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“WHEN TOUCH TALKS ABOUT BEAUTY: MEANINGS DISMANTLED BEHIND YOUTUBE BEAUTY VLOGS”

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Abstract

This paper describes my perspective as a linguist whose concern is systemic functional linguistics sees touch functioning as a resource for meaning making on beauty-themed video blogs. Researches on touch are a few, and some reveal touch in relation to marketing-related issues, and some (if not few) are scrutinized under language analysis. One inspiring article compelled me do a research on the same topic but in different context (i.e. beauty vlogs) is from that brilliant work written by Bezemer and Kress (2014). Their idea sheds light on how social semioticians see it as both a non-mode as well as a mode of communication. Touch as the latter fulfills the criteria of language proposed by Halliday, comprising (inter)textual, interpersonal and ideational functions. Jewitt and Mackey (2018) even explore touch further. This tactile mode is researched by the conflation of multimodality and sensory ethnography, as multimodality alone is criticized for its subjective interpretative stance. Touch, according to Goffman (1979), is observed as a label embodied to women more than men. One example of the implementation of touch associated with what women mostly do is beauty vlogs – beauty-themed video blogs posted in social media. Together with other modes, this prehensile potential may carry several at-issue meanings. Using theories proposed by Bezemer and Kress (2014), Kress and van Leeuwen’s social semiotic communication (2006), Halliday’s SFL, and Goffman (1979), this article reveals –if not to show beyond doubt –how touch contains meanings (inward and outward meaning making, terms as suggested by Bezemer and Kress) linked to beauty-related issue. The data chosen are 5 (five) Youtube beauty vlogs of which topic is how to take care of the skin naturally, comprising 3 videos from Indonesian vloggers and the rest are from those outside Indonesia. These are selected as they are among mostly watched videos within 2018. Several touch(es) together with other resources, including linguistic texts taken in the form of shots assumed to have a particular and distinctive meanings are picked. The approach applied is social semiotics multimodalities, lying on how touch is made use by its users for constructing meanings and the finding is what Bezemer and Kress proposed is clearly applicable. In this way, touch reveals beauty in some ways. First, there proved to be a transduction where modes are moved to another mode. In this, the back of the hand, onto which touch is performed, functions as the face where beauty is associated. Second, there found also what so-called the dual materiality that touch is both visible and tactile in that both for the toucher and the (vlogs) viewers, and the last one is touch is proved *not* to be as a mode criterion, in that it is not used

to address the interpersonal function, as both the touchers do not touch the viewers, for touch is not utilized as a means of communication.

Keywords: metafunctions, touch, modes.

Women, more than men, are figured using their fingers and hands to trace the outlines of an object or to cradle it or to caress its surface (the latter sometimes under the guise of guiding it), or to effect a "just barely touching" of the kind that might be significant between two electrically charged bodies.

(Goffman, 1979:29)

INTRODUCTION

Touch is sometimes a touch, one we do not intend to do. However, touch might be an act we mean it. From a typical touch we do or see, we know what it means or it is meant to be. The touch of a doctor onto a part of his/her patient's body refers to an observation, so to speak, a physical checking. A slap on a face is a particular type of touch, too, and it indicates an anger. And recently, touches have been increasingly manipulated in such ways on beauty making vlogs, in that we see how touches seem to be a core of beauty meaning making. And, whether touch is used as a mode of communication was questionable, until Kress and Bezemer (2014) placed touch into two perspectives: inward and outward meaning making, which seem to address them to which parties the touch is referred to: either to the toucher him/herself or it is addressed to the other(s). In one hand, inward means touch is investigated in the perspective of the toucher, and this has two ways: implicit and explicit touchings. On the other hand, outward means touch is used for a wider domain compared to inward touching. The latter is meant to conduct for the purposes of representation and communication, and thus it fulfills the three metafunctions proposed by Halliday comprising: ideational, (inter)textual and interpersonal functions.

The Core Thing is Communication

When communication is no longer relying merely on language aspect, researchers are now altering their focus on other modes, like gestures, colors, and others potentially used for meaning making. Modes are made use to be finely designed to fulfill what the mode makers intend to, in this way Bezemer and Kress (2016) articulated that modes are used to reshape the makers' rhetorical intentions and adapt to the needs of the viewers. Kress and Bezemer(2014) clearly defined that a mode is socially and culturally shaped. Thus, I may draw a conclusion that an entity is categorized as a mode when there is a notion that it is used by a group of people as the vehicle of a meaning under communication purposes. Equipped with more developed technology which have been widely used around the globe, accordingly there are no such clear-cut boundaries among people all over the world to have more opportunities to communicate with others for a mere communication, or to communicate for earning

materials. One of instances we encounter is a phenomenon of the increasing number of a beauty vlogger. I neither discuss how much money they earn, who they are, the gender's perspective nor the products they promote. What has been my concern is on how a touch of a beauty vlogger makes use, in terms of how a touch is employed, and how this is connected to a particular meaning making and whether or not touch is a mode. Overall, this paper is intended to apply Bezemer and Kress' concept on touch in beauty vlogs.

METHODS

Hess and Hareli in Mandal and Awasthi (2015:121) offered two ways to decode emotion nonverbal cues. First, it is the perceiver is a passive decoder and second is the perceiver knows the expresser, so that he/she can adopt an active role in the emotion identification process. In this way, I employ passive perceivers. Passive means I don't know the expressers. But, at least, I am one of the perceivers who watched the vlogs and partly agree and is successfully persuaded by the vloggers. Although emotional reactions are said to be often weak and ambiguous, said them, the meanings can be revealed through the ambiguous expressions and the context information (2015:122).

I only select 5 videos produced within a year, taken from Youtube comprising 2 videos from Indonesian beauty vloggers, 2 others from India or probably Hindi-speaking country and 1 video from a country of those English-speaking. Among those 5 videos, several selected shots are chosen. Shot here means one single frame out of thousands of a single scene. The shots selected due to a consideration that a typical touch has been performed. I used a free Youtube downloader and saved the videos in my Samsung mobile phone, and paused some parts selected and screenshotted them. Among the samples taken, I filtered them with one of Samsung features provided. This filter is for free, yet the figures yielded are clear enough to observe. To make the notations to address similar words used over and over, I use notations suggested by Bezemer and Kress (2014:78). Touch in a non-technical sense [notation: touch]; implicit touching [notation:touch^{im}]; explicit touching [notation: touch^{ex}]; touch-as-mode (of representation and communication)[notation:*touch*].

Related Theories and Similar Researches

Discussion on touch is not new. Myriads of books and articles were written. In 1970s, Goffman reveal meanings behind meaning making resources in advertisements. Straughan (2012) shared her experiences with a touch she perceived from a beauty salon. Her sharing ideas are worth to use, especially to enrich notions of how touch is discussed in issues on beauty. Likewise, Marlow and Jansson-Boyd (2011) talk about touch in terms of beauty, but they discussed touch under marketing issue. Bezemer and Kress (2014) in particular wrote about touch and its relation with communication. They did some researches on touch conducted on operating theatre. The latter compels me to scrutinize touch in beauty vlogs.

DISCUSSION

Unlike inward function which deals only with the effect of touch to the toucher, which is split into two ways: implicit (touching we take for granted) and explicit touching which is meant to recognize ‘the world’ (something we need to know or check). Touch as outward meaning making means touch as a mode of communication (Bezemer and Kress, 2014:79). It has several meanings addressed to someone else. Either realize it or not, beauty vloggers manipulate touch to construct meanings and the viewers will perceive meanings either similar or different the vloggers intend to make. Apart from language they use and faces as the core product, these vloggers generate some types of touch which are discussed as follows.

Dual Materiality

Bezemer and Kress (2014:79) named a touch holding tools/materials we routinely do is an implicit touch. Implicit touch means nothing unless it is noticed by an observer, thus it is interpreted. But not for beauty vloggers, this type of touch is manipulated in such a way they intend to. They find ways to promote the materials.

Touch and Mouth Talk

A vlogger as shown in the figure below introduces the products by holding them at her hands. This time, the focus is not on the way she holds the products, not the way she touches the products, but it is a composite work between the touch and her mouth (explaining the products and the contents of each).



Fig 1. Touch and Mouth Talk

While holding the two, she said in Bahasa:

“Aku mau bikin masker dari Dancow dengan putih telur

Gampang banget kan kalian dapetin (She starts winking her eyes, or more like grinning)”

In this way, the way she touches is not that prominent. The touch works hand in hand with what she is saying, as she convinces that the mask materials she is going to make are something easy to get. In addition, she informs that those are items everyone (her viewers are expected to be teenagers and or young adults) can afford to buy. This is

proved by her grinning face, as if she asked for viewers’ agreement (or a teasing). The language choice she uses is a material process, so that her viewers will do exactly what she suggests.

1. Touch as a Tool

Touch to show a product is no longer a mental process. It is more like a material process. This type of touch is done by an actor and the target is the goal (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004). The goal this woman targeted is the canned milk. This becomes the prominent thing as she seems to put aside everything surrounds, including her face, when introducing the product.



Fig 2. Touch

2. Touch – Sight

Rather than material and behavioral processes, touch related to beauty is likely considered as mental process. The one who does the touch is named as a senser. The senser is endowed with consciousness (Halliday, 2004:201). The thing perceived in this process is a phenomenon, when the thing is an act, it is called as macropheomenal, and when it is a fact, it is named as metaphenomenal (2004:204). Touch as a mental process, I think, is pertinent to Machin and Mayr (2012:107) that mental processes allow us to gain an insight into the feelings or states of mind of certain participants (‘women worry too much about their physical appearance’).

2.1 See and feel how it looks like

Touch as shown by the following two figures left a message that the viewers should experience what they encounter. The smoothness, the reaction yielded from using the products is something they want to show. The model and or the vlogger touch the parts of the body as if they talked too their viewers feel how the skin looks like, how is the skin surface felt like. As Scollon and Scollon (2003:65) stated, “ ...vision is the synthesizing perception”.

Fig 4 the model close her eyes, her closing eyes seem to show us that she is feeling relaxed, she feels the tenderness of the skin she touches. The way the touch she holds is so tender, as if her skin is a valuable thing she must protect. She touches her skin so carefully and tenderly.

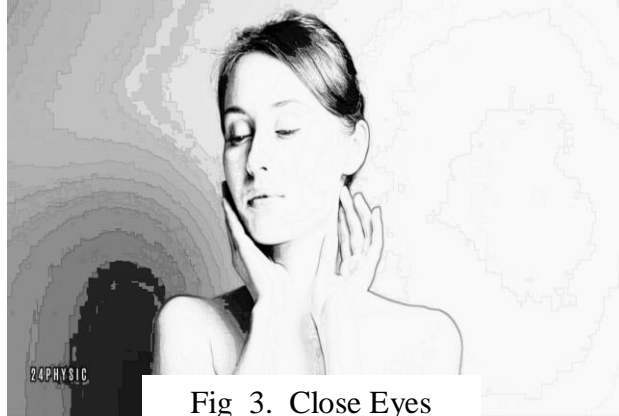


Fig 3. Close Eyes

Fig 5 and 6 indicate two meanings. First, the touch still shows how tender her skin is. She must carefully touch it, to give a proper treatment for her skin. From figures 4-6, they share something in common, that is a tender touch is that typical touch, the touch of a tip of a finger which then carefully touches the skin surface. The difference is on the eyes, fig 4 shows closing eyes, while fig 5-6 shows challenging eyes, implying those of energy and courage. The way she looks at the camera supports her touch in a way that showing her viewers on the skin after treatment. The skin will be look like this, the feel will be look like this.



Fig 4. Challenging Look



Fig 5. Touch and Face Work

2.2 *See and Follow what I am doing*

Fig 6 shows another kind of work of touch and face. Her face tilts down, while her hands rub her sides of her face. This is meant to ask for viewers to see and follow what she is exactly doing. Both touch and face work together.



Fig 6. Touch and Face Work

3 Touch as Corporeal Function

Goffman (1979:29) said that hand is prehensile. Thus, this is a tactile action. Beauty touch is a touch, probably tends to be meant as feeling the surface of the skin, it is also a kind of invitation to have the same feeling as one the model/the vlogger show. This type of touch is a typical feminine touch. These two figures show two different ways:

3.1 *Delicate Touch and Eyes Talk: Peacefully closing eyes*

This touch is corporeal, in a way that she wants her whole body and mind can feel relaxation and or peace she has when she has got tender soft skin. Her eyes and peaceful smile say so. Only her tips of fingers touch the skin surface. She does not let her palms to touch it. Tip of fingers function as one most sensitive parts of hands that can feel the surface of something.



Fig 7. Relaxing Face and Touch

3.2 Delicate Touch and Eyes talk: Tender Look

Unlike fig 7, the touch in fig 8 involves the palm of the hands, but still the touch is held in a tender way. Her tender look shows her satisfaction she gets from using the product she is holding right now. She just wants to show it to her viewers her satisfaction.



Fig 8. Relaxing Face and Touch

Transduction

Because nothing very prehensile is involved in these ritualistic touchings, the face can be used instead of a hand (Goffman, 1979:31)

Goffman's statement is proved to be correct. The vlogger uses her hand as the representation of her face. Spoken in mixed-language of Hindi-English, it seems that the vlogger asks viewers to believe her that this treatment can make face flawless (she definitely says 'believe me', but then she continues speaking Hindi). This word 'believe' is a mental process. It is a cognitive process, which is preceded by thinking

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and then believing. Her formula the vlogger offers is believed to make the face flawless. Her hands are the proof. The painted nails are meant to be showing something beautiful. The way she touches her hands are more firm, compared to other figures, but this is surely conceiving a confidence, a courage to ask viewers to follow what she has done.



Fig. 8 Touch and hand

As a mode criterion?

A touch of a woman

Beauty touch is mainly associated to beauty, to a woman. The properties of meaning behind touch are features related women’s hands, they are of those of soft skin, tender (I may call it as arteries-free hands), glowing not tanned skin, and sometimes when necessary, to make them beautiful women embellish their nails. The latter feature, painted or not painted nails is optional to make hands more pretty.

The following figure shows how women’s hands are painted to make them catchy, to give impressions to viewers that these are women’s.



Fig 9. Touch

CONCLUSION

In this way, touch reveals beauty in some ways. First, there proved to be a transduction where modes are moved to another mode. In this, the back of the hand, onto which touch is performed, functions as the face where beauty is associated. Second, there found also what so-called the dual materiality that touch is both visible and tactile in that both for the toucher and the (vlogs) viewers, and the last one is touch is proved *not* to be as a mode criterion, in that it is not used to address the interpersonal function, as both the touchers do not touch the viewers, for touch is not utilized as a means of communication.

Touch for beauty care conceives two processes. First, it is mental when it implies maintaining physical appearance, which means outward meaning and it is material when it is intended as a tool, more like inward meaning. Touch is yet not a discrete meaning, it together with sight works hand in hand as a composite meaning, and for beauty care, they construct a perception built for viewers. While the perception for beauty is that of tenderness, softness, smoothness of a woman, which cover not only the face but the hands as well. So, the face is beautiful, so is the hand, and vice versa. In brief, touch for beauty care is as a mode of communication, due to that it is used as representation of the voice of the mode makers which are then read as well as interpreted by the viewers. Whilst, the language aspect also agrees with what its counterparts, they are touch and its resemblance. Mental and material processes dominate the language aspect, asking for building and or rebuilding a particular perception among viewers.

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