

What happened to Japanese ‘women’s language’? ‘日本の女性のことば’はどうなったのか？

Yoshimi Miyake
 Akita University

秋田大学 三宅 良美

Introduction

More than 10 years have passed since it was reported that Japanese women have started to emulate a variety of men’s speech. Matsumoto, for example reports that *boku*, which generally used to be the first person pronoun used for self-reference by boys and men, is now widely used by teenaged girls, probably in order to present oneself as *kawaii*. (Matsumoto 1995) On the other hand, Nakamura 2006 reports that Japanese women have started to use the men’s variety in order to express their resistance against the tradition of gendered complementarity in verbal behavior.

For example, the following utterance by women showing anger and sadness toward a company president is not in a traditional women’s speech style:

- (1) おまえ、あやまっても 金返ってこねえし。
 omae ayamate-mo kane kaete
 you apologize-CP-even.if money return-
 ko-nee-shi.
 CP come-Neg-
 ‘Even if you apologize, our money won’t be returned.’

- (2) わたしたちを わすれんなよ。
 watashi.tachi-o wasure-nna-yo.
 us-ACC forget-Neg-Emph
 ‘Don’t forget us.’ (In a meeting between Gate 21 Co. Ltd. and its clients, October 2008).

Both utterances suggest that contemporary female

speakers believe that they can express their feelings more easily and effectively when they use men’s speech style.

So-called “women’s speech style” described in prescriptive Japanese language books is seldom observed in everyday speech in Japan. Likewise, the stereotypical “women’s language” described by Shibamoto 1985 and Ide 1990, etc. is not found in contemporary women’s speech, either. Instead it is more likely to be found in transvestites’ speech. This paper will discuss the current dynamism of gender issues in Japanese speech styles, based on data from TV interviews and recordings of men and women’s dialogues. After comparing the variations reported by Shibamoto more than two decades ago, this paper will consider how traditional styles have changed, where they have gone, and why they have gone.

Phonological, lexical, grammatical features comprising conversational styles characteristic of women were reported by Shibamoto, Okamoto, Ide, and Jugaku, and others.

According to Nakamura 2000 there are two kinds of studies of language and gender in Japan. First, there are prescriptive studies, i.e. those that tell readers how to use “gender-correct” language. Second, there are descriptive studies, that is, those that describe what is going on now, but at the same time indicate what kind of violations or adherence to gendered linguistic rules speakers display.

Thirdly there is a group of feminists who are making efforts to minimize gender differences in language use. For example, these study groups have been forceful

and bold enough to push the mass-media to eliminate representations of language-related gender inequality. A food company once had to cancel a commercial touting its curry sauce, after receiving severe criticism from feminist groups for reinforcing conservative gender roles in their commercial in which a boy says *boku taberu hito* 'I am the one who eats', and two girls who say, *watashi tsukuru hito* 'I am the one who cooks.' What I attempt in this paper is a reconsideration of the problems in the descriptive studies (I will not concern myself with the prescriptive studies) and see how the critical discourse on gender-specific speech styles has contributed to our knowledge of them.

I . “Women’s language”

1.1. Phonological features

1.1.1. Deletion of /i/ and substitution with /a/. For example,

gozaimasu- → gozaamasu
COPULA(POL)

1.1.2. Deletion of /r/ (this rule deletes /r/ and the following vowel when both precede nasal consonant /-n/; /r/ and the following vowel are deleted' /-n/ is lengthened)

wakara-nai → wakan-nai
understand-NEG. understand-NEG
'(I) don't know.'

utsura-nai → utsun-nai
reflect-NEG → reflect-NEG
'(It) does not appear (on photo or mirror)'

kawara-nai → kawan-nai
change-NEG change-NEG
'(It) doesn't change.'

1.2. Lexicon

Table 1. Male forms and female forms (type 1).

male forms	female forms	meaning
hara	o-naka	stomach
mizu	o-hiya	water
umai	o-ishii	delicious
kuu, kurau	taberu	eat

Table 2 Male forms and female forms (type 2).

Male forms	female forms	meaning
hashi	o-hashii	chopsticks
hon	go-hon	book

Although it is not exactly correct to say that left columns are exclusively used by males and the middle columns exclusively by females, women definitely tend to add the prefix *o/go* to words denoting certain objects more often than men do (Miyake 1999) ¹.

1.3. Grammatical differences

1.3.1. Women tend to delete subjects, objects, and other noun phrases in sentences.

(3) demo o-erai-wa-nee, sonna shi-te
but HON-great PART.PART such do-CP
'Anyway, (you are) great to do things like that.'

1.3.2. Women tend to transpose subjects from their usual place preceding verbs to positions following verbs, often all the way to the end of sentences.

(4) daigaku haitta desho, ue no ko ga.
university entered TAG upper GEN child SUBJ 'My older child entered a university, right?' [Lit: Entered a university, older child.]

1.3.3. Women tend to omit case markers on subjects and direct objects;

Doa ga aita → doa aita
door SUBJ opened → door opened

¹ The difference between type 1 and type 2 is that all the terms in Table 1 are separately listed in the dictionary as independent words, whereas the female forms in Table 2 are considered simply derivative forms of the original unprefix forms that are labeled “male”.

'The door opened.'

1.4. Politeness

Ide et al [1982,1992], Shibamoto [1985], Okamoto [1996] report that women speak far more politely than men. Shibamoto computed the level of politeness using the following values:

Normally polite	0
Markedly polite (humble forms?)	(+1)
Rude	(-1)

Average scores were computed for women and men across situations and showed significant gender differences: global scores of 0.27 for men and 2.90 for women, showing a drastic difference between them. My research on the use of *o-/go-*, the deferential particle shows that women use them 50 percent more often than men do (Miyake 1999:132).

1.5. Others

1.5.1. Compliments

Women are expected to compliment others much more often than men are with expressions such as:

yuushuu nee.
excellent, PART
'(you are/s/he is) excellent.'

1.5.2. Themes and topics of conversations

Writing in a rather extreme way, Miller 1967, citing as an example some women's lengthy discussion of the arrangement of a garden they were visiting, states that in Japan, not only do men and women talk differently from the verbal point of view, but they simply never share their topics and themes of conversation. According to Miller Japanese men never discuss the details of a garden.

Gender differences in conversation are sometimes similar to those which have been reported in English conversations. Makino 1990 argued that women tend to speak or write emphatically, while men speak or write evaluatively and are readier to accept the validity

of individual variations. Robin Lakoff (1975,1989)'s and Deborah Tannen(1993)'s analyses of gender differences in American English discourse are based on the assumption that women and men talk differently because their social/cultural/psychological background as well as their communication environments differ.

II. The current situation, 2008

Descriptions of the current situation show a sharp contrast with what has been reported and what is actually going on now. First of all, the phonological rule for "women's language" (stated above in section 1.1.1) should be dropped.

1.1.1. gozaimasu → gozaamasu → non-existent

The form gozaamasu simply does not exist either in women's speech or in men's speech.

1.1.2. ra->n

The nasalization of /ra/ to /n/ such as in wakannai, and kawannai is equally used by both men and women in informal speech styles. Although in casual talk men use the form wakanee more often than women, this form, which used to be considered a form used exclusively by men, is now used by young women, too.

1.2. Lexicon

Gender specific lexicons → mixed

The lexicons once specific to men and to women are now mixed. Men say *o-hiya*, *o-naka*, *o-bento* while women say *kuu*, *umai* in casual speech. Naturally in their distal forms (*desu/masu* forms), both men and women tend to use the terms listed in the women's column in Tables 1 and 2.

My students report both men and women say *o-hiya* in a *izakaya* setting if they work there part time. The gender difference discussed before has shifted to one between formality and informality, between service industry and non-service industry. Regardless of whether the speaker is a man or a woman, the lexical items used in the service industry are those which used to be regarded as specific to women's speech.

The three grammatical differences, 1.3.1.-1.3.3. are all rejected by my university students, especially 1.3.3. (Women tend to omit case markers on subjects and direct objects.) Male students strongly denied that gender has anything to do with case deletion. According to them, in their casual talk, there are no men who say *doa ga aita* (not omitting the subject marker *ga*).

II. Dialogue analysis

1. A bathroom dialogue: from Tokyo

Again we need to discuss the sub-categorizations of the social status of speakers and their audience when we consider gender difference in speech. Dialogue 1 is a conversation sequence overheard and transcribed in a lady's bathroom in Shinjuku in December 2008. Three girls, A, B, and C who appeared to be about 20 years old, with long curly hair, dyed light brown, mini-skirts, bags with shiny accessories, meticulously made up with long and thick eyelash, were standing, waiting for their turn to use the bathroom stalls.

Dialogue 1

(5) A *washiki dat-tara hami-deru jishin*
 Japanese.style be-if spill-come.out confidence
 aru.
 exist
 'If the toilet is Japanese style, I am sure that (it) will fall out (of the toilet bowl).'

(6) B *omae unko daro ?*
 you poop be.Fut
 'You are going to poop, right?'

(7) aa, *mou gaman deki-nai*
 Exclam already tolerance can-not
 'Ah, (I) cannot wait any more.'

(8) A. *kare to deeto da-mon.*
 he with date Cop-as
 "(This is) a date with my boyfriend."

While the girls use for the first person the pronoun *atashi*, the second person *o-mae* that they use at one time was considered 'man's rough style'. Considering the traditional tendency in Japanese for the first person as well as the second person to be omitted, *omae*, deliberately used in sentence (2) has some emphatic effect. Perhaps its use creates a feeling of intimacy. We can also predict that when those young women talk with each other, they share the second person pronoun *omae*.

We also should consider their conversation style. None of them responds or agrees with the others. A says that she might spill if the toilet is Japanese style, but B does not respond to A's theme, but shifts the topic to asking A if she is going to 'poop' (rather than pee). On the other hand, C chimes in, 'I cannot wait any more.' The last sentence by A, 'I am going to have a date with my boyfriend' has nothing to do with the previous sentences. All the sentences here violate a rule of conversation, i.e. the rule of relevancy. This conversational sequence shows that they are not trying to convey information but each of the participants utters each feeling spontaneously, presumably feeling free to do so because they share unquestionable friendship and solidarity.

2. Emotion and evaluation: observation from Nana (2005)

In order to shed more light on the current situation, I observed the dialogues in a film entitled *Nana*, a movie made in 2005, based on a super hit comic/manga story of the same title. In this film, I looked at four dialogs between women, i.e. *Nana*, a rock-n-roll singer-to-be, with short dark hair, with thick dark eye lines and another *Nana*, whose nickname is *Hachi*. The nickname was given by the first *Nana*, as according to the first *Nana*, *Hachi* is dependant and obedient like *Hachi-ko*, a heroic and legendary dog, whose statue is a popular meeting point in front of Shibuya Station in Tokyo.²

Hachi is a girl with long curled and light brown

² Another interpretation is that the nickname *Hachi* also comes from No. 8 as opposed to No.7, *Nana*, just to differentiate the two *Nana*'s.

dyed hair, wearing a frilled skirt and long boots—a typical contemporary young girl, and similar to the girls I observed in a Shinjuku public bathroom. She is a dreamy and romantic girl. Her key terms are *kawaii* and *kakkoi*—she adds *chō* ‘extra, super’ such as in *chō kawaii* ‘super cute’, *chō kakkoi* ‘super cool’. The third woman, is Sachiko, an art student who falls in love with Hachi’s boyfriend, Shoji, who finally falls in love with Sachiko. The fourth woman, Junko, Hachi’s friend, is also a significant person acting as a calm advisor and counselor.

3.1. Pronouns

Nana, Hachi, and Sachiko, all three, use the first person pronoun *atashi*, while all the men use *ore* as their first person pronoun. Meanwhile, the variation in the choice of second person pronouns is wide.

Table 4. Pronouns used in Nana (The number of the frequency is put in the parentheses for it is addressed in only few times.)

1 st person	User
<i>atashi</i>	Nana, Hachi, Sachiko
<i>ore</i>	All males
2 nd person	
<i>anata</i>	OL (Hachi’s supervisor) → Hachi Junko → Hachi (1)
<i>kimi</i>	Hachi’s senior → Hachi
<i>socchi</i>	Sachiko → Nana (1)
<i>anta</i>	Nana → Hachi, Ren (Nana’s boyfriend, band member) Junko → Hachi
<i>omae</i>	Nana → real estate agent Ren, Yasu (band member) → Nana Male → Male friends
<i>temee</i>	Nana → Hachi (2), Nobu (band member) (1), Sachiko

Nana’s pronoun choices show a wide range. Let me cite a dialogue among Nana, her real estate agent, Hachi, and Hachi’s real estate agent, when they run into each other at an apartment which both of them are interested in renting.

Dialogue 2.

(9) Nana:

てめえ は あの おとこの ところ で くら
しやいい。

temee wa ano otoko no toko de kurash-a
you TOPIC that man GEN place LOC live-if
ii.

good

‘Why don’t you stay at that man’s place?’

(10) Hachi:

だから、それができないの。

dakara sore ga deki.nai no.

so that Subj impossible EMP

‘I cannot do that, I told you.’

(11) Nana:

でもなあ、あんた プライバシー守れるタイプ？

demo.naa, anta puraibashii mamore-ru

But. PAR 2ndprsn privacy preserve-Pass-Inf
taipu?

type

‘‘But, are you a type capable of keeping the privacy of each of us?’’

(12) Nana’s real estate agent:

ん、やめた方が。

n, yame-ta hoo-ga

ummm. quit-Pst direction-Subj

‘Well, it’s better not to bother (to share a room).’

(13) 他人との共同生活なんてうざったい
だけだから。

tanin to no kyodo-seikatsu nante uzattai

other with Gen co-living TOP troublesome

dake da-kara

only that-from

'Living with somebody else is so much trouble.'

(14) Nana:

いや、そう でも ねえ だろ。

iya, sou demo nee daro

no such even NEG. Cop.Fut

'No, it cannot be.'

(15) さびしい おとこ だろ、お前。

sabishii otoko daro, omae.

lonely man Cop.Fut 2ndprsn

'You are a lonely man, aren't you?'

This dialogue shows Nana's rich repertoire of second person pronouns, i.e. *temee* to start with, to Hachi, *anta* to Hachi, then *omae* to her real estate agent.

Meanwhile, in the dialogues between Nana and Ren, the pattern of their pronouns is fixed, i.e.

anta

Nana (*atashi*) → Ren (*ore*)

←

omae

3.2. Subject-verb transposition

In the film *Nana*, a number of transpositions are observed. Dialogue 3 is taken from a scene in which Nana and Hachi have found that Shoji and Sachiko are involved. Nana walks up to Shoji and Sachiko. It is her, Nana, who immediately starts to show anger toward Shoji, instead of Hachi, the one who has been betrayed.

Dialogue 3.

(Nana to Sachiko)

(16) 関係ねえだろ、てめえは。

kankee nee daro, temee wa.

relation non-existent, Cop.Fut you TOP

'Not related, you?' ['Nothing between you two.']

(Sachiko to Nana)

(17) そっちでしょ、関係ないのは。

socchi desho? kankee nai no wa

there Cop.Fut relation non-existent GEN TOP

'You, that is not relevant.' ['What business is it of yours.']

In the film, in fact, both men and women in equal measure transpose subjects to the end of the sentence or even delete them altogether. This happens because, firstly, most of the dialogues are among close friends, peers. Secondly when speakers of Japanese get emotional they tend to put verbs and adjectives first. The film *Nana* includes a few of those scenes of high emotion.

3.3. Do women speak emotionally and men, evaluatively?

Analyzing *Nana*, we can reject this claim. In fact, the most objectively evaluative character in this film is Junko, Hachi's girl friend. Junko advises Shōji, Hachi's boyfriend, to take responsibility for Hachi, and at the same time, when Shōji starts an affair with Sachiko, which Hachi finds out about, Junko objectively judges that both are to blame, not just Shōji, because, in Junko's view, Hachi was thinking only of herself.

(18) あんたは 章司の こと 考えた ことある？

anta wa Shōji no koto kangaeta koto aru?

'Have you thought of Shōji?'

(19) あんたは いつもそうやって 自分のこと ばっかで

anta wa itsumo soo yatte jibun no koto bakka de.

'You have been always thinking only about yourself.'

(20) ちゃんと 章司のこと 思いやったって いえる？

chan to Shoji no koto omoiyatta -tte ieru?

'Can you say that you have really cared about Shoji's feeling?'

III. Conclusion: womanly talk and border crossing

Not only prescriptive but also descriptive studies have been conducted based on the assumption that women speak in exclusively women's ways. However, in the current dialogue, it has become extremely difficult to define women's talk in a way that clearly distinguishes it from men's talk. The polite/less polite difference

is determined by speech environment, not gender distinction. Gender distinction in language has clearly shifted to a complex of age, sub-category of interests, ages, stylistic, and occupational differences.

It is also important to point out that women now may adopt features of language previously considered men's style, in order to convey their emotion, same-sex solidarity, and intimacy. Regardless of their age differences, when women show their anger, they may adopt a style traditionally considered to be men's rough form". Likewise, their excitement also tends to be expressed in men's form. In this respect, we observe a certain discrepancy between their physical styles of self-presentation (outfits, make-up, hair-do, etc.) which remain quite feminine (frills and fringes, curled hair like a French doll's, sparkling nails and lashes, etc.) and their occasionally blunter linguistic forms. For many women, speaking like men does not contradict or clash with their feminine appearance.

Contemporary women's talk displays a wide range, from traditional women's style to traditional men's rough forms, while men's talk has a narrower range, from traditional men's forms to neutral forms. It can never be denied that the language of women is constantly changing, even producing new terms like "KY kotoba " which eventually may leap across the gender divide.

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