

## **GENDER-BASED VARIATION IN MODERN WOMEN'S LANGUAGE\***

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**Abstract:** A study of gender-based variation in spoken language across several generations of Japanese women reveals that gender difference in speech patterns is diminishing especially among young people in familiar encounters. This study examines variation in Japanese women's speech styles through an analysis of actual conversation and also social context that has triggered such variation. And it proposes that this variation is another example of a present population leading to diachronic change. Data are taken from women, who were recorded speaking with friends and close acquaintances. The social context will be examined and compared with other context such as that of "the modern girl" of 1930's.

**Keywords:** variation, young, Japanese, woman, language, Sendai

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Since the time of R. Lakoff's *Language and Woman's Place* (1973), there has been a notion of "men's speech" and "women's speech" as fixed register. In Japanese sociolinguistics, too, gender difference in speech patterns has been widely studied.[1] Such linguistic features as sentence-final particles and honorifics have been correlated with gender, and compared to features of men's speech. And Japanese women's speech has been characterized as politer, gentler and more emphatic than men's.

However, a study of gender-based variations in spoken language across several generations of Japanese women reveals that such a distinction is diminishing especially among young people in familiar encounters. The same tendency seems to be observable among college students not only in the Tokyo area but also in regional cities such as Sendai.

In fact, the need for empirical studies of wide within-gender variation in speech styles is increasingly being recognized.[2] Jorden (1991), for example, expresses such a view as follows :

"Authentic samples of language might be organized according to a spectrum that extends from the maximally gentle, emphatic, polite, monitored speech traditionally expected of the Japanese feminine woman to the maximally blunt, aggressive, dominating style associated with men. Individual features might also be examined on this continuum. Even on the basis of casual observation, it becomes clear that there is less to be assigned to the extremes of such a continuum today than is suggested by traditional descriptions. Increasingly Japanese women are adopting patterns formerly associated with men, and equally important, some patterns continually described as *onna-rasii* now turn up frequently in examples of men's speech."

Jorden also points to the fact that the speech of a Japanese grandmother in a family setting is of a blunt style in speaking to her son and daughter-in-law in a Japanese script, to the surprise of a group of American students in reading it. Such a blunt style is also observable in the speech of *Ofune-san* directed to her daughter, *Sazae-san*, in the comic script, *Sazae-san*. In other words, the blunt style has existed in women's speech of generations other than young people even in standard Japanese for some time.

This study, a work in progress, examines variation in Japanese women's speech styles through an analysis of actual conversation in familiar encounters and also social context that has triggered such variation. And it proposes that this variation is another example of a present population leading to diachronic change.[3]

## II. DATA

The main data consists of five audio-taped informal conversations, each between two (to three) close friends. A total of ten women, all residents of Sendai, participated as subjects in November 1996. There were nine college students, ages 18 to 22, and one high school student of 16 years old. The subjects were asked to tape record their chat with their close friend for thirty minutes on the topic(s) of their choice.

The subjects were selected on the basis of the length of their residency in Sendai. They spent most of their lives there. This process was necessary, because only a little over 50% of the Sendai residents have lived there for most of their lives, while the rest of them came from somewhere else.[4] The five tapes are a part of over one hundred tapes collected at the same time.

The supplementary data consists of 1) the taped conversation of SP(eaker) 11 from Hokkaido ; 2) the leading subjects' written reports on their own recorded conversations and on young women's language in general ; and 3) the analysis of young women's language in Tokyo which was reported in Okamoto (to appear).

The writer has analyzed the use of linguistic features that are often associated with gender. They are: 1) Sentence-final forms ; 2) "Vulgar", "strongly masculine", or very informal

lexical expressions ; 3) Referent honorifics ; and 4) The prefix o- for nouns. For the sentence-final forms, each token was identified as feminine, neutral, or masculine. The feminine and masculine sentence-final forms were further subdivided into moderately feminine/masculine forms and strongly feminine/masculine forms. (See McGloin (1991) and Okamoto and Sato (1992) for the main classification). Such classification, however, is by no means absolute, and not all Japanese speakers (especially younger ones) may agree with it completely.

The results of the analysis are in Tables 1-4 and examples of each analysis in Table 5, followed by leading subjects' attitudes toward their data and young women's language in general in Table 6 in the Appendix. SP in the Tables stands for a speaker, and ( ) indicates the grouping of speakers who spoke into the same tape. Sentence tokens obtained do not include the following types of sentences or fragments : 1) interrupted or incomplete sentences ; 2) fillers ; 3) direct and indirect quotations, except for the direct quotations of the speaker's own speech ; 4) expressions repeated for emphasis ; 5) dependent clauses, unless they were used sentence-finally with semantic completeness ; 6) neutral interrogative sentences (e.g., *Taberu* ? 'Are (you) going to eat ?'). Most interrogative sentences and fillers are neutral and these neutral forms were excluded because subjects who tend to be listeners and ask questions use them frequently and the inclusion of these forms would have skewed the data for these participants.

Although there is wide within-group variation regarding sentence-final forms, shown in Table 1, all subjects except one (SP2) used "masculine" forms more often than "feminine" forms. Furthermore, the subjects seldom used "strongly feminine" forms (6 times altogether). Most of the "masculine" sentence-final forms used by the subjects were moderately masculine forms. Some subjects did use "strongly masculine" forms, although only five times altogether. Subjects commonly used neutral sentence-final forms.

All of the subjects except one (SP2) also used lexical items commonly perceived as vulgar, very informal, or masculine. As for the use of honorifics, the subjects did not use honorifics for each other, since they were close friends. When they talked about certain persons (i.e., their superiors and/or strangers), they could have used nominal and verbal (referent) honorifics, but they did not. The prefix o- for nouns is said to be used for showing respect or refinement. The writer has examined the latter usage, which is considered to be particularly common among women. The subjects, however, rarely used this prefix.

### III. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results of my analysis show great variation in speech styles even among young women. For example, they generally use more "moderately masculine" sentence-final forms than "moderately feminine" forms. Their frequencies, however, vary according to individuals, as is shown in Table 1. The same is true with their uses of "vulgar", "strongly masculine", or very informal lexical expressions as is shown in Table 2, and the prefix o- shown in Table 4.[5]

It has been recognized in the literature that the gender distinction in Japanese has been more of an urban phenomenon than a rural one. Further, what is commonly characterized as "Japanese women's language" is not an accurate description of Japanese women's actual speech practice. Not only that, it is a category constructed along standard Japanese, the speech

style of traditional women in the uptown *Yamanote* area of Tokyo. It represents the hegemonic linguistic norm for Japanese women.[6]

On the other hand, it has been reported in the media that there is a lack of dialect characteristics in college students' conversations in Eastern Japan due to their Tokyo orientedness. They are not resistant to accepting the "standard" Japanese, and hence the remark of SP5 in 3 in Table 6. When relaxed, young people in the Kansai area use a combination of a standard vocabulary and a regional suffix as in "Tsumaran-to". In addition, those in the Eastern Japan, are reported to use colloquial language of the Tokyo dialect.[7] Such colloquialism, however, is not so prevalent in the present data, as is shown in Table 2. In fact, SP3 in 2 in Table 6 remarks to the effect that she cannot understand recent colloquial expressions used by high school students.[8]

Therefore, from the common use of "masculine" forms used by women we can infer that language does not directly relate to, or index, gender as a unified category, as assumed by the notions of male and female languages. Rather, it is the result of considering multiple social aspects of the context, such as attributes related with identity and relationship, the types of genre, and so on.

We also need to consider that language will change over time. For example, sentence-final forms such as *yokutte yo* and *da wa* first became popular among women students in the early Meiji period (1880's), spread among other young women, and finally became part of "standard Japanese". Furthermore, "the modern girl" of the 1930's was known for her use of sentence-final forms, *te yo* and *koto*, present woman's language.[9]

Social context in which modern women have been placed should be taken into consideration, too. The introduction of the concept of male-female equality in the Japanese Constitution in 1945, tax deduction for a spouse in 1960, the equal opportunity law in 1985, the recommendation of the removal of the spouse tax deduction in 1996, have all influenced the consciousness of being "women". And we are now said to be in an age without a need for "woman" consciousness.[10] Such a view is expressed in SP11's remark in 5 in Table 6. Our society is for independent "individuals", which may have brought forth the "masculine" language of young women.

Hence, Japanese women select the linguistic strategies most appropriate in a given situation in order to communicate desired social meanings, and in so doing they may trigger diachronic change à la Milroy (1992). The analysis of women's language that are presented in this paper will have an important implication in teaching Japanese as a foreign or second language, so that learners can function comfortably with its native speakers. [11]

## NOTES

\*A part of this paper was presented by the present writer at the 16<sup>th</sup> International Congress of Linguists at Palais des Congres, Paris, on 24 July 1997. The writer is grateful to many participants for their valuable comments on her presentation there.

[1] See, e.g., Ide 1979, 1982, 1990 ; Pang 1981 ; Reynolds 1985 ; Mizutani & Mizutani 1987 ; McGloin 1991.

[2] See Jorden 1991 ; Okamoto and Sato 1992 ; Okamoto, to appear.

[3] See, e.g., J. Milroy 1992.

[4] This ratio is better than that in Tokyo where less than 50% of the residents have lived there for most of their lives. (the National Language Research Institute, 4 September 1997, personal communication)

[5] Due to the rapid standardization of young people's language in Sendai, the traditional view attached to the Sendai dialect is not treated as such in the present analysis.

[6] See Okamoto, to appear.

[7] See Orii 1997. According to a dialectologist the writer met at a national meeting of Kokugo-gakkai ('National Language Association', Yamagata University, October 18-19, 1997), there still remain characteristics of the Sendai dialect in the sentence-final forms of young people's language there. However, as far as the present data are concerned, the subjects share characteristics similar to those of the Tokyo data of a sociolinguist, Okamoto's (to appear).

[8] One of my informants in Tokyo negates the prevalence of such colloquialism among young people there as is represented in their use of a prefix cho-, and criticizes the media for their exaggerated coverage of the usage.

[9] See Kawamoto 1997.

[10] See Yamashita 1996.

[11] Note that foreign learners of Japanese, both in Japan and abroad, normally study *kyootsuu-go* or standard Japanese by using textbooks, audio tapes, and other teaching materials that are designed to teach this variety.

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## APPENDIX

Table 1. Use of gendered sentence-final forms for individual speakers

SP=speaker ; Me=the mean ; F=feminine forms ; MF=moderately feminine forms ; SF=strongly feminine forms ; M=masculine forms ; MM=moderately masculine forms ; SM=strongly masculine forms ; N=neutral forms ; TST=total sentence tokens

| FORM | (SP 1) | (SP 2) | (SP 3) | (SP 4) | (SP 5) | (SP 6) | (SP 7) | (SP 8) | (SP 9) | (SP 10) | Me    | Range   | SP 11) |
|------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|---------|-------|---------|--------|
| F    | 13     | 6      | 30     | 14     | 18     | 2      | 3      | 4      | 0      | 5       | 9.5   | 0-29    | 9      |
| - MF | 11     | 6      | 29     | 14     | 16     | 2      | 3      | 3      | 0      | 5       | 8.9   | 0-29    | 8      |
| - SF | 2      | 0      | 1      | 0      | 2      | 0      | 0      | 1      | 0      | 0       | 0.6   | 0-2     | 1      |
| M    | 40     | 4      | 34     | 18     | 21     | 3      | 35     | 23     | 11     | 25      | 21.4  | 0-40    | 11     |
| - MM | 40     | 4      | 34     | 18     | 20     | 3      | 34     | 21     | 10     | 25      | 20.9  | 3-40    | 11     |
| - SM | 0      | 0      | 0      | 0      | 1      | 0      | 1      | 2      | 1      | 0       | 0.5   | 0-2     | 0      |
| N    | 178    | 80     | 187    | 147    | 123    | 163    | 233    | 175    | 118    | 191     | 159.5 | 80-233  | 191    |
| TST  | 331    | 90     | 251    | 179    | 162    | 168    | 271    | 202    | 129    | 221     | 200.4 | 104-331 | 211    |

Table 2. "Vulgar", "strongly masculine", or very informal lexical expressions

|  | (SP 1) | (SP 2) | (SP 3) | (SP 4) | (SP5) | (SP 6) | (SP 7) | (SP 8) | (SP 9) | (SP10) | Total | Range | SP11) |
|--|--------|--------|--------|--------|-------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|-------|-------|-------|
|  | 5      | 0      | 3      | 1      | 1     | 1      | 10     | 7      | 3      | 9      | 40    | 0-10  | 6     |

Table 3. Use and nonuse of referent honorifics

|                           | (SP 1) | (SP 2) | (SP 3) | (SP 4) | (SP 5) | (SP 6) | (SP 7) | (SP 8) | (SP 9) | (SP 10) | Total | Range | SP 11) |
|---------------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|---------|-------|-------|--------|
| Relevant tokens           | 0      | 0      | 2      | 0      | 0      | 0      | 0      | 0      | 0      | 0       | 2     | 0-2   | 0      |
| tokens w honorifics       | 0      | 0      | 0      | 0      | 0      | 0      | 0      | 0      | 0      | 0       | 0     | 0     | 0      |
| tokens without honorifics | 0      | 0      | 2      | 0      | 0      | 0      | 0      | 0      | 0      | 0       | 2     | 0-2   | 0      |

Table 4. Use and nonuse of the prefix o-

| FORM             | (SP 1) | (SP 2) | (SP 3) | (SP 4) | (SP 5) | (SP 6) | (SP 7) | (SP 8) | (SP 9) | (SP 10) | Total | Range | SP 11) |
|------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|---------|-------|-------|--------|
| relevant nouns   | 2      | 0      | 0      | 0      | 0      | 0      | 1      | 3      | 0      | 2       | 8     | 0-3   | 2      |
| nouns with o-    | 1      | 0      | 0      | 0      | 0      | 0      | 0      | 1      | 0      | 2       | 4     | 0-2   | 2      |
| nouns without o- | 1      | 0      | 0      | 0      | 0      | 0      | 1      | 2      | 0      | 0       | 4     | 0-2   | 0      |

Table 5. Examples of linguistic features examined

1. Examples of moderately "feminine" sentence-final forms:
  - 1) (SP 1) Aru *no*. (There is.)
  - 2) (SP 3) Itsu kiru *no*? (When are you getting a haircut?)

## 2. Examples of strongly "feminine" sentence-final forms:

- 1) (SP 5) Dete konai *wa*. (It doesn't come out.) jvaiss@msparis.fr
- 2) (SP 8) Neteru *wa*. (He is asleep.)

## 3. Examples of moderately "masculine" sentence-final forms:

- 1) (SP 1) Soo *da* *yo*. (That's right.)
- 2) (SP 7) Hidoi syashin *da* *ne*. (It's a terrible photo, isn't it?)

## 4. Examples of strongly "masculine" sentence-final forms:

- 1) (SP 5) Hontoo *kai?* (Really?)
- 2) (SP 7) Kamo shin *nee*. (It may be so.)

## 5. Examples of "vulgar", "strongly masculine", or very informal lexical expressions:

- 1) (SP 3) *Yaroo* *datte*. (That guy, too.)
- 2) (SP 7) *Puri-ketsu* *da* *yo*. (She has a well-shaped hip.)
- 3) (SP 8) Are dake *kutte* *rya*, niku-zuki *yoku* *naru* *yo* *ne*. (If she eats that much, no wonder she gets plump.)

## 6. Examples of use and nonuse of referent honorifics:

- 1) (SP 3) *Hitori-kaiwa*, *dame na n datte*. (A monolog isn't allowed, we were told.)
- 2) (SP 3) *Kaiwa no naka de*, *donna kotoba ga tsukawarete iru katte iu no wo*, *chekku suru rashii*. (I guess (the teacher) is going to find out how language is used in conversations.)

7. Examples of use and nonuse of the prefix *o-* :

- 1) (SP 1) *Kane* *aru n da*. (You have money.)
- 2) (SP 8) *O-uchi* *no kabe*, *masshirona n desho*. (Walls of a house are snow-white, aren't they?)

Table 6. Subjects' attitudes toward (1) their data and (2) young women's language in general

1. (SP 1) (1) negative; (2) a part of young people's fashion.
2. (SP 3) (1) positive; (2) a diachronic change in language among high school students.
3. (SP 5) (1) natural, but with a slight regional accent; (2) a change toward simple and easy use.
4. (SP 7) (1) negative, but real.
5. (SP 11) (2) increasing number of women speaking masculine language; rare use of traditional woman's language; Did women stop being conscious about gender difference?