

“Gentlemen, start your engines and may the best woman win”:

Troubling gender in *Drag Race* television

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Drag queen performance, often conceptualized as a homosexual man performing a heterosexual woman, has been used as a case study for research both on the performativity of gender (Butler 1990, 1993) and linguistic performances of raced, gendered, and classed personas (Barrett 1998; Mann 2011). More recently, drag has become a household phenomenon largely due to the television empire created by RuPaul Charles. While the show *RuPaul’s Drag Race* began in the United States, variants can be found in Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Chile. These shows’ constructions of drag identity provide an opportunity to explore how transgressive gender identities are produced and taken up in mainstream pop culture. Scholars (e.g. Moore 2013; Sandoval 2018; Stokoe 2020) have highlighted Rupaul’s binary juxtaposition of masculine and feminine lexical items while hosting the US version, however, the many relocalizations of the show enable the consideration of how drag gender is produced for public consumption not only in English, but also in languages which have grammatical gender marking like Spanish.

Spanish has a binary grammatical gender system that applies to nouns and modifiers and, for human referents, typically corresponds to perceived sex (Loporcaro 2018). There is a small class of nouns and modifiers that are not overtly marked for gender, generally those that end in *-e*. However, the majority of nouns and modifiers are overtly marked for gender, with *-o* indicating masculine and *-a* indicating feminine. English grammatical gender marking is substantially less pervasive, allowing speakers to avoid overt gender marking through lexical choices. This means that drag queens, speaking English, and *transformistas*, speaking Spanish, face unique challenges in articulating identities beyond a strictly binary and immutable conception of sex and gender. This study examines and compares the strategies used to produce drag identity in two seasons of the American production *RuPaul’s Drag Race* (S7, 2015; S10, 2018) and the Chilean production *The Switch Drag Race* (S1, 2015; S2, 2018).

Rupaul’s Drag Race, lacking the resources of grammatical gender, relies more heavily on lexical, as in (1), and visual techniques, such as juxtaposing the competitors’ masculine and feminine presentations with cinematic cuts, while almost universally referring to competitors by their drag names. By contrast, *The Switch* uses substantially fewer visual techniques, instead relying on shifting grammatical gender marking, as in (2), to trouble the cis-sexist assumption that every individual is either a man who should be referred to with masculine grammatical marking or a woman who should be referred to with feminine grammatical gender marking. By considering these two mainstreamed presentations of drag identity, this paper elucidates linguistic and visual semiotic techniques that television producers use to both trouble cis-sexist conceptions of gender and represent drag gender identities to the broader public.

1. Gentlemen, start your engines and may the best woman win.
Rupaul Charles, S7 & S10
2. *No se olviden chicas que vamos a trabajar para hacerlas mejor. Bueno, para las que no me conocen mi nombre es Nicole Gaultier. Soy un transformista bastante conotado en Chile. Quiero que sepan que seré su profesora de interpretación.*
‘Don’t forget, girls, that we are going to work to make you-F better. Well, for those-F who do not know me, my name is Nicole Gaultier. I am a-M transformista, pretty well known-M in Chile. I want you all to know that I will be your performance professor-F.’
Nicole Gaultier, S1 & S2

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