

Language of Inferior and Luxury
—A Sociolinguistic Interpretation of
Japanese Women's Language—(I)

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Introduction

Women talk all the time, but they talk about nothing. They speak politely and in a high tone of voice. These are some of the generally believed notions about women's speech in Japan.

Since language is a sensitive index of the status and values of its speakers, women's language in Japanese reflects the values and position in society. Women's language differs from men's as much as women's lives differ from men's.

We shall discuss various features of women's language in the context of contemporary Japanese society. We shall concern ourselves with middle and upper middle class urban groups, specifically Tokyo speakers of the Yamanote dialect, considered to be standard Japanese. This study is based on the author's own knowledge and perceptions of Japanese and on observation of other people's speech. Some statistical data in analyzing women's language is also employed.

There are two perspectives on women which are relevant to the analysis of women's language. Some people say that women are oppressed, that they are pushed into a marginal position and are given inferior status in society. Others would say that women are the "blessed" sex, free from mundane working life and concerned only with what is charming, endearing and aesthetic. Women have been considered to be keepers of moral and traditional culture, the luxurious aspect of life, and their power is centered in the home. From the former perspective, women's language reflects negative aspects of the lives of Japanese

women; from the latter, it reflects positive aspects. We shall consider women's language from both perspectives.

Historical Sketch

Before we discuss contemporary women's language, we should briefly review its historical background.

The lack of sources on spoken language in the early period of history makes it impossible to date the beginning of women's language in Japanese. It is generally believed, however, that the distinction between men's and women's language began in the Heian Period (the 9th through the 12th centuries).¹ In *Makura no Sōshi* written by the lady essayist Seishōnagon, a contemporary of Lady Murasaki of the *Tale of Genji*, there is a sentence discussing differences in men's and women's language. The collections of essays written in the early 11th century, is the first written indication of women's language in Japanese.

The *Manyōshū*, a collection of poems written by people of all classes in the Nara Period (8th century), contains gender indicative second person pronouns. However, it is generally believed that the social status of Japanese women was relatively high at that time compared with later periods, thus there was little difference between men's and women's language.²

The life of the court ladies in the Heian Period produced a women's language reflecting their very refined court lives. It became important for a woman of noble class to be weak and to lack a power base. Lady Murasaki wrote that women should talk little and speak very quietly. When they did talk, their mouths had to be hidden by their hands covered by the sleeves of their kimonos.

The trend toward specialized women's language and speaking behavior grew stronger as the society became more feudalistic. Five hundred

¹ Saburo Mashimo, *Fijingo no Kenkyū* (*A Study of Women's Language*). (Tokyo: Tokyodō Shuppan, 1969), p. 8.

² Kikuo Nomoto, "Onna no Kotoba," ("Women's Language") in *Nibon-jin Kenkyū* No. 3 *Onna ga Kangaeteiru-koto* (*Study of Japanese No. 3 What women are thinking*). (Tokyo: Shiseido, 1975), p. 149.

years later, in the Muromachi Period (the 14th through the 16th century), when feudalistic society pushed women's place further away from men, we find the beginning of *nyōbō-kotoba* (women's language). This was the language of the court ladies. *Nyōbō-kotoba* is often referred to as one of the major women's languages in Japanese history. (There are two other types of women's languages: one is called *nimonseki-go*, which is the language used by nuns, and the other is *yūri-go* or *yūjogo*, which is the language of geisha). The main feature of *nyōbō-kotoba* is its distinctive vocabulary. Typical usages were *kukon* for *sake* (Japanese wine), *oyu* for *yu* (hot water), *obiya* for *mizu* (water), *oshiru* for *shiru* (soup). It is interesting to find that some of these *nyōbō-kotoba* usages have come to be used in present-day Japanese, especially by women, because *nyōbō-kotoba* carries the polite and euphemistic connotation favored in women's speech. *Nyōbō-kotoba* was the language of upper class women.

Social classes became fixed in the Edo Period (the 17th through the 19th centuries). People were forced to conform to the expectations of their own classes and behave according to their appointed roles. Women were expected to talk and behave more politely than men. *Onnadaigaku*, etiquette books written by learned men, prescribed women's behavior. By means of such lessons in "etiquette" men could manipulate social norms to keep women in their places and accepting of their disadvantaged status. Among many prescriptions there are such words as "women's language should be softened by the honorific prefix *o* and suffix *moji* to all words," or "if a woman speaks in men's language, it sounds horrible and hard on the ears."³

The Meiji Restoration (1868) opened Japan's door to western culture. However, it did not elevate women's status as much as it did the status of men of all classes. Although the feudal system was abolished, women were still kept in their roles of serving men. General Nogi, who was the hero in the Japanese Russian War, wrote his version of the etiquette book which, among others, influenced middle and upper-class women's education until the end of the World War II. A woman's

³ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

entire upbringing was focussed on total service and obedience to men, and all "etiquette" (including manners in bed) centered on this. It was important, therefore, for a woman to be as different from a man in her language as in her behavior. Women were humble themselves by using more honorifics than men because women always had lower status. Even in marriage a wife of upper class or upper middle class often used honorifics in talking to her husband but not vice versa.

The end of the World War II brought Japan democracy and the law granting women equal rights with men. It is true that women's status in society changed enormously. Nevertheless the traditional role of women is still alive as a norm. To be a woman is still to be a wife and a mother and to have the home as one's locus of activity. Women educated in the prewar period constitute a significant part of the adult population in present-day Japanese society. Many of them are proud of their womanhood and continue to educate their daughters at home consciously or uncounciously according to their traditonal values. Thus, present-day Japanese, reflecting social values, continues to contain many particular women's features.

It is worth noting that Japanese immigrants in Hawaii and Brazil (and probably in North America, too) and their descendents have no women's language.⁴ Men and women speak in the same Japanese. The lack of such differentiation may derive from the influence of the society in which they live or from the fact that the immigrants usually come from the working classes in which there is less language distinction. It may imply that women's language in Japanese is not an inherent part of the language, but that historically and socially determined attitudes make women's language distinct from men's.

Personal Pronouns

The first thing we notice as a feature of sex distinction in Japanese is that we have different sets of personal pronouns.

The use of personal pronouns in Japanese is not so simple as the

⁴ Ibid., p. 151.

English "I" and "you" for the self-reference and the addressee reference. There are quite a few pronouns in Japanese, but the use of these pronouns is avoided as much as possible. The subjects are often dropped from sentences and we must assume from the context and the level of formality who or what the subjects are. When pronouns are used, the choice from the variety of pronoun forms is determined according to the sex of the speaker and the addressee and the formality of the situation and the topic.

The use of first person pronouns (how we refer to ourselves) is shown in the diagram 1.

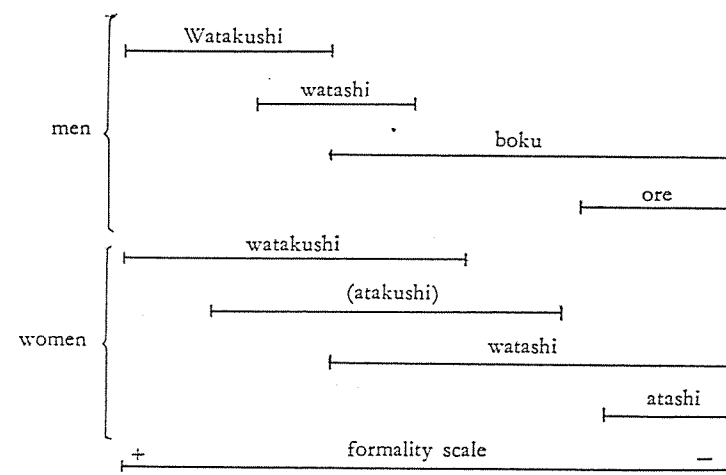


Diagram 1. First Person Pronouns (singular)

There are in fact more such as *washi*, *sessha*, *watasha*, *atai* and others which are not included here. Only major forms relevant to the scope of this study are included in the diagram.

Men have four varieties of "I", which are distributed along the formal and informal situational scale according to the range of their use. The form on the left, *watakushi*, is more formal than *watashi*, which is more formal than *boku* and much more than the least formal form, *ore*. *Watakushi* is a form of a pronoun while *boku* is an informal form. This is similar to the difference between "to purchase" (a formal form) and "to buy" (an informal form). It is appropriate to use formal forms

in formal situations and to use informal forms in informal situations.

Women have four varieties of "I". The most formal form is, like men's, *watakushi*. If we look at the ranges of their use and compare women's with men's, we see that women use *watakushi* in a wider range of situations than men. As for *watashi*, men use it in much more formal situations than women. This means that there could be a situation where a man uses *watashi* while a woman uses more formal *watakushi*, or where a man uses *watashi* or *boku* while a woman uses the more formal *watakushi* or *watashi*. Women use *watashi* most often in semi-formal or informal situations where men would use *boku*. *Atakushi* is often used by women of upper social class in place of *watakushi* or *watashi*. *Atashi* which is used by most little girls, is used by some women but it is a less formal form than *watashi*.

In practice these forms are chosen according to the following three factors which constitute the situational context. One is the formality of the setting such as speech in public, at home, or on the streets. Another is the relative status of the speaker vis-a-vis the addressee. The last one is the familiarity of the relationship of the speaker and the addressee. If the situational context is public speech, speaking to a higher status person or speaking to an unfamiliar person, one has to use the formal pronouns. To choose a first person pronoun is to identify oneself appropriately to the situation.

Within the same degree of formal setting two people may choose different pronouns to refer to themselves depending upon their relative status. Suppose at a panel discussion two men use *watakushi* and one man uses *boku*. The man who uses *boku* is obviously superior to the other two, because he can identify himself less formally and still be appropriate in the formal panel discussion. His informality is tolerated, whereas if inferiors were to use *boku*, they would be considered to be impolite, and would be behaving inappropriately to the situation. In this way the choice of the first person pronouns, the self identification, reveals the psychological perception of the relative status of the speakers involved.

If we observe the use of pronouns by men and women in real speech,

there are cases when *watashi* or *boku* is used by men whereas *watakushi* or *watashi* is used by women. Women are expected to use the formal form *watakushi* in a wider range of situations in order to be more formal. Even if there is no difference in the social status among the people involved in a conversation, it is considered appropriate for women to humble themselves and to try to use slightly more formal speech. If one uses a more formal form in speech, it is taken as an attempt to show respect to the other people involved in the conversation.

Appropriate speech is analogous to appropriate clothing. In wedding receptions or at funerals if one wants to pay respect to the people involved, one tries to wear as formal clothes as possible. By showing formality in an outfit one can show the degree of respect paid to the event. The more formal one's clothes are, more polite his or her attitude is assumed to be. The formality of speech is relevant to politeness in the same way.

It can be noted that the informal forms used by women are simply variants of *watakushi*. *Atakushi* is formed by deleting *w* from *watakushi*. *Watashi* is formed by deleting *ku* from *watakushi* and in turn *atashi* is formed by deleting *w* from *watashi*. That is to say that women's "I" words are reduced forms from the most formal form of "I" that is *watakushi*, while men's informal forms are separately derived words.

The choice of the first person pronoun indicates that women use more formal forms, while men use such variants as *boku* and *ore* which sound not only informal but also relaxed. This could be interpreted in the following two ways. One we have already noted; that is, that women should identify themselves in a more formal way than men because they are supposed to be lower in status. The other interpretation is that the use of more formal pronouns is a sign of the speaker's dignity and elegance. We should note the saying *onna no kuse ni* (meaning in spite of her being a woman) is often used to point out impolite behavior in women. There is a counterpart saying *otoko no kuse ni* (meaning in spite of his being a man) which is never used to criticize men's impoliteness, but rather to criticize timidity or weakness. Therefore, if a woman chooses any inappropriate pronouns and she uses a less formal variant

than she is expected to use, she is very likely to be blamed as a rude speaker "in spite of her being a woman." Therefore, it is more important for a woman to be careful with the forms and the situational context. This leads her to be more conscious about *how* she says something rather than *what* she says. The consequences are that men are permitted more varied, wittier and relaxed speech than women.

Let us now turn to the second person pronoun. Pronouns are not the only way to refer to the second persons. *Sensei* (teacher) is used to refer to teachers, professors, doctors, congressmen, and other respected persons, as the second person referent. Titles alone like *shacho* (company president) are often used. One can refer to one's superior by titles alone, but not vice versa. The first and last names followed by suffixes meaning endearment, *-sama*, *-san*, or *-chan*, as in *Yōko-sama*, *Yōko-san*, *Yōko-chan*, are also widely used to refer to the second person.

Second person pronouns are used only when one is talking to a person of the same status or to one's inferior. It is impolite to use pronouns to refer to a higher status person. The distribution of forms is shown in the diagram.

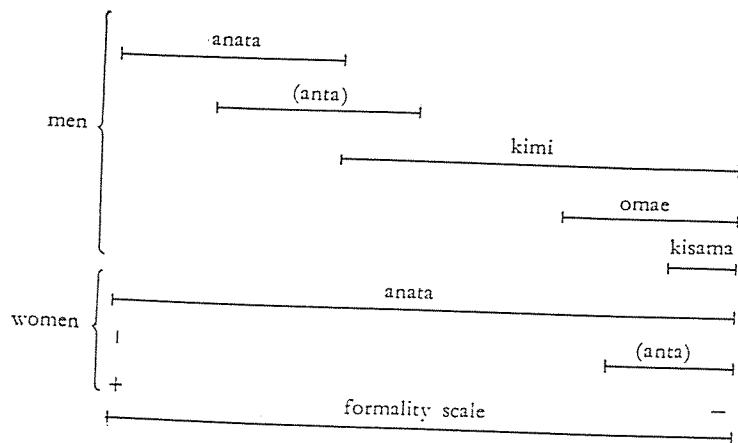


Diagram 2. Second Person Pronouns (singular)

Anata is the most formal second person pronoun men use in a formal setting or in reference to an unfamiliar person. (In some local dialects *anta* is often used by men). The most frequently used one is *kimi*.

When a man refers to the second person as *kimi*, the speaker must be on the same social level as the addressee or superior to the addressee. *Omae* is very informal and is used with a familiar person. *Kisama* is rather derogatory and is used when one is fighting with or looking down upon the addressee.

Women use *anata*, the most formal form, in all levels of formality of situation. There is no counterpart of *kimi* for women. The only alternative form *anta*, which sounds slightly derogatory and is not part of educated people's vocabulary, is a derived form of *anata* made by deleting *a* from the second syllable. Thus, the diagram shows how women use a more formal form because they are expected to be more polite, while for men the informal *ore* or derogatory *kisama* are tolerated when they choose to be boastful or to show anger toward the addressee.

Between husbands and wives it is most common to use *omae* (or *kimi*) and *anata*. Husbands use *omae* (or *kimi*) with their wives and wives use *anata* with their husbands. One could say that, since *anata* is more formal than *omae* (or *kimi*), women are politer than men, reflecting women's politer behavior toward men. It is expected for them to be so because women are supposed to be inferior in status. *Anata* is most commonly used as an address form by women to their husbands. Husbands, however, do not use *omae* (or *kimi*) for address but use their wives' first names. Calling by a first name without honorific titles (suffixes) like *-san* or *-chan* (which connotes endearment) is called *yobisute*. *Yobisute* can be done only by a superior person to an inferior person, or in some strong in-group situation *yobisute* name calling is done among close friends. The fact that a husband calls his wife by *yobisute* indicates that a husband is regarded as superior to his wife.

Acquisition of Personal Pronouns

How do people learn the different uses of personal pronouns? Do boys and girls learn them separately from the time they pick up pronouns? Or, do they learn them at first mixing boy's and girl's forms and then relearning them separately in the process of socialization?

Most children begin referring to themselves or the addressees by the

first names followed by *-chan*, an equivalent of honorific title but connoting endearment, such as *Ken-chan* and *Yōko-chan*. Little boys and girls both use names plus *-chan* as the equivalents of "I(me)" and "you". Some boys, however, begin using *boku* as a self referent from the beginning. It is because mothers who are close to their sons often use *boku* instead of you or boys' names in referring to them as second persons. When a mother says, for example, "*Ken-chan, boku mo iku?*" (Ken, are you coming along?), *boku* which is a word for "I" is used for "you". Mother's psychological identity with her son might have influenced this use of *boku*. It is also observed that some adults refer little boys *boku* as second persons instead of their names whether their names are known or not. *Boku*, a first person pronoun, does have boyhood connotation, which is a favorable one in the male chauvanistic society. *Boku* is so often used that the use of it like a proper noun, *Boku-chan*, is sometimes used. There is no parallel use for girls, since *watashi*, which could be the counterpart for *boku*, is never used as early as *boku* is. While most boys are referring themselves by *boku* around three year old, most girls are referring to themselves by their name plus suffix *-chan* as in *Yōko-chan*.

By the time they begin kindergarten at around four year old, girls know that they should use *watashi* (or *atashi*) to refer to themselves and *anata* to refer to the addressees. They usually keep using name plus *-chan* in place of "I(me)" and "you" and they use *watashi* (or *atashi*) and *anata* in formal occasions. Going to kindergarten means, for some girls, facing formal occasions. When they speak up in public or talk to teachers, they know they should use *watashi* (or *atashi*) to refer to themselves:

In kindergarten boys acquire other varieties of pronouns. Boys learn the use of *ore* besides *boku* for "I", and *omae* for "you". Both are used when boys want to show power over others or show boys' group solidarity. There is no counterpart to this for girls. The only variant girls may pick up in kindergarten is *watakushi* which is the most formal form of "I". Girls may use this when they are conscious of a need for formality. *Kimi* may be employed by boys a little later as a substitute

for name plus *-chan* for "you". *Kimi* has a slightly more formal feeling.

Thus, in summery, we see that the basic words for "I(me)" and "you" in early childhood are *boku* (I) and name plus *-chan* (you) used by boys, and name plus *-chan* (I) and plus *-chan* (you) used by girls. Boys have variants *ore* and *omae* which show power and group solidarity, while girls have variants *watashi* (*watakushi*, *atashi*) and *anata* for formality. Thus the motives for the choice of personal pronouns are quite different for boys and girls from a very early age. When a boy says *ore* we know that he wants to show off his masculinity; his feeling is "I am a boy. I am strong". When a girl of four year old says *watashi*, we know she wants to show off her little ladyhood: her feeling is "I am a little lady. I know a girl should say this in formal occasions like this".

Japanese boys can express their power and masculinity by the use of personal pronouns from early childhood. As early as they have sex consciousness at around four year old they associate the choice of personal pronouns with sex consciousness.⁵

⁵ Sachiko Ide, "Sex and Personal Referents of Japanese Children," *Proceedings of the Symposium on Japanese Sociolinguistics*, The Summer Institute of the Linguistic Society of America 1977 (Trinity University Press, 1978).