face so well and accentuates her eyes, the other responds with: "And I just love your dress! The vibrant color really plays down your pallor and the cut is so slimming!"

In the world of real-life interactions, this kind of comment is known as the "backhanded compliment". Such "compliments" are personal jabs thinly disguised as positive, well-wishing sentiments. Although there is some room for interpretation depending on the wit and craftiness of the deliverer, most people can recognize the underlying sabotage by sensing a logical or substantive disconnect within the message: in our example, the compliment was aimed at the dress and not the woman who was, on the contrary, dealt an insult to her physical appearance. It is fair to assume that the fictitious

woman would not find her acquaintance's comment genuinely friendly – in all likelihood, she would consider it condescending, confrontational and adversarial.

Yet, there is a type of a "backhanded" message that is quite prevalent in our everyday discourse that can elude our irony radar because it is devoid of ostensible malice. For instance, some people gladly accept being told that, if they are "overweight", it is the beauty on the inside that counts – though, in essence, the underlying message urges one to focus on one's personality because the outward appearance is not worth noting. Despite the shift in focus – from outer, physical beauty to inner, spiritual beauty – some women find such a euphemism comforting and even empowering and consider it an overall "positive" message.

This paper focuses on such mixed messages in the realm of social discourse about female beauty – a cultural theme that gives rise to tremendous attention, controversy and anxiety in the US society and is rife with a minefield of mixed messages around every turn. The cultural emphasis on physical attractiveness as a woman's primary "social currency" (Williamson 2002, 20, 42), has been a lucrative one for peddlers of "beautifying" products and surgical augmentations (Haiken 1997), but, of course, as scholars remind us, the modern concept of female beauty is much more than just great business – it is a powerful framework for instituting and perpetuating a wide range of social inequalities by stressing the "detrimental" value of female beauty as the key in women's success in life – at home, at work and as a major marker of female identity in general (see Wolf 2002, Peiss 1999, Kilbourne 1999, Berry 2007, to name just a few.) In this paper, I explore the inconspicuous inequality rooted in culture, cognition and the intersubjectivity of human communication: the vocabulary we use to talk about female beauty and the competing, contradictory ideas and expectations packed into certain popular "compliments" and "insults" on the topic. I argue that some of our popular compliments to women, when analyzed semiotically, betray not-so-flattering deeply seated biases and double-standards rooted in socially "mythologised" beliefs about gender.

I begin by introducing the ***cryptoseme*** (pronounced: /krĭp'tə-sēm/, Greek for *kryptos*: "hidden" / "secret" and *sêma*: "sign" / "meaning") – a type of a mixed message in communication in which "hidden" meanings can remain undetected by either or both,

the sender and the receiver of the message, followed by multiple examples that illustrate cryptosemic coverage of the female beauty topic in social discourse. I argue that these "loaded" compliments would not exist if our rigidly defined cultural standards for female beauty had not been, in the words of Barthes, "mythologized" (Barthes 1972) into our shared belief system as "natural", and, hence, "normal". I conclude by posing the question of the potential latent effects of cryptosemes on macro-level cultural norms of the female beauty concept in contemporary U.S. society.

Cryptoseme: The Mixed Message with Hidden Meaning

Mixed messages have been around for as long as societies have been placing a high premium on tact, etiquette and social niceties. In instances of having to face pragmatic realities and physical limitations – at times when things happen to us outside of our control – any morsel of "positivity", even technically off-topic, can appropriately serve as a supportive effort. Members of U.S. culture highly value and actively cultivate "positivity" – in personal attitude (Cerulo, 2006), as well as in social interaction (Carnegie 1981). Speakers of American English depend heavily on complimenting as a means of creating and securing positive relationships with others (Wolfson and Manes 1980). But politeness is a double-edged sword, as it forces us to ignore or obscure inconvenient realities and cultural taboos in order to maintain social peace and friendly ambiance.[1] As we strive to smooth out the rough edges of social interaction with words of comfort and appeals to vanity, we frequently find ourselves having to bend, embellish or entirely sacrifice the truth (as we perceive it) to preserve the precarious amicability of the moment. This is to suggest that though politeness is certainly the language of diplomacy, it is neither the clearest form of communication nor one that yields the most truthful, honest output. Consequently, compliments implemented as politeness discourse strategy are rife with "mixed" semiotic content. It is ironic that when we take issue with a compliment, it is usually because we doubt the sincerity of the speaker (i.e.: "Does she

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[1] See Brown and Levinson's seminal work "Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage" for their framework of politeness as a social defense strategy in response to or anticipation of "face threatening acts" (Brown and Levinson 1978 (2009))

really *mean* it?", "What is his *true agenda* for saying this?", etc.), while it is actually the sincere, "coming from a good place" compliment that calls for a more critical scrutiny.

Generally defined, a **cryptoseme** a mixed message in communication that is quite genuinely spoken with a singular meaning in mind, but also hosts a parallel, veiled dimension of meaning that hints at a far more complex overall content. This obscured dimension of meaning derives its substance not from what is being spoken but from what is ostensibly left unsaid: the unspoken assumption clashes in some way with the sentiment of the spoken words, thus undermining the intended positivity or negativity of the statement, subverting the truthfulness or, to put it in J. L. Austin's terms, the "felicity" (Austin 1962) of the message. There are positive and negative cryptosemes. A positive cryptoseme is a message delivered as a compliment, despite the not-so-flattering assumptions it stems from. The hidden negative meaning within the cryptosemic compliment owes its stealth to the tone[2] of positivity overshadowing and obscuring pragmatic value (i.e.: the larger context that determines the meaning of the words being spoken.) Conversely, a negative cryptoseme is a message disguised as an insult or a reprimand, in spite of the largely positive, favorable premise it is built on. These two types of cryptosemes share the same structure, but run on opposite dynamics: the positive cryptoseme owes its success to highlighting form over content, whereas, in the negative cryptoseme, content trumps form.

Cryptosemic compliments arise not in response to acts of nature or god, but rather from social circumstances that are, nonetheless treated as afflictions. These are social settings in which people feel compelled to console others – *though the "problem" at hand would not require a consolation, if the society at large did not consider it a problem in the first place.* This is to say that the cryptoseme is very much a cultural phenomenon: its origins are embedded in the cultural norms and roles of one's social environment. An illustration is in order.

Many women share a common experience: around the age of thirty, they start receiving compliments about how fantastic they look *for their age*. These are genuinely well-intentioned praises but if one is to dissect the total content of the message, one

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[2] By "tone", I do not mean the tonality of the speaker's voice but the overall attitude or spirit in which the message was delivered.

discovers that the positive bit of the message is nested in a larger negative assumption. Much as "the dress is so slimming" is a compliment to the dress and not its wearer, here, the compliment is not to the woman's looks but to her impressive powers of self-preservation against the merciless toll of time. It is not that she objectively looks fantastic – but that she looks fantastic in comparison to other women of her age cohort who, presumably, "look their age", which is implied to be "bad"[3].

This *conditionality* of the compliment is one of the defining qualities of many cryptosemic utterances and is responsible for undermining the intended "goodness" of the entire sentiment. Cryptosemic praise comes at the expense of exposing low expectations: the positivity of the message is drawn from essentially congratulating the person for defying those unfavorable social odds. To be genuinely flattered by the "you look amazing for your age" statement, one must subscribe (at least, implicitly) to the dominant cultural belief that, beyond a certain age number, women's physical appearance (and, hence, appeal) *de facto* deteriorates. And beneath this statement dwells another obscured, taken-for-granted social "fact" – that the deterioration of a woman's physical attractiveness signals the diminishment of her overall social worth. Departing from this "truth", one may, indeed, feel complimented to hear something positive about her physical appearance – indeed, some women may draw a sense of triumph and empowerment specifically from this implicit acknowledgement of defying low expectations. It has been suggested that older adults maintain self-esteem and life satisfaction precisely by gauging themselves against their peers, rather than against larger generic social norms (Heidrich and Ryff 1993), which helps explain the popularity of the "you look great for your age" cryptoseme, since the recipient can now take pride in being ahead her age cohort competition. The problem is that the implied "unfortunate circumstance" of a woman's "advanced" age is a socio-cultural staple that is quite unfavorable to women of all ages. In trading this "compliment", all parties involved are complicit in an unconscious conspiracy of denial of building social pleasantries on a problematic premise. This cryptoseme, though gratifying in the short-term, comes in tow

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[3] It follows that, in a world in which looking younger than one's age is a requirement for female beauty, telling a woman that she looks her age is not a neutral observation – it can very easily be interpreted as a vicious insult.

with the perpetually mounting pressure to look younger than one's age to feel oneself (and be perceived by others) as a contender in the game of beauty and social worth.

One may make an argument that there is nothing unusual or deceptive about compliments that try to downplay people's age – after all, most would agree that aging is an undesirable fact of life for all involved. A useful rule of thumb in checking for presence of sexist influences is to see if the situation unravels the same way when applied to the opposite sex. The question of the double-standard of aging among genders has long been a source of debate, with all sides acknowledging that it is a complex issue with many variables at play. For instance, the double-standard exists when applied to judging others' attractiveness through the aging process (Deuisch, Zalenski, and Clark 1986) but not necessarily in *self-evaluations* of body attitudes (Wilcox 1997) (also, people seem to experience different attitudes towards aging and how it affects attractiveness throughout their own life course: Deuisch, Zalenski, and Clark found that college-aged subjects were considerably harsher in their judgments of women than elderly subjects of both sexes who showed no discrimination). It is safe to say, however, that, in the Western conception of gender roles and values, the notions of age and aging carry significantly different socio-cultural connotations for men than women: contrary to being a major marker of decline in "freshness" in women, advanced age connotes accomplishment, worldliness and overall "distinguished-ness" for men. This rift in age norms and roles being stratified by sex is bolstered by the observation that men can feel uneasy in response to the same statements women find complimentary. To tell a woman that she looks younger than her actual age is a traditional go-to fool-proof compliment but to tell a man the same thing is frequently received as emasculating because the idea of looking younger than one's age summons a completely separate set of associations for a man: it hints at inexperience, immaturity and a potential lack of means – not beauty. As Sontag (1972) pointed out in "The Double Standard of Aging," the social conventions for masculine aesthetics allow for conceptions of both "boy" and "man", whereas women's standard of beauty only allows for "girl" and offers no counterpart for a more mature option. And so, though both sexes change physically overtime and no one is too thrilled with the health issues and physical limitations becoming more pronounced with aging, the stigma of age as destroyer of physical attractiveness and social worth continues to

6

apply largely to women – and this is telling of a durable cultural double-standard towards men's and women's social valuation that lends itself to compliments built on rotten foundations.

The question of the interrelation of influence between cryptosemes and culture is at the heart of this inquiry. Cultural taboos push us to express controversial ideas with special code such as metaphors (Lakoff 1973) and euphemisms (Rawson 1981). The multiplicity of different and often contradictory cultural norms within the same society (see "cultural toolkit" in Swidler 1986) creates cognitive dissonance (Plous 1993, 22-30) amongst its members that lends itself to thinking and speaking in mixed messages. Social rules of cooperation and reciprocity (Cialdini 2001, 20-49) require that not only should we steer clear of any social awkwardness and embarrassment on our own behalf, but that we are responsible for helping others "save face" as well (Goffman 1967, 5-45) – an effort that requires considerable diplomatic skills. These factors come together to motivate the creation and perpetuation of cryptosemes (particularly cryptosemic compliments and "kudos") in public discourse. The potential social side-effects of the cryptoseme are best anticipated through understanding its cultural foundations.

Cultural Properties of the Cryptoseme

Just as conditionality undermines a compliment, the praise within the positive cryptoseme can also be subverted by a *consolatory* note in the message. Cryptosemes arise from the implicit need to offer support and encouragement to a person suffering from a perceived *deficit* of some important quality. In reaching for a cryptoseme, the sender of the message attempts to compensate this lacking quality by misdirecting attention (the receiver's and the sender's own) towards some positive quality that *is* there. In the "you look fantastic for your age" example, that certain something that is missing and must, somehow, be compensated for is a woman's (narrowly defined) youth.

In linguistics, "presupposition" is the term used to describe the absolute taken-for-granted assumption underlying verbal expression. For instance, to say: "I am sorry I called you bourgeois" presupposes that being bourgeois is understood – both, by the speaker and by the receiver of the message – to be a "negative" thing. Stalnaker, in

situating the term in pragmatic linguistics, stressed the aspect of meaning located in the human element of the communication outside of pure semantic value of the words spoken:

... [T]he basic presupposition relation is not between propositions or sentences, but between a person and a proposition. A person's presuppositions are the propositions whose truth he takes for granted, often unconsciously, in a conversation, an inquiry, or a deliberation. They are the background assumptions that may be used without being spoken – sometimes without being noticed – for example as suppressed premises in an enthymematic argument, or as implicit directions about how a request should be fulfilled or a piece of advice taken. (Stalnaker 1973, 447)

The key characteristic of the above-described presupposition is that it positions certain conceptual "truths" as the norm and does so automatically, without deliberation. In understanding cryptosemes, I am suggesting that intersubjective *cultural* presuppositions, buried in our unconscious and tapped on autopilot, account for the "silent" or "hidden" – at any rate unspoken – dimension of meaning that can elude some or all parties involved in the conversation – because the "truth" of those presuppositions is not habitually questioned or re-evaluated.

Barthes called this acceptance of culturally constructed meanings as natural and, hence fixed and eternal, "mythologisation" (Barthes 1972). A myth, as Barthes put it, "is constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things: in it, things lose the memory that they once were made." (142) Although social values, beliefs and trends shift and alter through history and geography, there exists a myopic tendency to treat the cultural norms of the "here and now" as if they are universal and timeless. To be flattered by the statement "You look great for thirty!" is to accept as natural, and, hence, inevitable, the myth that, at thirty, an average woman looks less than "great".

A cognitive explanation of the same phenomenon is provided in Hofstadter's "Changes in Default Words and Images Engendered by Rising Consciousness", in which he talks about the trap of *default assumptions* – notions that hold "true in what you might say is the 'simplest' or 'most natural' or 'most likely' possible model of whatever situation is under discussion." (1985, 137) Hofstadter writes about default assumptions in

reference to the markedness (Jakobson and Halle 1952) of certain popular linguistic signifiers. The words "motorist" or "doctor", for example, are technically gender-neutral, yet, through our cultural socialization, we tend to think of those terms as masculine unless otherwise specified – as evidenced by the ubiquity of gendered qualifiers such as "female motorist" or "lady doctor". Hofstadter's concept of default assumptions, likewise, describes the settled, automatically summoned templates of cultural norms and roles that "permeate our mental representations and channel our thoughts" (Hofstadter 1985, 137), pushing us to reach for cryptosemes when we encounter people whom we perceive as socially handicapped because they fall outside of those narrowly prescribed roles and norms. An "older age" for a woman is widely viewed as a disadvantage and, thus, we may feel compelled to treat is as a negative affliction that must be ameliorated with positive words.

Or, consider this all-too-familiar conversational exchange that seems to take place across countless U.S. households every holiday season:

-- "I've gained ten pounds since Thanksgiving – I feel so fat and ugly!!"
-- "Nonsense!! You look so healthy and happy now!"

Unfortunately, this type of lamenting one's weight is common and even customary for women, and so is the response. Usually, such a reply is earnestly meant to ease the complainer's torment, yet, the total message does not transmit a contradiction to the complainer's statement about extra weight making her ugly. Instead, it offers a distraction by shining the spotlight on a set of *seemingly analogous* positive qualities this person possesses: appearing healthy and happy.

If we take it for granted that the woman in question did visibly gain some weight and that the response was meant well, we can assume that the speaker was attempting to overcome a two-part challenge: to make the woman feel better about herself by saying something "confidence-building", but to do so with deference to the rigidly unforgiving social standards for physical beauty and fitness that are not stacked in her favor. As such, the speaker comes up with something to say that carries the overall tone of positivity (to offset the negativity of the implied fatness / ugliness), while, at the same time, making

sure that it has a ring of realism to it – hence, the cryptoseme. Customary reliance on the "fat" vs. "thin" dichotomy as if those terms were antonyms of each other is telling in itself. "Thin", after all, is an external shape – the *form* of a person, while "fat" references a specific *content* of lipids inside one's body. This difference in focus on the external condition in one case and internal in the other, signals a bias that is already built into our language, and hence, into our perceptions and attitudes about body weight. It is also not a coincidence that the popular terms used to describe social attitudes towards women's bodies are "thin privilege" and "fat hatred" – labels that reflect the socio-mental asymmetry of negativity afforded to women considered on the "heavier" side of the thin / fat divide.

It follows that, if we were not so quick to call women "fat" in the first place, many a self-esteem would be salvaged. But this is only because the term "fat" in itself, has, in the past few decades, secured itself a place as the Supreme Insult to women. If the mainstream culture offered a real option for being "fat and beautiful", the speaker would surely not have any issue crafting a straight-forward positive message by simply replying: "Not at all – you are quite beautiful!" Instead, the cryptoseme betrays the "double-bind" (Bateson 2000, 206-212) of the speaker's own cognitive dissonance in reference to the issue of female body weight and beauty: the speaker wishes to reassure the woman that she is not "ugly", but cannot quite bring him/herself to calling her "beautiful", since "fat and beautiful" is not an entry in the mental catalogue of familiar cultural concepts. In this sense, a cryptoseme can be said to be an outcome of one's conscious, deliberate intentions coming into conflict with one's unconscious default assumptions (for a riveting discussion on the clash between conscious and unconscious decision-making processes and the havoc it wreaks upon social outcomes, see Wilson's *Strangers to Ourselves: Discovering the Adaptive Unconscious*, 2002.)

When one is confronted with the awkward dilemma of having to comfort a person who is insecure about weight gain making her ugly, the convenient solution is to employ a cryptosemic compliment – an automatic strategy that ameliorates, at once, both contradictory urges: the social pressure and / or one's own empathetic impulse to say

10

something uplifting – and – on the other hand, staying true to one's own values[4] This is achieved by dipping into a parallel line of discourse on female beauty and summoning the point about looking healthy and happy. The topics of health and happiness have been socially framed as a positive way to talk about relative weight gain in women and, therefore, make a handy substitute for talking about physical beauty. Phrase it with an opener such as "nonsense" or "don't be ridiculous" or any other indicator of contrariety (as in: "Don't be silly – you don't look fat and ugly – you look healthy and happy!"), and the receiver is likely to imagine that "healthy and happy" is offered as a mere synonym for "beautiful". In her book *Mindfulness*, Langer (1990) talks about automatic behaviors triggered by a particular structure and phrasing of a statement rather than its total semantic content. Langer's research team found that in an experimental scenario, where office colleagues were lined up to use the copy machine, asking: "Excuse me, may I use the Xerox machine because I'm in a rush?" and asking: "Excuse me, may I use the Xerox machine because I want to make copies?" yielded the same rate of success in being allowed to cut in line. This is because, when not engaged in active focusing, people demonstrate "attention to structure rather than conscious attention to content." (14-15) In this request, the word "because" was the structural marker that caused the people's mental autopilot to assume that the asker had a reasonable justification for wanting to cut in line – even in the case when the words spoken were "because I have to make copies". The same automatic response may happen in the mind of the receiver of our "healthy and happy" cryptoseme: if a person had just complained about feeling "fat and ugly" and her companion's response begins with a contrarian interjection "nonsense", she may easily assume that the statement that follows is a *refutation* of her lament. In addition, I suggest that even the *sender* falls victim to the positive tone and trigger words in his / her own message: because it is such a popular cliché, one could easily use this cryptoseme with a

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[4] In concurrent works, I illustrate in great detail the structural mechanisms of the cryptoseme. In analyzing the relationship within and between signifier / signified pairs (de Saussure 1916 (2003)), the main culprits in the formation and perpetuation of cryptosemes is the human propensity towards becoming mentally "stuck" in reified frameworks of meaning rooted in binary, mutually exclusive distinctions, such as "us" / "them", "pro" / "con", "friend / enemy", etc. (e.g. "analogical thinking" in Levi-Strauss 1972; "semiotic square" in Greimas 1987, Zerubavel 1987 and 1997; "islands of meaning" in Zerubavel 1991; "metaphors we live by" in Lakoff and Johnson 1980 – to name a few.)

sincere belief that she / he is indeed, calling someone "beautiful" – just not utilizing that specific word. The total message, however, with all its unspoken implications, spells out something different: "You may be overweight and, therefore, unattractive, *but at least* you look healthy and happy."

Another testament to the importance of culture in cryptosemes is their tendency to emerge in tandem with themes that have been commonly framed as "sensitive social issues"– particularly pertaining to notions of fairness, equality and meritocracy. Barthes notes that a myth is *depoliticized speech* (Barthes 1972, 143): a message that pretends to lack an ideological basis by posing as a simple reference to undisputed, concrete reality, as if no personal interpretation applies and no larger social issues are at stake. "Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact." (43) In other words, we can unconsciously pack ideological wishful thinking into many of our seemingly un-political statements. Let us follow through with our "healthy and happy" example. In the recent decades, there developed a mounting public controversy in the US surrounding the question of the price women pay for physical attractiveness – especially within the rubric of body weight. Women brutalizing themselves for the sake of beauty is nothing new but the current concern has to do with women having to aspire to mass-media portrayals of beauty ideals that are either out of the scope of practical accessibility (such as the pressure to match the glamorous look of "stars" and "celebrities" (Blum 2003)) or actually do not exist in nature. These mainstream images and descriptions of what constitutes modern standards of female physical beauty are technological fabrications and fictions that cannot be achieved in reality, and yet the pressure to reach them is quite real and women go to extreme lengths to do so, frequently at the expense of undermining their physical and mental well-being. Because women's perilous self-abuse for the sake of beauty has now been dubbed a social "epidemic", it makes sense that the topic of "beauty" has been publicly reframed into a "health and wellness" issue. And so, upon being confronted with a person who struggles with weight-related self-esteem problems, one may experience a sense of indignation about the injustice of it all and may wish to counter-balance this unfortunate situation with a socially responsible statement.

This, it seems, is why so many people rely on the "you look healthy and happy" euphemism. In contrast to the affliction of being unattractive, one's health and happiness are generally assumed to be the province of personal control – hence, telling a person that she looks "healthy and happy" affords her *agency* and that feels like a positive act in itself.

"Hot", polarized social topics can summon anxiety and spark the urge to make a political stand or an ideological commitment, but cryptosemes provide a opt-out short-cut, not only from the serious consideration these issues demand but also from the anxiety of having to redefine one's social identity each time a complex social topic is introduced. They serve as diffusers of the cognitive dissonance we experience in modern times in terms of the conflict of *who I am* versus *whom I should be*, the rift between ideal culture and real culture, if you will. Modern Western women have reached a historical point of stalemate between strong pulls of patriarchal values heavily infused into their socialization and democratic values of the ideal culture they have also been brought up to subscribe to intellectually. This frustration is captured perfectly in a quote by activist Dana Densmore responding to the popular view that the act of cosmetic beautification helps cultivate women's self-esteem: "Somehow it always just looked painted, harsh, worse than ever, and yet real life fell so far short of the ideals already burned into our consciousness that the defeat was bitter too, and neither the plain nor the painted solution was satisfactory." (quoted in Peiss 1999, 261) This statement points to the driving force behind the utilization of cryptosemes: one may consciously acknowledge that cosmetic make-up is a "bondage", an artifact of an ugly history, an imposition on women's liberty and an insult to the self – that the bare, unpainted face is "enough" to be beautiful in itself – but, at once, cannot bring oneself to truly believe it, to be truly satisfied with it because the idea clashes with the social expectations one has internalized throughout life. As the result, many women find themselves in a loss / loss situation – if they want to look and *feel* beautiful, they must experience shame and pain for conforming to unreasonable, demeaning social standards of female beauty; and if they wish to make a stand against these archaic values, they do so at the price of feeling less than socially desirable (and resenting themselves for feeling this way.) For women, speaking in mixed messages about female beauty may be a manifestation of this internal conflict: the cryptoseme

satisfies the need and desire to appear as a good person and progressive thinker and yet allows one to stay true to the not-so-politically-correct values of one's upbringing.

This attempt to right social wrongs by reframing an old issue in new terms is a problematic foundation for crafting a genuine compliment, because the new terms do not re-define the old issue – only suppress it into the nether-depths of our psyches. Both, the sender and the receiver of the cryptosemic compliment may walk away feeling good about themselves and about what was spoken and heard, unaware of the paradox within the exchange: that the "hidden" meaning of the message conceals (and, I argue, reinforces!) the "old" notion the "new" part of the message is so valiantly claiming to debunk.

The power of capitalizing on moral indignation and guilt about harsh beauty ideals (i.e.: to sell products that actually reinforce the inequalities that one is supposed to be upset about in the first place) has not been wasted on corporate advertising executives: in the past decade, there has been an onslaught of products advertised under the banner of readjusting the female beauty imagery towards more realistic media representations. The revolution was advanced by Unilever's Dove Campaign for Real Beauty launched in 2004, which was created especially for the introduction of a new line of "firming" cellulite cream, and became a tremendous success with consumers and media watchdog organizations alike. The multimedia marketing campaign, by virtue of featuring "real", "average"-sized, "curvy" and allegedly un-airbrushed women, was touted (and widely received) as the new, socially conscious model for addressing and representing female beauty in advertising. It featured non-fashion-model women with "real curves" who offered "inspirational" quotes, such as this one by Julie Arko: "It's okay to be you! Not every woman comes in a size 2 package. It's who you are on the inside that counts; it's the 'whole package'!"[5] If the irony of peddling cellulite cream under the guise of "real beauty" was lost on many a fan of the ads (there are hundreds of online testimonials about switching to Dove brand as a measure of support of its "good cause" such as: "When I first looked the Campaign up, I was so inspired that I immediately switched to

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[5] Julie Arko, one of the "real" women featured in the campaign, accessed on November 14, 2005 (Julie's page has since been taken down.)
http://campaignforrealbeauty.com.

Dove products,"[6]) it is not surprising that many consumers overlooked the subtle cryptoseme underlying the entire campaign. Julie's quote is a variation of the "You're not ugly – you are healthy and happy" cryptoseme, the total message being: "Because of your "normal" size, you don't qualify for what is considered physically attractive – therefore, you should focus on your 'inner beauty' instead." The opening line on the original website for this campaign read: "Firming the thighs of a size 2 supermodel is no challenge." Throughout the ad copy, the word combination "size 2 supermodel" was juxtaposed against the notion of "women with real curves" and, as semiotic theory suggests, such a repetitive comparison is likely to place the two categories of "beauty" into polarized, mutually exclusive oppositions in the perceptions of the audience. In a cultural climate that places a very high premium on female attractiveness, it is not unreasonable to imagine that, given a choice, many women would opt for the "supermodel" body type rather than whatever other body standard was offered as an alternative – which, in Dove's case, happens to be "real women with real curves"[7]. Such deceptive cryptosemic advertisement only exasperates the double-standard of female beauty: for those who do not fit into the narrow definition of conventional, mainstream beauty, the only "real" beauty is to be found "on the inside". Incredibly, while it has been a long and infamous tradition amongst North American men to say that a woman has a "great personality" as code for her absence of physical attractiveness, amongst women, essentially the same euphemism can be delivered and accepted as a positive, even empowering message. The Dove Campaign for Real Beauty exemplifies the hypocrisy built into much of cryptosemic expression: presenting itself as an agent of humanistic progress, while, simultaneously channeling the very way of thinking that thwarts the realization of those ideals. As Dara Persis Murray (2012) notes in her detailed semiotic and feminist deconstruction of the said campaign – not only does Dove commit the irony

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[6] Sahar's Blog, "Mirror Mirror On the Wall, Who's The Prettiest of Them All," September 28, 2008, http://saharsblog.wordpress.com/2008/09/28/mirror-mirror-on-the-wall-whos-the-prettiest-of-them-all/

[7] It bears noting that, in the keeping with the above-mentioned tendency towards "analogical thinking", the public backlash against social demands of unrealistic thinness from women has swung the pendulum of bias and exclusion to the opposite extreme: in this reactionary framework, "real" women have "real curves", implying that a woman who lacks the said curves is, somehow, less of a woman or, at least, not as "real" a woman as those who are deemed "curvy". The discrimination against "larger" women is counteracted by discrimination against "skinny" women – an approach that glorifies one kind of womanhood at the expense (e.g.: mockery, demonization and, ultimately, exclusion) of another.

of objectifying women in the name of celebrating their natural beauty (10), it capitalizes on the classical feminist themes as if it single-handedly invented them: "The copy emphasizes Dove, not the women – 'it's time to change all that…it's why we started the campaign for real beauty' - as the catalyst for change, thus usurping the power of the feminist movement (represented by the women) in this mission of 'real beauty.'" (12) Although cryptosemic advertisements are quite intentionally contrived to persuade us into buying products (as opposed to the sincerely well-meant cryptosemic compliments people exchange in everyday social interaction, without commercial agenda), hermeneutic analysis of commercial cryptosemes is phenomenologically useful to us because it uncovers the same Trojan Horse principle the positive cryptoseme thrives on: sending in a saboteur under the guise of a good will ambassador.

The Negative Cryptoseme

Tabloid and pop culture texts show us that cryptosemes are not always constructed with "positivation" of the message in mind. Because of the unrealistic body weight ideal propagated by the fashion industry, mainstream cultural icons and countless commercial and entertainment industry representations and definitions of what conventional beauty should look like (Wykes and Gunter 2005; Grogan 2008), there has been a notable backlash in the mass media and public forums against, what one online blogger called, "the tyranny of the thin ideal."[8] But with the indignation against the destructive media imagery and amidst calls for fat-acceptance, also came a knee-jerk reaction against celebrities and fashion models who exemplify this trend (one can see for oneself by doing an online search for keywords such as "sickly thin" or "disgustingly skinny".) Not surprisingly, to pander to the mounting public outrage, the yellow press routinely runs "human interest" updates on the body weight fluctuations of the rich and famous, condemning celebrities and professional fashion models for being excessively underweight in statements that attempt to be critical of these women, yet fall short of challenging the status quo of the standards in place. In the same vein, it is very rare to come across a feature about a celebrity who has gained some weight and is said to look

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[8] Kite, Lexie and Kite, Lindsay. "Photoshop Phoniness: The Hall of Shame," accessed April 2013. https://everydayfeminism.com/2013/04/photoshop-phoniness-hall-of-shame/

"beautiful", even if the intention is to frame it as positive change. Instead, one frequently encounters "empowering" commentary such as that of Teen Vogue's Editor in Chief Amy Astley – in reference to the magazine's commitment to feature teenage amateurs as opposed to professional models in its "back to school" fashion issue: "Models are freaks of nature with genetically perfect bodies, so to me, it's important that girls can look to someone like us and see how to find jeans even though her legs aren't eight miles long."[9] This quote was referenced on the Parents Television Council website as an *exemplary* message to young women. "Sadly, such enlightened and equal treatment of girls in today's popular culture is far from the norm," the "Culture Watch" feature article laments.[10] The author of the article considers Astley's statement an "enlightened" one – not because of what she has to say about "normal" girls (it really does not say anything good about them, only suggests that they fall short of the ideal leg length), but because saying something negative about fashion models creates the impression that something positive was said about their "imperfect" counterparts.

Astley's words are quite representative of the typical discourse about female body issues: the ideal is virtually never challenged, since there is a continued reference to the ultra-thin model body type as "perfect". Instead, "normal" women are urged to give up on trying to achieve the unattainable and, instead, focus on loving themselves for who they are, even if their legs are short (with one's legs being "eight miles long" presented as a real option, albeit, a genetically "freaky" one.) As with many cryptosemic statements, the incessant urging for self-acceptance has the condescending ring of a call for self-*settlement*. A very thin model will be referred to as sickly, unhappy, "a genetic freak of nature", with a possibility of taking jabs at her supposed inferior intelligence and shallowness – all topics from parallel lines of (misogynistic) public discourse about fashion models, yet, underneath all the negative noise, it is still understood that she represents physical perfection.

The result is a culture in which being called "anorexic" is routinely taken as a compliment by girls and young women who have come to implicitly understand that,

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[9] Astley, Amy. MTV News. "Average Janes Supplanting Supermodels," accessed February 2006. http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1512370/average-janes-supplanting-supermodels.jhtml)
[10]"Culture Watch", Parents' Television Council, accessed February, 2006. http://www.parentstv.org/ptc/publications/culturewatch/2006/0206.asp

despite being technically a "bad thing", anorexia is a disorder that brings on thinness and thinness remains the only acceptable standard of beauty. This is the intriguing property of the cryptosemic insult: the process of "decoding" (Hall 1996) the message by the receiver is the opposite of that of the positive cryptoseme. Take the example of criticizing a young woman for looking unhealthily thin – and doing so in a clearly negative scolding tone. Chances are, if this woman has struggled with body weight insecurities, she will be more flattered than unsettled by such a reprimand. This is an instance in which the sender's negative tone and intent to criticize are actually the obscured, ignored component of the message, while the underlying cultural "myths" offset the sternness of the comment by being quite welcoming and accepting of extreme thinness as a positive female aesthetic. The logic of thinking in such mutually exclusive binary opposites (Jakobson and Halle 1952; Levi-Strauss 1972) leads one to make the following chain of inferences: if "thin" is beautiful, then "fat" is "ugly"; if "fat" women are "healthy and happy", then "thin" women are "unhealthy and unhappy"; it, then, follows that, if "thin" is "beautiful", then "unhealthy and unhappy" is "beautiful" (and, consequently, "healthy and happy" is "ugly"). As far as the receiver is concerned, she was just called "beautiful" – because outside of the microcosm of this conversation, the macro-level cultural norms internalized by the receiver override the "local" intentioned negativity of the statement.

Why is the negative cryptoseme so diametrical to the positive cryptoseme in terms of form, not content, becoming suppressed into the "hidden" dimensions of the message? A separate inquiry must be made into the psychology and cognition of responding to compliments as opposed to insults. My initial guess is that the tone of positivity or negativity of the utterance sends the receiver a signal as whether to brace oneself for hostilities or a friendly exchange, resulting in different psycho-cognitive attention outcomes. Perhaps those who receive negative cryptosemes stay more attuned to the semantic content of the message because they are in a more defensive mode, while those who are expecting a positive statement are relaxed enough to let the mental autopilot make meaning from it (and, as mentioned earlier, out mental autopilots favor the structure-over-content heuristic.) It is also possible that this focus on positivity (overt or obscured) within the cryptosemic message comes from "positive asymmetry" – a term coined by Cerulo (2006) to describe a "powerful convention of quality evaluation" (6)

rooted in the coupling of the human cognitive propensity towards focusing on the "best", while turning a blind eye to the "worst". This socio-mental prioritizing of the positive over the negative may help explain why some people will pick up only on the positive / complimentary dimension of meaning within both, positive and negative cryptosemes.

The presence of structure that allows the receiver to look past the overt negativity into the silently connoted positivity within the cryptosemic insult bolsters my supposition that cultural default assumptions play a very active part in shaping the total message of the cryptoseme. One wonders whether these unspoken double-standards underlying cryptosemic utterances register within the conscious or unconscious faculties of the mind and, if so, what latent effects they may have on contemporary and future belief systems. At the very least, cryptosemes can be employed by marketing experts to capitalize on people's ideological sensibilities to sell them the opposite of what they think they are buying. As early as the 1960's, feminism has been known in the advertising industry as "the perfect product pitch" used to sell anything from female vaginal deodorants to cigarettes (Frank 1998, 153), and it has become an updated marketing convention to capitalize on pandering to the righteousness and the wallets of the consumer by appearing to say something negative about unrealistic beauty standards for women. Pedersen (2002) offers a poignant example in which she applies semiotic analysis to a sample from the *Look good on your own terms*® campaign put forth by Kellogg's Canada – a series of ads that claims to "[swim] against the cultural current, challenging the unrealistic body image standards by which women judge themselves." (quoted in Pedersen 2002, 169-181). One print ad shows a portrait depiction of a rail-thin woman in a bathing suit in a typical vulnerable model pose (arms twisted behind the back, head tilted up and to the side, neck exposed, etc.) as the title copy reads: "IF THIS IS BEAUTY, THERE'S SOMETHING WRONG WITH THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER."

At a first glance, one may get the impression that, by questioning the aesthetic value of the woman in the photograph, the makers of Special K are challenging the established beauty / body norm in place. They seem to be suggesting that there is something wrong with this representation of beauty. However, on a cognitive level, Pederson insists, the message is quite the opposite: everything about the photograph is analogous to any other legitimate, conventional fashion ad (presented in a "portrait"

format, which, traditionally emphasizes *being* over *doing*), because the model in it actually does represent the "ideal" body image and, thus, "this is her symbolic value" (172); because despite the implication that her shape may be objectionably thin, she resembles all the other models on the pages surrounding this very ad in Fashion magazine in which it appears (in glamour as well as submissive and exposed sexuality). The ad never dispels the notion that "this is beauty" – it only suggests that there is something wrong with people who think so (which is, presumably, the majority of us). The ad avoids explicitly stating that the image is "ugly" – it shifts that responsibility to its audience, and goes so far as to suggest that it is our own fault if we see nothing wrong with this image. But, of course, we are already supposed to think that this is beautiful, so, in essence, the ad only presents us with something we already know – it does not make any changes to the notion of beauty, but passes (or, rather, forces) the torch of forward thinking onto the "beholder" of the ad. The "old" value the message is supposedly trying to improve upon is: "rail-thin women are beautiful"; the "new" message, however, does not reverse this notion – it does not directly assert that rail-thin women are ugly and neither does it suggest that larger than rail-thin women are beautiful per se. Instead, while maintaining the overall rubric of body weight, it shifts the topic from physical attractiveness (i.e.: what range of body weight is or isn't attractive) to the topic of social responsibility in aesthetically appraising female worth. This is a very clever way to make us think that the ad is saying something negative about this image of supposedly self-destructive lifestyle and goals, while, in fact, the word "beauty" still appears in the title copy in reference to the image without offering any new insight or alternative: cognitively, the association between the ultra-thin image and the term "beauty" is reinforced rather than severed. And so, the image of the model, whose likeness is supposedly presented as an example of "how not to be", simultaneously becomes, as Pedersen puts it, "insidiously appealing". (172)

Conclusion

"Insidiously appealing" is an expression that strikes at the heart of the composition and function of the cryptoseme. In social psychology, one encounters the term "halo effect" – a singular, usually superficial, personal trait that overwhelms other

people's perceptions of a person's overall character. If a person is particularly physically attractive, others may find it difficult to suspect her or him of ill will or underhandedness because it is difficult to believe that someone so aesthetically "good" could be "bad" at the level of character substance (Cialdini 2001, 148). The cryptosemic compliment thrives on the very same magic trick by emphasizing some cosmetic aspect of its form that creates a halo effect that spreads the positivity of its attitude over the complex content of the message, muting the underlying premise. But the halo effect is only an illusion and the positivity of the cryptoseme goes only as far to misdirect attention, rather than to actually replace an old vision with a new one. For this reason, cryptosemes are problematic in the same way handling any conundrum with avoidance can to be said to be counter-productive. The most subversive quality of the cryptoseme lies in relegating certain ideas into the realm of the unspoken, which, if unacknowledged for long, comes eerily close to the psychological defense mechanism known as denial. Macro-scale social denial, in its turn, nurtures the status quo of the social structures and cultural notions in place (Zerubavel 2006, 77). Cryptosemes on the topic of female beauty are highly suspect in terms of latent social side-effects, since they serve to perpetuate the hegemonic social order that summons them to existence. Many women consider cryptosemes about "beauty within" empowering because those expressions seem to suggest that superficial appearances do not matter as much as internal substance of the human being, which would, indeed, be a positive message – in a different world. In the US today, however, women who fit the conventional standards of beauty are still primarily praised for their attractiveness (with their "internal" merits frequently ignored or dismissed), while women who are considered less physically attractive are praised for their virtues "on the inside".

A recent study has found that fat stigma around the world is on the rise and that this ascent may, ironically, be exacerbated by well-meaning educational media, such as global health campaigns that seek to educate the public by creating exposure to images of obese people with the intention of spreading awareness about health risks. (Brewis et al. 2011, 274). The problem is that imagery of obese people has, thus far, appeared in the context of inviting ridicule and judgment and reintroducing similar imagery under a different banner is not enough to reverse the stigma because the populace is already

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trained to see these images in a negative or mocking light. The proverbial road to hell is paved by the conscientious efforts to combat stigma by re-introducing its victims in a different ideological frame. These attempts are misguided because they rely on language and imagery that already come with fixed social "baggage": the "myths" are already solidified in their linkage to certain objects or concepts. Furthermore, treating a real, contemporary source of inequality as if it were an artifact of the past that no longer applies to *us* is only going to allow the inequality to flourish unchecked in the "conspiracy of silence" surrounding it.

We hear the term "culture wars" being applied to disagreements between different ideological factions that make up the population of a given nation (e.g.: conservatives vs. progressives in the US (Hunter 1991)), but analogous conflicts of ideas, beliefs and definitions of "truth" and "norm" rage within a nation's individual members as well. The female beauty concept is one of the most potent examples of such a cultural rift because the US society is currently experiencing an identity crisis in its attempt to redefine its gender norms and roles to reflect a more egalitarian social ideal. By now, we have learned to recognize some formerly popular cryptosemic "compliments" as appallingly condescending and not at all flattering: "he's so articulate for a Black man", "she is so intelligent for a woman," "he is so educated for a foreigner", etc., but there are many more statements in our speech that we deem "normal" and "nice" today that may well be considered just as ill-conceived and unacceptable from the retrospective gaze of future society. Goffman wrote that "one can try to work backward from the verbal consequences of presuppositions to what is presupposed" (1983, 3) and I am suggesting that, in the same vein, we can inductively identify the taken-for-granted social prejudices of our time by taking a close look at our popular compliments and insults. In acknowledging former cryptosemes for what they are – and debunking the still-existing ones – we expose the durable cultural double-standards at their socio-linguistic foundation; by understanding how cryptosemes function, we develop a new gauge for studying culture and language in society.

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