

The CALA 2020 Proceedings Paper 12 - 2

*Language, Gender, Sexuality, Paper 2*

**The Shifting Sub-Text of Japanese Gendered  
Language**

Mary Goebel Noguchi  
*Kansai University, Japan*

# The Shifting Sub-Text of Japanese Gendered Language

Mary Goebel Noguchi<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*Kansai University, Japan*

---

## Abstract

Sociolinguists (Holmes 2008; Meyerhof 2006) assist to describe the Japanese language as having gender-exclusive elements. Personal pronouns, sentence-ending particles and lexicon used exclusively by one gender have been cataloged in English by researchers such as Ide (1979), Shibamoto (1985) and McGloin (1991). While there has been some research showing that Japanese women's language use today is much more diverse than these earlier descriptions suggested (e.g. studies in Okamoto and Smith 2004) and that some young Japanese girls use masculine pronouns to refer to themselves (Miyazaki 2010), prescriptive rules for Japanese use still maintain gender-exclusive elements. In addition, characters in movie and TV dramas not only adhere to but also popularize these norms (Nakamura 2012). Thus, Japanese etiquette and media 'texts' promote the perpetuation of gender-exclusive language use, particularly by females.

However, in the past three decades, Japanese society has made significant shifts towards gender equality in legal code, the workplace and education. The researcher therefore decided to investigate how Japanese women use and view their language in the context of these changes. Data comes from three focus groups. The first was conducted in 2013 and was composed of older women members of a university human rights research group focused on gender issues. The other two were conducted in 2013 and 2019, and were composed of female university students who went through the Japanese school system after the Japan Teachers' Union adopted a policy of gender equality, thus expressing interest in gender issues. The goal was to determine whether Japanese women's language use is shifting over time. The participants' feelings about these norms were also explored - especially whether or not they feel that the norms constrain their ability to express themselves fully. Although the new norms are not yet evident in most public contexts, the language use and views of the participants in this study represent the sub-text of this shift in Japanese usage.

*Keywords:* Gender-exclusive language, Japanese, gender norms

---

## Introduction

Sociolinguists generally agree that in all speech communities, the linguistic forms used by males and females differ to some extent (Holmes 2008: 157). However, in most communities around the world, these differences are referred to as gender-preferential variations, wherein both males and females use all forms, but some are used more by men and others by women.

In contrast, some languages have gender-exclusive patterns of use, with certain linguistic forms being reserved for women and others for men. Languages with gender-exclusive features are generally limited to

indigenous languages such as the native American languages Yana and Koasati and the Australian aboriginal language Yanyuwa (Holmes 2008; Meyerhoff 2011; Trudgill 1983).

The sole exception is Japanese. Although it is one of the world's most spoken languages (Ethnologue 2019), Japanese is the only major language that has gender-exclusive features. In this paper, I will briefly describe these features of Japanese and summarize recent research on their use, explain the background for this study, and then present the findings of a study involving three focus groups which explored the use of these gendered forms by female college students.

## Gender-Exclusive Features of Japanese

One of the most pronounced differences in male and female Japanese speech involves personal pronouns. There are six basic first-person pronouns in Japanese. All of those used by females are variants of *'watakushi'*, the most formal first-person pronoun. Two of these are also used by males in formal situations. However, it is not considered appropriate for females to use the 'masculine' pronouns *'boku'* and *'ore.'*

Similarly, second-person Japanese pronouns are also normally used in a gender-exclusive way. Of the four basic second-person pronouns in Japanese, two are used by both females and males: *'anata'* and its abbreviated form *'anta.'* However, males more frequently use *'kimi'* or *'omae,'* which are not considered appropriate for female use.

The third gender-exclusive aspect of Japanese involves sentence-final particles. According to McGloin (1991), those used to express strong insistence (*'zo,' 'ze,' 'sa'*) and assertive confirmation (*'na'*) are considered 'masculine,' while those which express a weaker degree of insistence and confirmation (*'yo'* and *'ne'*) and those which are used to create a sense of rapport (*'no'* and *'wa'*) are considered appropriate for females to use. In addition to these particles, another well-known sentence-ending softener generally used only by women is *'kashira,'* which indicates a degree of uncertainty and means 'perhaps.'

A fourth area of gender-exclusivity in Japanese involves lexicon. A number of kinship terms and words related to eating are generally used only by men. For instance, males often refer to their father as *'oyaji'* in casual speech, rather than using the standard terms *'otoosan'* (honorific) or *'chichi'* (humble), while their mothers may be referred to as *'ofukuro'* rather than as *'okaasan'* (honorific) or *'haha'* (humble). The casual 'masculine' term for one's older brother is *'aniki,'* while females would normally use *'oniisan'* (honorific) or *'ani'* (humble). Words used by males when talking about eating include *'hara'* rather than *'onaka'* for 'stomach' or 'hunger,' *'ku'* rather than *'taberu'* for 'eat,' and *'umai'* instead of *'oishii'* for 'delicious.'

In addition, Shibamoto (1985) notes that there are many Japanese nouns to which an honorific prefix is always added by women or added more often than it is by men. This type of wording is known as *bikago.* In general, women are expected to use *bikago,* while men often do not.

Exclamatory expressions also tend to be gender-exclusive. Shibamoto (1985) mentions that men may use *'hoo'* to express surprise, *'oi,' 'naa'* and *'yai'* to get someone's attention, and *'kuso'* as an expletive. Women often use *'ara'* and *'maa'* to express surprise and *'chotto'* to get someone's attention or express disapproval. Overall, the "feminine" expressions are softer, politer and less assertive.

It should be pointed out that these features are not normally used in written Japanese. In everyday speech, however, it is almost impossible to avoid using them, and women are expected to avoid the 'masculine' expressions.

While the above explanation is conventionally accepted in Japan, recent research has raised a number of issues with this kind of description. First, while the features of Japanese reserved for women, referred to as *onna kotoba* (women's language), are often regarded as an inherent element of the language, a number of scholars have traced the history of their popular use back only as far as the nation-building movements of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and argue that *onna kotoba* is 'closely linked' to ideological views of women that were constructed and disseminated in order to consolidate the nation-state (Inoue 1994, cited in Yukawa and Saito 2004; Endo 1997; Nakamura 2012).

Another problem with the above description of the gender-exclusive nature of Japanese is that it is more of an ideal than a reality. These features are considered a part of standard Japanese, and tend to appear when women speak that variety, but are absent in a number of regional dialects (Nakamura 2012). A number of studies presented in Okamoto and Shibamoto Smith (2004) provide empirical data showing that language use today is much more diverse than suggested by conventional descriptions of gendered Japanese.

Nonetheless, such descriptions do have normative value, especially as females in Japanese movies, television dramas and even commercials, almost always use *onna kotoba*, and even the Japanese subtitles for female characters in non-Japanese films employ these feminine markers. Nakamura (2007) argues that this gives Japanese around the country the impression that this is the 'correct' way for women to speak. Hence, this adherence to gendered norms in mass media culminates in their popularization.

The main motive for the current study was the incongruence between the growing acceptance of the concept of gender equality in Japan, particularly in the field of education (Yagi 2008), and the apparent lack of change in the way female students use Japanese. I suggest that perhaps I was not seeing changes in gendered language use as I was observing students mainly in the classroom, where a more formal register is generally used. It occurred to me that they might use different language with friends and family. I therefore opted to investigate how Japanese women use and view their language in the context of this shift towards greater gender equality.

## Exploring Shifts in Female Language Use

### *Methodology*

I began my exploration of this topic in 2013, by organizing two focus groups at a university, one composed of female students in a senior seminar and another composed of older female instructors involved in a university human rights research group focused on gender issues. I developed focus groups as I felt that I could get a better idea of actual language use if I could get small groups of Japanese women together in a setting in which they could feel comfortable, discuss issues close to themselves with people similar to themselves in terms of age, gender and occupation, and "respond to and build on the views expressed by others in the group" (Litosseliti 2003: 2).

As a springboard for the discussions, I composed a questionnaire asking for the participants' use of a range of linguistic features—both gender exclusive and neutral—as well as how appropriate they thought it was for women to use these expressions. After the participants filled in the questionnaire, I moderated a discussion about these expressions, bringing in research findings such as those of Miyazaki (2004, 2010) about junior high school girls' use of '*boku*' and '*ore*' to refer to themselves, and Matsumoto (2004) on the use of 'masculine' sentence-ending particles by middle-aged housewives to serve as transition elements and to stimulate deeper discussion (Litosseliti 2003). The discussions, which were audio recorded and transcribed, were conducted in Japanese in a relaxed atmosphere with a good deal of interaction and laughter.

The purpose of this first study was to contrast the findings of the group of younger women, who had all gone through the Japanese school system after the Japan Teachers' Union adopted a policy of gender equality (Yagi 2008), with those of the older women, who were avowed feminists but were raised and had worked in an era when Japan's gender norms were much stricter. The results of this study were presented at IGALA 8 (Noguchi 2014). That study found that the older women's attitudes towards females using "masculine" Japanese were more liberal, but it was the younger women who were actually employing some of the "men's" linguistic features, albeit only with family and close friends.

In the following years, further changes in female language use became evident both in the mass media and in student responses to questions in my lectures, so I decided to organize two more student focus groups in the fall of 2019. As with the 2013 student focus group, the participants in 2019 were enrolled in my senior seminar; the 12 females in the class were divided into two focus groups of six. They were asked to fill in the same questionnaire as was used in the 2013 study, and their discussions were audio recorded and transcribed.

For this paper, I have considered only the results of the student focus groups, the goal being to compare the results of the 2013 group with those of the two groups from 2019 to determine if there have been any changes.

## *Results*

One of the more interesting findings of this study was a growing rejection by young women of many of the 'typical' markers of feminine speech. While none of the students in either year felt that women "should absolutely never use" the 'feminine' first-person pronoun '*atashi*,' the proportion of students who 'absolutely never use' or "seldom use" it for themselves rose between 2013 and 2019. Although the proportion of participants in 2019 who said they "often use" *atashi* was still large (33%), a full 42% said they absolutely never use it for themselves and another 8% said they seldom use it, compared to 40% who said they seldom or never used it 2013.

The rejection of other elements of "*onna kotoba*" was even stronger. All of the students in both years indicated that they never or seldom use the ultra-feminine sentence endings "*desu mono*" or "*kashira*." Moreover, while the majority in both years said they never or seldom use the exclamation "*ara*" (ooh!), that percentage was higher in 2019 than in 2013. The rejection of "*maa*" (my!) was also greater in 2019 (83%) than in 2013 (67%).

Nonetheless, none of the participants in the focus groups in either year indicated that they use the 'masculine' first-person pronouns '*boku*' or '*ore*' to refer to themselves. However, attitudes towards other females using these first-person pronouns were more tolerant in 2019 than in 2013.

Similarly, attitudes towards female use of the 'masculine' second-person pronouns '*omae*' and '*kimi*' were less negative in 2019 than in 2013. One of the more interesting findings of this study was the difference between what the participants originally wrote on their questionnaires about their own use of these pronouns and what came out during the group discussions, particularly in 2013. On the questionnaires in 2013, only one of the students indicated that she used '*omae*,' while another answered that she used '*kimi*.' However, after these two participants confessed that they sometimes used these pronouns, all of the other participants ended up admitting that they also used '*omae*,' mainly with good friends of the same age.

The group discussions in 2019 followed a similar pattern, with some participants changing their answers in response to others saying that they or their friends use "*kimi*" and "*omae*." These results suggest that there is a growing acceptance of the use of these "masculine" pronouns by women.

A second area in which the shifts away from conventional female norms were seen was in attitudes towards and personal use of ‘masculine’ sentence-ending particles. In 2013, none of the participants indicated on the questionnaire that they used ‘*ze*’ or ‘*zo*,’ and all but one suggested that it was not very good for females to use them. In contrast, in 2019, three students said they sometimes use ‘*ze*’ and one wrote that she sometimes uses ‘*zo*.’ Moreover, over half of the participants indicated that it was sometimes all right for females to use ‘*ze*’ and ‘*zo*.’

These more liberal attitudes towards the use of these particles by women also came out in the group discussions in 2019, with several members in both groups admitting that they occasionally use these particles. Moreover, when I mentioned the Matsumoto (2004) study’s finding that some middle-aged housewives used ‘*ze*’ and ‘*zo*’ when talking among themselves, all of the participants in the two 2019 focus groups agreed that it sounded cool (*kakkoī*). These results suggest increasing acceptance of female use of these particles.

Another area in which there were indications that young women are making incursions into ‘male’ territory was in their dropping of the ‘beautifying’ honorifics known as ‘*bikago*.’ Large percentages of the students in both 2013 and 2019 wrote that they sometimes or often use all three of the “masculine” items on the questionnaire: the plain forms ‘*bento*’ (lunch box), ‘*kanē*’ (money) and ‘*hashi*’ (chopsticks).

More tolerant attitudes towards females using the ‘masculine’ kinship terms ‘*oyaji*’ (father), ‘*ofukuro*’ (mother) and ‘*aniki*’ (older brother) were also revealed in the questionnaire responses in both years. In terms of their own usage, however, ‘*oyaji*’ was the only one of these words that more than one student said she used. However, greater actual use was revealed in the group discussions. In 2013, four of the participants said they themselves would never use any of these terms, but that they had heard female friends use them. On the 2019 questionnaire, the majority of the students (four out of six in one group and five out of six in the other) said that they would never use any of these words. However, in the course of the group discussions, students reported use of these terms by themselves and friends in special circumstances. Thus, the group discussions suggested that taboos are slowly fading, especially concerning the use of ‘*oyaji*’ to refer to an older man who is not one’s father.

Even greater female incursions into ‘male’ language territory were evident in the questionnaire answers and group discussions about lexical items related to eating. Among the ‘masculine’ terms related to eating, ‘*umai*’ (delicious) stands out in that it seems to have become quite acceptable for females to use: on TV gourmet programs women are often seen saying ‘*umai*’ as they eat. This trend was confirmed by the questionnaire responses. In the 2019 focus groups, all 12 participants said they use it themselves and almost all said they see no problem in females using it; this is compared to much lower proportions of the students in the 2013 groups.

‘*Hara*’ (literally stomach, but most often used in the phrase ‘*Hara betta*’ meaning ‘I’m hungry’) also seemed to be used more and to be seen as more acceptable for females to use in 2019 than it was in 2013. In contrast, attitudes towards ‘*ku*’ (eat) and ‘*meshi*’ (food) remain about the same. In the 2013 discussion group, one student admitted that she used ‘*ku*’ at home, but said her mother reprimanded her for it. In the 2019 groups, several students said they used all three words with family and/or friends without problems. These results suggest that increasingly, the use of these ‘masculine’ terms is seen as acceptable when social distance is small.

The final area I explored was the use of swearing. As in Lakoff’s (1975) description of women’s language in English, Japanese women traditionally avoided using swear words. It should be noted, however, that swearing is much less common in Japan than it is in English-speaking countries, and characters in Japanese movies or television dramas use swear words far less often than characters in Hollywood movies.

In this study, I asked about the word *'kuso'* which is an expletive equivalent to 'shit' in meaning. The results for both the questionnaire and the group discussions were similar in 2013 and 2019. Several participants in both years described situations in which they might use this word, suggesting that young women today may use this expletive, but generally only when they are alone or with people they are close to.

## Conclusion

The results of both the questionnaires and the focus group discussions suggest that many of the features highlighted in descriptions of Japanese women's language are not used much or at all by young women today. However, it seems that many of the speech features traditionally regarded as 'masculine' are being adopted by young women today. Among the latter, usage of the second-person pronouns *'omae'* and *'kimi'* and 'masculine' lexical items tied to eating, as well as the dropping of honorific prefixes, are particularly pronounced. While none of the participants said that they used the 'masculine' first-person pronouns *'boku'* and *'ore'*, students in 2019 appeared to have less negative attitudes towards females who do use them than the participants in the 2013 focus group, suggesting a gradual relaxation of attitudes towards such 'transgressive' behavior.

While the data suggest shifts in attitudes towards and usage of the gender-exclusive elements of the Japanese language, the study's limitations should be noted. First, the number of participants was small, so the findings may not be generalizable. Moreover, all were college students, and all from the Kansai area, which has its own dialect. Some of them mentioned that they regard *'onna kotoba'* as part of 'standard Japanese,' which they see as different from the regional variety of Japanese that they speak. Thus, their usage may be quite different from that of young women in other regions of Japan. Finally, the findings are based on self-reported usage, which may be unreliable.

All the same, the study suggests that Japanese women are slowly changing the gendered nature of Japanese, using very few of the traditional elements of Japanese 'women's language' and slowly adopting a number of traditionally 'masculine' features which have been taboo for females to use. Although these trends are not evident in most public contexts, the language use and views reported by the participants suggest that there is an ongoing the shift in gendered Japanese usage.

## References

- Endo, Ori. *Onna no Kotoba no Bunkashi* [A cultural history of Japanese women's language]. Tokyo: Gakuyo shobo, 1997.
- Ethnologue. (2019). "Languages of the World." Accessed March 13, 2019.  
[https://www.ethnologue.com/16/ethno\\_docs/distribution/size/](https://www.ethnologue.com/16/ethno_docs/distribution/size/)
- Holmes, Janet. *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*, Third Edition. Essex, UK: Pearson/Longman, 2008.
- Ide, Sachiko. *Onna no Kotoba, Otoko no Kotoba* [Female Language and Male Language]. Tokyo: Nihon Keizai Tsushinsha, 1979.
- Lakoff, Robin. *Language and Woman's Place*. New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1975.
- Litosseliti, Lia. *Using Focus Groups in Research*. London and New York: Continuum, 2003.
- Matsumoto, Yoshiko. "Alternative femininity: Personae of middle-aged mothers." In *Japanese Language, Gender and Ideology: Cultural Models and Real People*, edited by Shigeeko Okamoto and Janet S. Shibamoto Smith, 240 - 55. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- McGloin, Naomi Hanaoka. "Sex differences and sentence-final particles." In *Aspects of Japanese Women's Language*, edited by Sachiko Ide and Naomi Hanaoka McGloin, 23 - 41. Tokyo: Kuroshio Publishers, 1991.

- Meyerhoff, Miriam. *Introducing Sociolinguistics*, Second Edition. London: Routledge, 2011.
- Miyazaki, Ayumi. "Japanese Junior High School Girls' and Boys' First-Person Pronoun Use and Their Social World. In *Japanese Language, Gender and Ideology: Cultural Models and Real People*, edited by Shigeo Okamoto and Janet S. Shibamoto Smith, 256 - 74. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Miyazaki, Ayumi. "Boku (Masculine "I") is a Girls' Informal Pronoun, Right?": Japanese Girls Crafting and Resignifying Gendered First-Person Pronouns in Their Social World. Presented at IGALA6, September 12, 2010, Tokyo, Japan.
- Nakamura, Momoko. "*Sei*" to *Nihongo: Kotoba ga Tsukuru Onna to Otoko* ["Gender" and Japanese: How language Makes Women and Men]. Tokyo: NHK Books, 2007.
- Nakamura, Momoko. *Onna Kotoba to Nihongo*. [Women's Language and Japanese]. Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 2012.
- Noguchi, Mary Goebel. Is Women's Vision of Japanese Shifting? Presented at IGALA8, June 7th, 2014, Vancouver, Canada.
- Okamoto, S. and Shibamoto Smith, J. S. (Eds.). *Japanese Language, Gender and Ideology: Cultural Models and Real People*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Shibamoto, Janet. S. *Japanese Women's Language*. New York: Academic Press (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers), 1985.
- Trudgill, Peter. *Sociolinguistics: An Introduction to Language and Society*. London: Penguin, 1983.
- Yagi, Asuka. (2008). "*Jendaa Furii Kyoiku*" no Saikento: *Bakurasshu wo Ukete* [A Fresh Look at "Gender-Free Education"—After the Backlash]. PhD. Dissertation. Hirosaki University Graduate School of Education, 2008. Retrieved on January 25, 2020 from the Hirosaki Daigaku Gakujutsu Jouhou Repository at [hirosaki.repo.nii.ac.jp](http://hirosaki.repo.nii.ac.jp)
- Yukawa, Sumiyuki. and Saito, Masami. Cultural Ideologies in Japanese Language and Gender Studies: A Theoretical Review. In *Japanese Language, Gender and Ideology: Cultural Models and Real People*, edited by Shigeo Okamoto and Janet S. Shibamoto Smith, 23 - 37. Oxford: Oxford University Press.