

JAPANESE AS A GENDERED LANGUAGE

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1. Introduction

Japanese is well known for its 'gendered' speech styles. That is, in Japanese, male and female speech are differentiated morpho-syntactically. These morph-syntactic markers usually appear as, or in the selection of, 1st-person pronouns, sentence-final particles, interjections, or exclamatory particles, beautifier prefixes, or vowel coalescence in pronunciation. For example,

Ashita iku *wa*
tomorrow go SFP
'I'll go there tomorrow'

is understood as a female utterance due to the use of the 'female' sentence-final particle *wa*. By contrast,

Ore kaeru
I return
'I'm going home'

is interpreted as a male utterance because of the masculine 1st-person pronoun *ore*.

Combined with the elaborate honorific system of Japanese, gendered speech styles make possible the depiction of Japanese conversation without identification of each speaker. Edward Seidensticker, who has translated many Japanese novels, including *The Tale of Genji*, remarks that if the following conversation were made by 4 people — Maude, George, Aunt Margaret, and Uncle John — it would be impossible to record it in English without identification of who said each line (Seidensticker 1989):

"You didn't!"
"Oh, yes, I did."
"But why?"
"Can't you guess?"
"Because I loved her."
"You should have told me."

This conversation must be written in English as something like:

"You didn't!" exclaimed Maude.
"Oh, yes, I did," said George.
"But why?" wondered Aunt Margaret.
"Can't you guess?" said Uncle John.
"Because I loved her," responded George.

“You should have told me,” said Aunt Margaret.

In Japanese, skillful uses of gendered language and honorifics make this sequence of utterances possible without overt reference to any speaker.

2. Indexicality

In recent years, this type of speech behavior characteristics has been investigated based on the idea of *indexicality*. That is, these characteristics have been investigated in terms of the relationship between a linguistic expression and its context. In the past, such information as the speaker's gender, geographical origin (identified as a regional dialect), and social class membership was considered to be the *evoked meaning* of linguistic expressions. In such a view, socio-cultural information is considered to be part of linguistic expressions themselves. By contrast, indexicality analyses assume that such information is not part of sentence meaning *per se*. Instead, language *practice* is considered to involve *indexing*, or pointing to, a multiplicity of socio-cultural significances (or you might want to call them socio-cultural meanings), including social identity, social acts (such as speech acts), social activities (such as politeness), and affective and epistemic stances.

Eleanor Ochs (1993) and other researchers consider that affective stances and social acts are *direct* indices, while gender and social relations are *indirect* indices. She explains, for example, that Japanese sentence-final particles *ze* and *wa* *directly* index affective stances of coarse versus delicate intensity, and such affective stances in turn *indirectly* index gender and gender images of masculinity and femininity.

My recent research on soliloquy (Hasegawa 2006) has revealed that so-called gendered speech is far less common when one speaks to oneself without assuming an addressee. It has also been discovered that soliloquy has indexing potential that differs slightly from those applying to dialogues. For example, the sentence-final particle *zo* is commonly attributed to male speech in dialogues, but in soliloquy, women can use it without exerting masculinity, e.g. *gambaru zo!* ‘I’ll make it!’ In soliloquy, this sentence-final particle *zo* indexes only coarse intensity, as Ochs contends, not masculinity, as commonly believed.

This complex mechanism of indexing gender and gender images poses a serious challenge in the teaching of Japanese as a foreign language. Virtually all Japanese language textbooks assume that certain linguistic forms are *direct* indices of gender. So, these textbooks explain that ‘gendered’ forms are used exclusively by male speakers or by female speakers. But this generalization is simply inaccurate. Female speakers sometimes usurp ‘masculine’ forms when they want certain effects, such as strong determination or assertiveness. Before further discussion of this issue, let’s consider another problem of so-called gendered speech in Japanese.

3. Idiology

The second problem related to ‘gendered’ speech in Japanese is that the so-called female speech has been defined ideologically, rather than based on actual observations of how women speak. What does this assertion mean? Silverstein (1979:193) defines linguistic ideologies as “any sets of beliefs about language, articulated by the users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use.”

The so-called Japanese women’s speech was constructed a little over 100 years ago, based on the idealized speech style of traditional women residing in the upscale areas of Tokyo. This style is what ‘proper’ women are expected to use today. Shigeko Okamoto (1997) points out

that Japanese women's speech is class-based and prescriptive, representing the hegemonic linguistic and gender ideology. Women's speech styles that do not conform to this ideologically established norm may be criticized as not feminine, unattractive, ignorant, and symptomatic of improper upbringing (*ibid.*). Most dialects of Japanese do not differentiate gender morpho-syntactically, but they are totally ignored, regarded as substandard language variations.

It has been pointed out that researchers tend to analyze the native ideology of language use, as though it were an objective description of the relationship between linguistic forms and social context (Silverstein 1979). And this *is* often the case in analyses of 'gendered' speech in Japanese.

Speech styles are strategically selected based on a speaker's consideration of multiple social aspects of the context (for example, gender, age, intimacy, genre, speech-act type) as well as on the speaker's linguistic ideology and attitudes concerning language use (Okamoto 1997). Based on their perception of multiple social aspects of the context, speakers employ linguistic expressions that they consider most appropriate. Dominant ideologies certainly affect speakers' strategies of language use, but it is important to distinguish particular beliefs about language use from actual distribution of linguistic forms (*ibid.*).

Actual language uses are not always consistent with the dominant ideology because of the complexity of actual social context and also because of the diversity of linguistic ideologies that mediate the indexical process (*ibid.*). Individuals may have different ideas about language use and may form different relationships between linguistic forms and social context (*ibid.*).

In fact, it has been reported in recent years that young Japanese women not only avoid traditional female speech, but have begun to use strongly masculine speech forms. Nevertheless, even eloquent novelists of today sometimes produce ideologically and culturally constructed female speech, which are unheard of in real modern-day life.

4. Pedagogical Considerations

To recapitulate, Japanese speech forms that are traditionally labeled as gendered do not necessarily directly index gender or gender images of masculinity and femininity. This is especially true where so-called female speech forms are concerned. What they directly index is such affective stances of coarse and gentle intensity. Furthermore, many of the so-called gendered forms are merely ideological and do not necessarily occur naturally in everyday language.

The question, then, becomes how should these gendered forms be handled pedagogically in the teaching of Japanese as a foreign language. Or, in more general terms, should we teach language that is actually used in real life, or should we teach ideologically constructed normative language.

The gendered language I've described here is not conspicuous in the polite register of Japanese. Therefore, we can avoid the gendered language problem at the elementary level by teaching only the polite style. However, although it is more ideological than real, gendered language is commonly used in literature. As I mentioned earlier, in Japanese novels the speakers are not always identified explicitly. Rather, they are implied by delicately entwined gendered expressions. Therefore, we will eventually have to incorporate gendered language into our teaching material in some way.

Before I returned to Berkeley, I taught at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. One day, one of the TAs told me that she didn't feel comfortable teaching a certain dialog that was included in the textbook we used there. It was a conversation between a husband and a wife.

In it, the husband uses the plain style of speech with masculine forms, while his wife uses the polite style throughout the conversation. This TA considered it to be insulting and said that we should not promote such gender inequity. I too disapproved that textbook conversation. So, we decided not to use it in our teaching.

Unfortunately, we are not always able to avoid the problem of gendered language in this way. Whenever applicable, we need to include linguistic materials that help students analyze and understand cultural differences between the United States and Japan. And, like it or not, Japanese culture does emphasize the importance of acknowledging gender differences more than U.S. culture.

Like the TA at Illinois, I feel uncomfortable acknowledging this fact because such disparities frequently represent oppression in disguise. Oppressive training is often concealed with aesthetics. Girls have not generally been told that females are inferior and therefore they need to use a different speech style than men's. Rather, girls have been made to believe that it is a feminine *privilege* and aesthetically proper for them to use female speech. Aesthetic values are extremely powerful; once this belief is established in one's mind, it is very difficult to amend it. I welcome the recent trend of Japanese young women's use of masculine and even vulgar language, but it is naturally causing ideological conflict and many people scorn the trend.

There is another aspect that the Japanese language is well known for and which is also related to indexicality of language use: *honorifics*. Like gendered language, the honorifics system reflects the nature of Japanese society and culture, including hierarchical social relationships. So, it is of interest here to compare these two aspects of Japanese language. Both gendered language and honorifics are highly ideological, but, unlike gendered language, we do not hesitate to teach honorifics. In fact, our program teaches honorific expressions starting at the elementary level. Gendered language, on the other hand, is far more difficult to teach or incorporate in a language curriculum because it requires further understanding of ideological and cultural backgrounds and their significance.

I have not yet found a good way to handle this problem. Our Japanese language program offers five years of instruction, and I offer Japanese linguistics courses alongside the Japanese language courses. Currently, the topic of gendered language is included in one of my linguistics courses. However, not all students of Japanese take my course. Therefore, we need to teach this thorny topic of Japanese as a gendered language somewhere in our language curriculum. This certainly awaits an innovative solution.

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