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To lift and separate reveals the naked truth

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WORDS

IT'S SAID ENGLISH has a plethora of synonyms. For instance, for "fat", we have: ample, big, chubby, corpulent, curvy, flabby, fleshy, generously proportioned, heavy, hefty, large, matronly, obese, over-sized, overweight, plump, podgy, portly, rounded, Rubenesque, stout, strapping, thickset, tubby, weighty, well-built, well-endowed - to mention a few. Yet, even amid such plenty, we know that our choice of which fat-word to use is powerfully constrained by factors such as context, audience and intention.

Sometimes gradability helps. For instance, at the other end of the spectrum, for the sake of variety, it's possible to put slim, lean, narrow, slender, skinny, anorexic on a continuum, and henceforth argue that they carry the same sense, differing only in degree.

And that was how I used to think of the words that you'd roughly cluster as "underwear". Words like: foundation garments, support wear, underwear, intimate apparel, lingerie. But in struggling to place them onto a continuum, I made a discovery. Bottom line: different gradients - engineering v architecture.

The words "underwear" and "lingerie" aren't different degrees of the same thing; they're different phenomena. They target different demographics, talk to different audiences, service different clients, display different attitudes. The purpose of underwear is to enhance outerwear. Underwear lifts, separates, shapes, smoothes, flattens, supports. Not quite whalebone corsetry, but you get the gist. The objective is svelte, the process engineered, the garment itself, best not seen.

On the contrary, far from covering nakedness, lingerie suggests it, promises it, indeed precludes it. Built into the exorbitant price tag is lingerie's pledge: wear me, be sexy. Not for nothing does Elle call her range "intimates". And women, seduced by the promise, collude in the mystery: they feel sexier in lingerie. Unsupported, more at risk, but sexier.

Nowhere is the tension more evident than in that veritable site of contestation, the G-string. This item of apparel - looks good on very few, feels good on even fewer - pretends to bat for both teams and in so trying, fails. It winks at underwear's under-outer function by claiming to disappear the otherwise-visible panty line. But it somehow forgets that anything so skimpy, suggestive and uncomfortable has to have lingerie pretensions.

"Underwear" and "lingerie" reflect and construct opposing world views. If there's a tension between them it's because even as they fulfil competing functions, they disingenuously pretend to be cut from the same cloth. Perversely, they each insist on calling the same department home.

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