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A Study on Women's Language in English and Japanese Societies

Masaru Kurihara

Introduction

In researching this topic, it was surprising to discover how much research has already been done. The rapid expansion of research on the women's speech and language had started in western cultures decades ago. Based on Lakoff's method (1975) 'women's speech strategies such as the style of "politeness" may be understood as ways of coping with greater male power' and 'men use higher frequencies of so-called stigmatized phonological variants than women, which make their speech more informal.' Another surprising discovery was that some researchers donate women's speech as 'uncertain,' 'unsureness' or 'inarticulate.' The muted group theory (Kramarae, 1981) provides a good explanation of the sex differences in speech:

The language of a particular culture does not serve all its speakers equally, for not all speakers contribute in an equal fashion to its formulation. Women are not as free or as able as men to say what they wish, when and where they wish, because the words and the norms for their use have been formulated by the dominant group, men. So women cannot easily or as directly articulate their experiences as men

can. Women's perceptions differ from those of men because women's subordination means they experienced life differently. However, the words and norms for speaking are not generated from or fitted to women's experiences. Women are thus 'muted.'

In this paper, I will study the female feature in English and Japanese societies referring to the references. Surprisingly, most of the explication of female language are of a negative aspect, which I would like to argue about as a male speaker and observer. While studying the change of female language, you can see the change of social structure, how women are treated in 1970s-1980s, hierarchic society. Our speech not only reflects our place in culture and society but also helps to create the place. For the last chapter, I shall look into the question of 'talk like a lady'; whether the statement can still exist in this modern time. And the common/different female features between Western and Japanese societies.

Chapter 1: Feature of Women's Language in English Society

Lakoff (1975) suggested that women's speech was characterized by linguistic features such as the following:

- ① Lexical hedges or fillers, e.g. *you know, sort of, well, you see*
- ② Tag questions, e.g. *she's very nice, isn't she?*
- ③ Rising intonation (Prosody), e.g. *When will dinner be ready? – Around six o'clock?*
- ④ Adjective of approval, e.g. *adorable, charming, cute*, cf. *cool, great*
- ⑤ Color terminology, e.g. *beige, mauve, lavender*, cf. *brown, purple*
- ⑥ Intensifiers such as *just* and *so*, e.g. *I like him so much.*
- ⑦ 'Hypercorrect' grammar, e.g. consistent use of standard verb forms

- ⑧ 'Superpolite' forms, e.g. indirect requests, euphemisms
- ⑨ Avoidance of strong swear words, e.g. *fudge*, *my goodness*
- ⑩ Emphatic stress, e.g. *it was a BRILLIANT performance*

However much of this initial research was methodologically unsatisfactory, because speech was recorded in laboratory conditions with assigned topics. Furthermore, most of the subjects were university students. Consequently, it was difficult to generalize from the results, the natural informal speech in the community as a whole. In addition, further research proved various different results of the features of women's language. Apparently, the research was done more than thirty years ago, which could be another reason. Surprisingly, many researchers missed Lakoff's fundamental point. She had identified a number of linguistic features which were unified by their function of expressing lack of confidence. It was unified by the fact that all the forms identified were means of expressing uncertainly or tentativeness (Holmes, 1995).

In this chapter, I will address some of the features in Western countries which have good evidence although to me most of them are hard to agree with.

Sex-Preferential Speech Feature

Nowadays, it can be said that Western communities no longer have sex-discrimination. Therefore, it is common to see women's and men's social roles overlap and the speech form they use also overlap. They use different quantities or frequencies of the same forms. These has been an interesting research done: In all the English-speaking cities, women use more *-ing* pronunciations and fewer *-in* pronunciations than men in words like *playing* and *crying*.

Japanese have the similar phenomenon; In Tokyo, mainly males often say '*kitanee*' instead of '*kitanai*' and '*sugee*' instead of '*sugoi*': [ai], [oi]

→ [e:]. This phenomenon can especially be seen with young males in an informal situation. They speak sluggishly to sound ‘masculine’; ‘cool.’

HRT [High Rising Terminal] and Tag Question

This special use of a syntactic rule is common nowadays. I think it is getting more common now. As shown in the example above ③, there is a peculiar sentence intonation pattern which has the form of a declarative answer to yes-no question. Lakoff notes that:

Here we find unwillingness to assert an opinion carried to an extreme. One likely consequence is that these sort of speech patterns taken, reflect something real about character and play a part in not taking a women seriously or trusting her with any real responsibilities since ‘she can’t make up her mind’ and ‘isn’t sure of herself.’ And here again we see that people form judgments about other people on the basis of superficial linguistic behavior that may have nothing to do with inner character, but has been imposed upon the speaker, on pain of worse punishment than not being taken seriously.

There is also another opinion of mine. I think this phenomenon is from women’s caring nature not from unsureness. Using declarative questions, they can make sure whether everything is clear with the addressee. They are giving the addressee a chance to interrupt by giving HRT sentences. Such features are probably part of the general fact that women’s speech sounds much more ‘polite’ than mens’. This politeness is to leave a decision open to the addressees, not imposing your mind, or views or claims on anyone else.

Though Lakoff claims that tag questions (see ②) are used by women more often than men, and convey uncertainty; some researchers note the

opposite statements; e.g. Lapadat and Seesahai (1978) found that in informal conversations, men use twice as many tag questions as women. Thus it is hard to draw conclusions from all of this.

Chapter 2: Feature of Women's Language in Japanese Society

“MEN SUPERIOR, WOMEN INFERIOR”, an indispensable element in the Japanese hierarchical society. Since the end of World War II, women's perception has given rise to ‘status conflict’ in various areas of social life. The complex interaction between social change and language change emerges, and the changes in women's speech become visible. The new social order is based on egalitarian ideology. However, the average person's image of women has not changed significantly, and the notion that women should behave *onna-rashiku*, ‘as expected of women’, is still predominant. Thus, Japanese women talk submissively and politely, just as always. The task of this chapter is to study the feature of Japanese women's speech concerning ‘does the cultural belief that women should talk *onna-rashiku* still exist in this 21st century?’ And if not, what is the new feature of women's speech these days. This study concentrates on their ways of speech such as lexical or minor morphological differences, not writing differences.

These are the characteristics of women's speech examined by main researchers:

phonology / lexicon / conservative / repetitive / soft / loose / High Rising Endings / unclear / diffuse / elegant / emotional / less direct / less precise / Avoidance of vulgar language

Though main researchers have made similar observations, some of them may be hardly agreeable. This chapter will address the question of how, or

whether, these features identified as characteristics can be true to this 21st century.

Phonology

Phonology consists of the two elements; deletion and assimilation:

Ara, iya da wa. → *Ara, ya da wa.* (deletion)

Moo, iyarashii. → *Moo, yarashii.* (deletion)

Wakaranai. → *Wakannai.* (assimilation)

[i] deletion in the forms *-te/-de iru* is generally occurs, though not always. [r] assimilation occurs when a syllable consists of [r] + V occurring before a nasal, the vowel is deleted and the [r] assimilated to the following nasal. Both phenomenon actually apply in both males' and females' speech. However, women apply this rule more frequently than men do.

The Lexicon

The most commonly cited lexical characteristics of female Japanese speech are:

the avoidance of *kango* (Sino-Japanese)

honorific prefixes *o-*, *go-*, or *omi-*

special pronominal forms

sex-differentiated forms of reference and address

《Examples》

①	Male forms	Female forms	English
②	<i>hara</i>	<i>o-naka</i>	stomach
③	<i>bentoo</i>	<i>o-bentoo</i>	lunch box
④	<i>mizu</i> <i>umai</i> or <i>oishii</i> <i>kuu</i> or <i>taberu</i>	<i>o-mizu</i> <i>oishii</i> <i>taberu</i>	water delicious eat
⑤	<i>boku</i> or <i>ore</i>	<i>watashi</i> or <i>atashi</i>	I

Though some of the words above may often used by both sexes, most people can distinguish those lexicon words. For example, ‘*hara*’ or ‘*kuu*’ are usually employed by male speakers. Nowadays, many females, more often girls, use those words without any hesitation. Thus it can be said that there has become less distinguishability between male and female lexicon forms. In fact these ‘female forms’ shown above are ideal Japanese words for both sexes, however, since men and the power held in families, they tend to use vulgar language or directive speech. While female were of a low status not only in the family but also in social life, they employed politer language. This custom became part of their nature now. Those lexicons are becoming ‘natural’ language.

Sentence ending particle: ‘*wa*’ and ‘*no*’**(1) *Wa***

‘*Wa*’ is used by both male and female. And it can be said that there are two types of ‘*wa*.’

Insistence (Kitagawa, 1977)

The sentence particle ‘*wa*’ is generally associated with feminine speech. ‘*Wa*’ is used by a female speaker addressing someone intimate to her such as family members or close friends.

e.g.

d. *Watashi ga yaru wa*. (I will do it.)

e. *Ocha ga oishii wa*. (This tea is nice.)

In (d) and (e), ‘*wa*’ is attached to the plain ending of predicates. These sentences could be uttered among intimate friends and family. Also they are used for maintaining an official relationship such as business relationships, formal interviews, etc. ‘*Wa*’ demands that the speaker and the addressee have a personal relationship.

Some researchers have observed that ‘*wa*’ can be used by male speakers.

f. *Ore mo kau wa*. ↘ (I will buy it, too.)

g. *Watashi mo kau wa*. ↗ (I will buy it, too.)

‘*Wa*’ with falling intonation, as in (f) is occasionally used by male speakers of modern standard colloquial Japanese, while ‘*wa*’ with rising intonation as in (g) is generally used by women. These two types of ‘*wa*’ have the same basic function of conveying a sense of insistence by part of the speaker. Kitagawa (1977) noted that this feminine ‘*wa*’ ↗ “derives from the speaker’s attempt to reduce the strong sense of instance inherent in this particle by expressing it with the gentle question intonation, thus

submitting... the appropriateness of that insistence to the better judgment of the addressee.”

Emotional Emphasis

h. *Wakaikoro wa yoku kenka wo shita monodesu wa.* ↘ (I used to fight often in my youth.)

This ‘wa’ is used by older men when they are recalling certain past events with some emotion.

i. *Yoku niau wa ne.* (You look nice in your dress.)

This ‘wa’ is used to express strong emotional feeling not “insistence.” The difference between masculine ‘wa’ and female ‘wa’ is that the ‘wa’ directs this emotional emphasis toward the addressee, while the masculine ‘wa’ does not. Thus feminine ‘wa’ seeks to engender an emotional rapport, an atmosphere of empathic feeling between the speaker and the addressee.

Main arguments have been done over the function of ‘wa’, either “insistence” or “emotional emphasis.” However, both analysis apply to different contexts. In other words, the speaker can mean either of them.

(2) No

‘No-ending’ declarative sentences are typically used in female speech (as in (k)). And ‘no’ in combination with polite endings are only used by female speech (as in (l),(m)). However ‘no’ is often used in questions by both sexes.

j. *Doko ni itte ita no?* (Where have you been?)

k. *Okashi ga daisuki na no.* (I love snacks.)

l. *Yuube denwa shita no yo.* (I called you last night.)

m. *Ano yaoyasan yoku irassharu no?* (Do you often go to that grocery?)

In many cases, ‘no’ can be considered as an abbreviated form of ‘no desu’ (nominalizer ‘no’ + polite copula ‘desu’) or ‘no da’ (‘no’ + plain copula ‘da’) via copula deletion. Sentence (l) and (m), for example, can be rephrased as (K) and (L), without changing the meanings.

K. *Okashi ga daissuki na [n desu.] / Okashi ga daisuki na [n da.]*

L. *Yuube denwa shita [n desu] yo. / Yuube denwa shita [n da] yo.*

There are three variations: ① *n(o) desu* → neutral

② *n(o) da* → masculine

③ *no* → feminine

However, ② and ③ function equivalently because feminine ‘no’ is the absence of copula ‘da.’ This ‘da’ makes assertive sentences and is generally avoided in female speech.

Japan has been discovered as an emotional society nowadays. Women are no longer confined to the home but are taking up various social/public roles which used to belong to men. Inevitably, mixed sex interactions have significantly increased, causing remarkable changes in the way people relate. Mixed sex interaction in which women and men can talk almost as equal is no longer taken as exceptional.

Is Women’s Speech Conservative?

Many researchers have claimed this feature with two aspects of female

speech. First, as I mentioned above, female speech uses more correct and polite forms. Therefore, it can be said that women are in some way the standard bearers of the language. However, it has been more than sixty years since World War II, and Japan has made a great development in industry and economics. Surely, the social status of women has changed as well. Till around World War II, the female speech might have been conservative, however, this 60 years has made the language change. Thus speaking more correct and polite forms does not necessarily mean that women's speech now is conservative. It depends on the person's characteristics.

The second aspect is that it has been said that 'women do not create as many new lexical items, particularly what may be termed *ryukogo* or "popular, slang words" as men do, nor do they use them as frequently once they have been created.' However, nowadays women are more creative than men, especially in the young generation.

The change of Japanese language is very rapid. Furthermore, Japanese people are very adaptable. The study on '*ryukogo*' offers new interesting and fruitful researches. Why do Japanese people like to use a lot of loan words from English? One of the reason is that Japanese people feel their own Japanese language out-of-fashion. They are always trying to catch up with the world since the end of World War II. They learnt many things from the United States of America, therefore, the USA was always their ideal. Another reason is that Japanese language has wide ranges of onomatopoeia. They like to play with words and sounds. These are a part of Japanese and its interesting characteristics. Many foreign Japanese learners are often amazed and become more interested in learning Japanese. That is another interesting study.

Chapter 3: Gossip: A Language of Female Secrets

In this chapter, I will approach the study of women's oral culture: gossip. Gossip describes the in-group talk that goes on between people in informal contexts. In Western societies, gossip is defined as 'idle talk' and considered particularly characteristic of women's interaction (Holmes 2001). Also Jones (1980) describes 'gossip is a specific type of women's language or style.' To prove this fact, I conducted the survey on the male's idea of the women's community in Australia in 1998. Asking twenty-five males a question of 'what comes up in your mind when you see girls gathering or when you hear a sentence of "women in their speech communities"?', the result was very clear. Surprisingly, twenty-one out of twenty-five males said 'gossip.' The other answers were 'noisy,' 'eating,' or 'chatting.' I was surprised to find out this fact; gossip is a universal female language. As we have the words "*idobata-kaigi*," gossip is the common women's social meeting in Japan. Its roots extend far back into the history of *nyobo-kotoba*, the language of the ladies in the court from the mid-Kamakura Period to the early Muromachi. In those days, women were seen as subordinates. Women lived together apart from their husbands, thus they made their own words and talked about men. In this modern time, you can see many kinds of 'women's magazines' in Japan which shows how much Japanese women like gossip.

Jones (1980) describes gossip into four categories: house-talk, scandal, bitching, and chatting. House-talk functions to exchange the information and resources connected with the female role as an occupation such as the exchange of recipes, household hints, and dress patterns. It also functions in meeting emotional needs for support and recognition.

Scandal – the first function is to gossip about the 'misbehavior' of other women, especially sexual misbehavior. The second is to make clear women's

interest in each other's lives.

Bitching is the kind of gossip that men feel most uneasy about. It is the overt expression of women's anger at their restricted role and inferior status. That is expressed, but in private and to other women only. As a form of gossip, bitching is essentially cathartic. The women speaking do not expect to change, but want only to make their complaints in an environment where their anger will be understood and expected.

And chatting is the most intimate forms of gossip, a mutual self-disclosure (Jones, 1980). Chesler (1972) notes a good description:

In fact, what the women are doing – or where they are going – is toward some kind of emotional resolution or comfort. Each woman comments on the other's feelings by reflecting them in a very sensitive matching process. The two women share their feelings by alternating the retelling of the entire experience in which their feelings are embedded and from which they cannot be 'abstracted' or 'summarized.' Their theme, method and goal are non-verbal and/or non-verbalized.

Gossip sometimes accompanies a tag question, and they change topics abruptly. Their talk is contrasted completely with the cooperative, agreeing and supportive. Women are not only sharing information, but are asking each other. Gossip is a staple of women's lives, and the study of gossip is the study of women's concerns and values. It is a key to the female subculture. This study shows that men and women are in different cultural groups so that they sometimes miscommunicate.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

The new wave of studies about women's language was between the

1970s–1980s, beginning with *Language and Women's Place* (Lakoff, 1975). It was a big hit in the modern Women's Liberation movement. Lakoff claims that sexual discrimination has to be cleared up. In this case female language is the first thing they have to look at. Women are expected to 'speak like a lady', a concept which causes the sex-discrimination. At the time society and its communication system were defined by men. The importance of the male/female division itself is likely a product of the male definition of the social structure. Women's opinions are never taken as important to men, and women became more polite and quiet. Many researchers have mentioned this statement – 'speak like a lady' and '*onna-rashiku*.' Here, what does 'speak like a lady' mean? Basically, this term is from Lakoff's research. Therefore, it means a lady should follow the ten features shown in the Chapter 1 in this paper. To sum up the ten features; women tend to or should speak politely, softly, correctly, uncertainly, and with HRT intonation, '*onna-rashiku*' can be said to have these common features.

Ide (1990) notes that 'the tendency for women to speak powerless language and for men to speak less of it is due, at least in part, to the greater tendency of women to occupy relatively powerless social position.' She also mentions that Japanese language itself is 'powerless' when compared to the Western languages. Therefore, Japanese sounds passive and feminine to Western ears.

I think that those features or their language in the Western countries has changed drastically. Language change emerges and changes in women's speech then becomes visible. The features shown above will no longer exist since sex-discrimination will not exist in the Western countries. It is very common to see women executives in business, or sometimes men stay at home, 'house-husbands.' There is a great deal of evidence to suggest that male speakers are socialized into a competitive style of discourse, while

women are socialized into a cooperative style of speech. Therefore, women succeed in adapting a more competitive discourse and this style could be successful in the male-dominated societies. However, it does not mean 'speak like a lady' is totally extinct. When they are with their lover or children, they show their feminism. While in Japan, unlike Western countries, there still exists sex-discrimination. The stereotype of a Japanese husband is to work for his family, and a wife, to bring up the children and support her husband. That is what most male-created stereotypes of what women are. If there is a woman chief executive, the media brings a big documentary program such as 'Life of a female boss in Japan.' The existence of that kind of program proves that Japan is still hierarchical society. Therefore, Japanese *onna-rashiku* is more distinct than *to speak like a lady*.

Here I give some common factors/features of female speech in both English and Japanese:

- ① Women speak like a lady (*onna-rashiku*) only when they want to identify their feminism.
- ② Women are less likely to use vulgar language publicly, however, the recent development of egalitarian ideology means many self-respecting women are becoming able to use vulgar language publicly without flinching.
- ③ 'Gossip' appears to be a universal women's secret language.
- ④ Women likely to use HRT, because they are caring for the addressee. To make sure the addressee is with the speaker, everything is clear, letting them have a chance to interrupt the conversation.

In conclusion, women's language in this 21st century is for females to identify feminism and which characterizes themselves as female. The new

research for the future will be on women's humor (*ryukogo*), gossip, and the language among the new generations. Language only exists through individual speech and language as a social instrument. How they interact depends on their characteristics, the situation, and the addressee.

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