

Robert Lawson, **Language and Mediated Masculinities: Cultures, Contexts, Constraints**, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2023, 344 pp., \$43.99 (paperback).

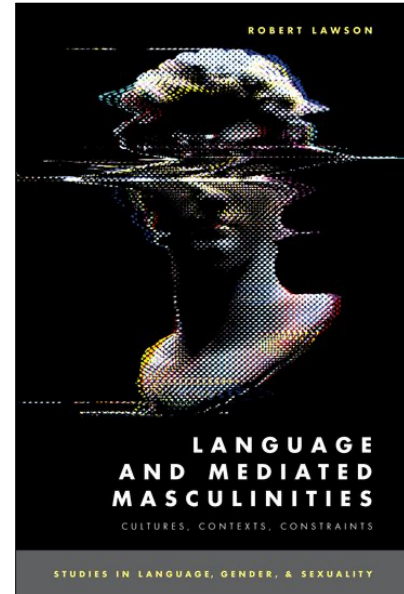
Reviewed by  
Yiming Wang  
Maastricht University

In recent years, the discourse surrounding problematic, toxic, and aggressive masculinity has gained traction due to the rising rates of violent crimes, aggressive rhetoric, and polarized discussions, especially within (anti-)woke topics. These discussions and their content are (re)presented and shaped through the language used in various media forms, including newspapers, television shows, and social networking sites. However, how has masculinity reached this point, and how do different forms of masculinities reflect contemporary cultural identity and gender relations? Moreover, what opportunities exist for progress and change?

Robert Lawson, an associate professor of sociolinguistics at Birmingham City University, explores these questions in his book, **Language and Mediated Masculinities: Cultures, Contexts, Constraints**. Situated within the field of language, gender, and sexuality studies, Lawson's work advances the research of language and masculinities by highlighting the diverse representations of masculinities in media and social practices and the role language plays in the complex construction of identities. This book begins with a demonstration case of toxic masculinity and concludes with a manifesto calling to transform the gender culture from the language level. Based on critical discourse analysis and corpus linguistics methods, this book provides a thought-provoking analysis of the language in the performance, maintenance, and construction of masculinities in both public and semipublic spheres and the related power relations among people.

In chapter 1, "Contexts, Cultures, and Constraints: Language and Mediated Masculinities in the Twenty-First Century," before introducing the changing discourses of masculinities in the 21st century, Lawson begins by spotlighting the dialogue between Donald Trump and Billy Bush in the "Pussygate" scandal to emphasize the tight connection between language and the construction of masculinity. Lawson argues that linguistic analysis is essential for comprehending gender ideologies and the construction of masculinities.

To provide a clearer explanation of key terminologies, in chapter 2, "Setting the Scene: Some Key Ideas in Language and Masculinities Studies," Lawson provides a comprehensive literature review on the critical examination of men and masculinities. Lawson meticulously scrutinizes the definitions and challenges associated with terms such as *sex*, *gender*, *male*, *men*, and *masculinity*. He situates the book within existing research on language and masculinities, emphasizing that "being a man is an ongoing process of identity construction" (p. 27). Furthermore, he points out that the field of masculinities is



multiple, fractured, and dislocated, which sets the stage for the later exploration of five types of masculinities in chapters 4–8.

Chapter 3, "Approaches to Analyzing Language and Masculinities: Data, Theories, and Methods," introduces the methodology and ethical consideration of this research. Through critical discourse analysis and corpus linguistics, including word list analysis, keywords, collocation, and topic analysis, Lawson analyzes the textual data sourced from newspaper archives, online forums, television shows, and social networking sites.

The following five analytical chapters explore different types of masculinities and their linguistic construction. Chapter 4, "Representations of 'Hard Man' Masculinity and Ideologies of Toughness in the British Press," examines violent/tough masculinity by analyzing "hard man" discourses in the newspapers *The Scotsman* and *The Guardian*. Traditional media are essential for ideologically constructing and disseminating normative forms of masculinity. Drawing on corpus linguistic methods, Lawson contends that "reified identities like the 'hard man' are positioned in complex ways in the British press, particularly in relation to larger social concerns like entertainment, politics, and sport" (p. 83).

Chapter 5, "Being a 'Real Man' on /r/The\_Donald: Masculinity, Ethnic Identity, and the Alternative Right," examines the intersections of masculinity, ethnicity, and White supremacist nationalism within the alternative right (alt-right) community /r/The\_Donald on Reddit. Lawson reveals how White men in /r/The\_Donald perceive themselves as victims of oppression and discrimination, yet their contributions and social value remain underacknowledged to "[excuse] them from criticism or denunciation, particularly as it relates to sexism, racism, or misogyny" (p. 109). They also rationalize their White supremacist opinions by depicting Muslim and Black men as violent, sexually abusive, and criminal "others" due to racial or religious differences. To reinforce the top position of White men in the hierarchy of masculinity, Black men are strategically and politically used to criticize Muslim men, who are situated at the bottom.

Chapter 6, "'Alphas Get Treated Like Bygone Emperors and Betas Live Lives of Quiet Desperation': Toxic Masculinity and Discourses of Gender in the Manosphere," examines the toxic masculinity and gender discourse in the "manosphere," a male-centric collection of male-authored websites, blogs, and social media spaces. Lawson highlights how discussions in the manosphere often revolve around women, serving to foster homosocial male bonding through expressions of anger, misogyny, and sexism. One interesting observation about the manosphere is the "chilling effect" on members that the "challenging sexist and misogynistic behavior in these spaces are often met with vitriolic resistance" (p. 165). Moreover, the toxicity is not just toward women but also men. The intense hierarchical perception of men, ranging from alpha to beta, fosters toxic masculinity, which evaluates idealistic masculinity based on sexual bravado, physical strength, and heterosexuality while ignoring the lived reality of most men.

After the problematic but well-known three types of masculinities, the following two chapters present relatively healthy and meaningful masculinities and their media representation. Chapter 7, "Positive Masculinity and *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*: Reconfiguring Dominant Gender Tropes in Television Comedy," focuses on the transformative and progressive masculinity constructed in the television comedy

*Brooklyn Nine-Nine* (p. 167). Positive masculinity redirects attention from merely highlighting men's problems to recognizing their empowering qualities that contribute to personal and societal improvement, which includes adaptive character strengths, emotions, and virtues that enhance well-being and resilience in oneself and others (pp. 168–169). Lawson analyzes the scripts of the TV series and focuses on two cases to explore the homosociality and emotional vulnerability faced by the male characters to show the encouraging effect of constructing diverse masculine performances.

Chapter 8, "The Language of Fatherhood 2.0: Discourses of Caring Masculinities on an Online Fathers' Forum," discusses the discourses of caring masculinities on an online fathers' forum, *DadInfo*. In this male-centric, heteronormative, heterosexual place, men can share personal difficulties, engage in emotional discussion, and seek out support to be a father. Through examining the online construction of fatherhood and the tension between traditional expectations of masculinity, Lawson argues that caring masculinities can be a "useful framework for thinking through how men come to understand their positionality as caring individuals and what this means in their everyday lives" (p. 204). Lawson also acknowledges that this is a new area for masculinities that needs to be explored more.

In chapter 9, Lawson concludes the book by zooming out from the texts examined to consider the broader role of masculinity and linguistic analysis in the implications of the research from different aspects, including digital literacies on gender issues, masculinities, and (de)radicalization; victimhood and discourses of inequality; and gender relations in the 21st century. This move serves to further justify the importance of language and masculinities research in the contemporary gender culture wars on media.

I particularly enjoy the author's reflective and constructive approach to his identity and research ethics. As a White heterosexual male, Lawson, whose identity also largely dominates the case studies within the book and the mainstream social media discourse, provides a critical analysis of the language and perceptions of masculinity within this demographic. Through the concerns of male mental health, he examines the development of masculinity and advocates for qualities such as empathy, respect for diversity, and seeking emotional support to be emphasized in the construct of masculinities. This not only fosters social harmony but also enhances men's well-being, which makes it more likely to resonate with the target audience.

Though the book is well written and organized, I would have been curious about the potential overlaps between different masculinities and the related limitations, especially a mix of the first three and the last two. For example, a White supremacist nationalism on */r/The\_Donald* could also be a caring dad on *DadInfo*. This highlighting of different traits in male disposition as they adjust with identity and context seems to be more than just a competitive alternative. Conversely, how the compassion inherent in masculinities can extend beyond specific individuals in one's immediate circle requires more consideration than simply regarding them as exceptional cases in need of care but rather understanding that there are more general "others" to be considered. Additionally, when it comes to the corpus selection, the latter two chapters, featuring specific television comedy scripts and forums for specific functional identities, appear relatively limited in their universality compared to the preceding three chapters, which examine print media and broad-based online forums. Unlike the broad-reaching interactions found in forums, where

dissent can be unwelcome and suppressed, scripts as a single corpus seem less capable of capturing the audience's level of identification with the show and its real-world impact.

This book would inspire a diverse range of readers. It is particularly suited for undergraduate or graduate students taking courses on language, gender/sexuality, and linguistic anthropology. The book's accessible conceptual approach, detailed research methods, and readability make it an ideal resource for these academic audiences. Additionally, researchers in linguistics, gender studies, sociology, and media and communication studies would find valuable insights in the exploration of language and gender dynamics. Beyond academia, this book engages with contemporary discussions on masculinities, appealing to a wider audience interested in understanding theoretical frameworks behind everyday practices and the media landscape. For readers who acknowledge, question, or critique the concept of masculinities and seek to reflect, challenge, or enact change, this book would be a choice not to be missed.