

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

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Particles

Sentence-final particles express the feeling or emotion of the speaker. By putting particles at the end of the sentences one can give tone and feeling to the utterances. They are found only in informal speech. When one is talking to a person of higher status one does not use these particles because the resulting informal speech would be regarded as impolite by the superior.

Some particles are exclusively used by men, some by women and others are used by both sexes.

Zo and *ze* are exclusively used by men. They are used to get the attention of the hearer. They sound very strong and somewhat derogatory. *Ze* is a more derogatory form of *zo*. Here are some examples:

Omoshiroi *zo*. Hey, it's interesting. (+M, -F), (-For)
(*Omoshiroi* means interesting. Subject and verb
are deleted in this Japanese utterance.)

Omoshiroi *ze*. Shit, it's interesting. (+M, -F), (-For)

After each Japanese utterance an English equivalent follows and a contextual situation is described. (+M, -F) means that it is used exclusively by men, (+M, -F) means that it is used exclusively by women, (+M, +F) means that it is used by both sexes; and (+For) is used for formal situations only, (-For) for informal only and (\pm For) for both situations. A formal situation occurs when it involves one of the three following factors: formal setting, talking to superiors, and talking to unfamiliar persons.

Yo is another particle used to draw attention.

Omoshiro*yo*. Look, it's interesting. (+M, -F), (-For)

This *yo*, used without preceding *desu*, is only used by men. (*Yo* is used after nouns with ellipted predicate, too. In that case *yo* is used by both sexes.) It does not carry a derogatory connotation, as do *zo* and *ze*, and is therefore widely used.

When women want to draw attention, they use *yo* together with *wa*. The function of the particle *wa* with rising intonation is to soften a statement. It is exclusively used by women. By putting *wa* before *yo* women can be gently emphatic.

Omoshiro*wa-yo*. See, it's interesting. (-M, +F), (-For)

Thus, when a woman tries to call attention she has to use the non-derogatory particle *yo* with the softening particle *wa*, while a man can choose either *yo*, *zo* or *ze*. This shows that men are allowed to express themselves more strongly.

In sum, *zo*, *ze*, and *yo* are used mainly by men, and *wa* and *wayo*, are used mainly by women. *Wa* and *wayo* are the signals for women's speech. Women's particles are for softening and men's are for unequivocal, strong or derogatory utterances.

An American linguist defined a tag-question in English as a feature of women's language. She says "such features are probably part of the general fact that women's speech sounds much more polite than men's. One aspect of politeness is leaving a decision open, not imposing your mind, or views, or claims, on anyone else."¹ The use of a sentence-final particles *wa* or *wayo* by women seems to give the same effect in Japanese speech. Since *wa* and *wayo* soften statements, an utterance with either *wa* or *wayo* sounds less imposing, and thus more polite.

Copula

Desu and *da* are copulas which function like "be". By putting them

¹ Robin Lakoff, "Language and Women's Place," *Language in Society*, 2: 45-80, (1973), p. 56.

at the end of sentences, a speaker can be more definite. *Desu* is formal and *da* is informal. The former can be used by both sexes, but the latter is normally used by men.

Kore wa hon *desu*. This is a book. (+M, +F), (+For)

Kore wa hon *da*. This is a book. (+M, -F), (-For)

In an informal situation a woman add the softening particle *wa* after *da*.

Kore wa hon *da-wa*. This is a book. (-M, +F), (-For)

Thus, the single use of *da* is avoided by women. Women are supposed to avoid strong and decisive statements. Not only the tone of voice but also the choice of expression shows the "softness" of women's speech. If a woman wants to speak decisively and informally, she has to use *da*, and then it is regarded as unwoman-like speech. It is assumed, therefore, that a woman does not behave informally and decisively. The effect of softness of female speech is that a woman cannot engage in a serious discussion in an informal mode. This is because a woman's social role demands that she provide a pleasant atmosphere for others by speaking gently and unassertively.

Imperative Sentences

Other disparities found between men's and women's speech are in the imperative forms.

In addition to the auxiliary *nasai* (used by both sexes) and the particle *ro* (used only by men), the particle *yo* is sometimes used for the imperative. The latter, however, is used mainly in written forms. When used in speaking, it is often preceded by the particle *ro*, which is used only by men. *Nasai* is a plain imperative, and *ro* is a straightforward and strong imperative used only informally by a superior person in talking to his inferior.

Tabete *nasai*. Eat. (+M, +F), (\pm For)

Tabete *ro*. Eat. (+M, -F), (-For)

Tabete *ro-yo*. Eat. (+M, -F), (-For)

Again, the informal form is not to be used by women. There is no counterpart of *ro* for women's speech. Imperative forms, whether formal or informal, are only possible when talking to people of equal or inferior status.

More formal and polite imperatives, which are actually request forms, are made by adding the subject-exalting verb *kudasaru*. *Kudasaru* means to give, but when the imperative form of it, *kudasai*, is used as a verbal compound, it adds the meaning of polite request to the preceding verb.

Tabete *kudasai*. Would you please eat? (+M, +F), (+For)

This polite form is used by both sexes. Again the formal form is allowed for both sexes, but some of the informal forms as stated above are not allowed for women.

What do women do in an informal situation to substitute for the imperative *ro* or *ro-yo*? They often use elliptical expressions without *kudasai*. The effect of ellipsis is that the sentence is not complete and it is thus not decisive.

Tabete. Please eat. (+M, +F), (-For)

We find "Tabete." a soft weak request, showing the speaker's lack of confidence. Just as in the case of the copula, a woman is expected to be soft and uncertain about herself.

There are other variants to show the imperative, such as adding *ttara* or *mii* instead of *kudasai*, but these are not discussed here.

Honorifics

Honorifics are the forms used when one wants to be polite. The more formal the setting, the more polite the honorifics. The higher the status of the addressee, the more honorifics used. To an unfamiliar person one usually uses honorifics.

Women use more honorifics than men. This means women are politer than men. One explanation for women's politeness is that their status is lower than that of men. From the opposite point of view, it can be said that a woman's politeness and command of honorifics demon-

strate her good breeding and elegance and are regarded as an asset to her. Beautiful language and sensitivity to the addressee and to the situation are considered virtues in women. But, on the other hand, because women pay more attention to honorifics, the *forms* of language, they are likely to pay less attention to its content. Whether we regard the use of honorifics from a "negative" (sexist) or "positive" (elegant) perspective, their use nevertheless is an important reflection of a woman's status in her own eyes and the eyes of society.

The honorific prefix *o-* or *go-* is placed before nouns, adjectives, and adverbs to pay respect or to beautify the expression. Both men and women use it but women use it far more frequently than men.

sensei no <i>go-hon</i>	teacher's book	(? M, +F), (+For), (+Hono.)
sensei no hon	teacher's book	{(+M, -F), (+For), (-Hono.)
		{(+M, +F), (-For), (-Hono.)

It seems appropriate for a woman to use *go-hon* because *sensei* (teacher) is supposed to hold a superior status and to use the honorific prefix before teacher's book is to indicate that the speaker is paying respect to the owner of the referent, the book, as well as to beautify the expression. However, when men use honorifics in the same situation, they are considered either too polite or too effeminate. A man can use such honorifics only when he has to exalt the addressee for some special reason.

Now, let us examine a pair of sentences with honorifics.

O-shokuji-o isshoni <i>shi-mashō</i> .	Shall we have lunch together?
	(? M, +F), (+For), (+Hono.)
Shokuji-o isshoni <i>shi-yō</i> .	Let's eat together.
	(+M, -F), (-For), (-Hono.)

The verb phrases under consideration here are *shi-mashō* for the polite formal form and *shi-yō* for the informal form.

The first one is typical of speech among women as well as of women talking to men. In a similar situation men would use the second one among men. However, men would probably use the first one if they were asking women very politely so that their offer would be accepted.

(When a person asks somebody, rather than suggests to somebody, to do something, a polite way to do it is to humble oneself, which can be done by using more formal linguistic forms than one normally does.)

Adding *o-* to verbs followed by *naru* has the effect of exalting the addressee's actions. It is put before verbs indicating the second or the third person's action but never before verbs for one's own action.

Sensei wa *go-hon o o-yomi ni naru*. The teacher reads books.
(? M, +F), (+For), (+Hono.)

Sensei wa hon o *yomu*. The teacher reads books.
(+M, -F), (-For), (-Hono.)

O-yomi ni naru is an honorific form for *yomu*, meaning to read. The first sentence is used more frequently by women. In this sentence there is the underlying implication that the speaker has a polite and respectful feeling towards *sensei*, the subject of the sentence. The second sentence without honorifics is a plain and objective statement. If an educated woman used the second sentence in front of *sensei*, she would be condemned for being rude or insensitive.

The prefix *o-* is put before adjectives and adverbs, too.

Sensei wa *o-hayai* desu ne. Teacher, you are early, aren't you?
(+M, +F), (+For), (+Hono.)

Sensei wa hayai n da ne. Teacher, you are early, aren't you?
(+M, -F), (-For), (-Hono.)

The first sentence with the honorific *o-* before the adjective *hayai*, sounds polite; the one without the honorific is inappropriate when used by a woman.

Though there are no honorifics exclusively used by either sex, there is a great deal of difference in the frequency of their use. That is, the norm for women's speech is that greater politeness must be indicated through the more frequent use of honorifics.

The proper use of honorifics is the most difficult part of the Japanese language even for native speakers. Since it is so embedded in specific situations, people must learn it in everyday life. People in the middle and upper middle classes seem to be more fluent in the use of honorifics,

as they have more formal occasions when they have to use honorifics. Because the most elaborate use of honorifics is found in the women of the upper middle class, middle class women with desire for upward social mobility tend to use, or sometimes overuse them frequently. They tend to show off their sophistication and their high breeding by the use of honorifics. Those who exaggerate the use of honorifics are always women. Thus, the use of honorifics has two aspects; one is to be polite and the other is to show in language elegance, indicative of high breeding.

Chinese Words

The Japanese writing system is made up of two sets of Japanese syllabaries (alphabets called *hiragana* and *katakana*) and the Chinese characters. The Chinese characters are mostly used to express words of Chinese origin which signify concept. Each Chinese character had its own concept and meaning. As they are used in Japanese, if two or more Chinese characters are compounded, they make a word which usually expresses an abstract philosophical concept. The Japanese language borrowed much of Chinese vocabulary together with the Chinese characters in the early period of its history. Fifteen hundred years ago, Chinese was the essential language for a learned Japanese to study, just as Latin used to be for a learned Englishman.

One of the features of women's language is that it uses fewer Chinese words. Seishōnagon, wrote that Chinese words do not sound well in women's mouths. This feeling seems to exist still.

Two scholars have conducted research in which they compare the frequencies of the use of Chinese words in men's and women's speech.² Both show that woman use fewer Chinese words. Men in their 30's use Chinese words most frequently, followed by men in their 40's and then men in their 50's. These three groups of people include the people

² Nomoto, "Onna no kotoba" *Nihonjin Kenkyū* No. 3, (Tokyo: Shiseido, 1975). pp. 147-48. One is done by Mr. Nomoto based on the data of speech behavior taken at Uyeno City in 1947 and Okazaki City in 1948. Another is done by Mr. Shin-ichi Tsuchiya based on recorded conversation transcribed in *Gengoseikatsu* No. 169.

who are most active in society. Next come men in their 20's followed by women in their 20's. The use of Chinese words is found less in relaxed situations. Therefore, the more Chinese words one uses, the more serious and important one's topic is supposed to be.

The Chinese words conveying large concepts sound hard and important. Women tend to use fewer Chinese words and make their speech sound softer and less important. With the Chinese words we can express concepts briefly. It is true women speak longer, but they convey less compared with men using the same amount of utterances. It is said that women are not good at participating in serious discussions. If they write articles in women's style, they are likely to be less academic because of their scanty Chinese words. If a woman wants to maintain femininity in her speech and still write good academic articles, she has to manage to use two different levels of language. In other words, it is more difficult for a woman to play a serious role in society than it is for a man. Thus, the lack of Chinese words in women's speech reflects the reality of woman's marginal and trivial place in society.

Expletives, Modifiers, and Conjunctions

Women speak emotionally, but more softly than men. Just as softer expletives like "oh, dear" are preferred by women in English, Japanese women also use softer expletives.

Expletives used exclusively by women such as "*arab* (oh, dear)", "*maah*, (oh, my)" and "*uwā* (oh)", convey a soft, elegant emotional expression of surprise or delight. Men's counterparts, such as "*ossu* (hey)", "*yoob* (hey)" and "*hyee* (damn it)", are very often derogatory. As in their use of pronouns and particles, men, whose status is high, can use more derogatory words which are never allowed to women.

Women use more modifiers. A study analyzing compositions of school boys and girls from the fourth through twelfth grades show that girls use more modifiers than boys.³ Women like to emphasize what

³ Ibid., pp. 147-48.

they are saying by adverbs of degree. Such adjectives as *sutekina* (lovely, nice, neat) or *osoroshii* (frightful), and degree adverbs such as *tottemo* (awfully) or *sugoku* (very much) are typical signals of women's speech. Thus, in sentences of the same length by men and women, we find women use more modifiers, and consequently fewer nouns and verbs. That is, with the same length of speech men have more to say in content than women.

The study of students' compositions found that boys used conjunctions such as *soshite* (and) and *dakara* (and therefore) more frequently than girls, and that girls used more conjunctions like *demo* (but) more frequently than boys. Girls are uncertain about what they are saying and tend to use the conjunction meaning "but" in order to make their opinions adjusted to the addressees and thus acceptable to them. Women who are articulate and assertive are not preferred by many men. Women are preferred who are uncertain about their philosophy, ready to be molded to any way of thought, so as to be ready to agree with whom they are speaking. Women's choice of expletives, adjectives, adverbs and conjunctions are, thus, a reflection of women's social role.

Vocabulary Repertory

Women's vocabulary repertory is rich in the fields where women's interests lie. The most active are in the areas of cooking, sewing, cosmetics, dress fashion, and child care. For example, elderly Japanese women interested in *kimono*, a traditional costume, know the color terms used to dye *kimono* such as *moegi-iro* (young green). Younger women tend to be more subtle in the use of loanwords from French and English such as *beji* (beige) or *neibi burū* (navy blue) which are used for western clothes. Elderly Japanese women usually carry about a hundred different vocabulary items dealing with the different types of textiles and the parts of *kimono*, while men would recognize only a few of them.

Speech formulas in greetings are observed more strictly by women. There are quite a few speech formulas in Japanese, and they constitute integral parts of human relationships. For example, when a guest comes in the house, he should say *ojama shimasu* (I am going to bother you) and

when he leaves, he should say *ojama shima shita* (I bothered you). When one gives a gift, he says *tsumaranai mono desu ga* (This is a very trivial thing, but . . .) whether the speaker thinks it so or not. When the recipient of the gift sees the giver a few days later he should say *kono aida wa kekkona mono o arigatō gozai mashita* (Thank you for the nice gift of the other day). A man's failure to use speech formulas properly is generally be tolerated, while a woman's failure could mean social death. Mothers regularly teach *daughters* speech formulas as part of a proper young lady's upbringing.

Asobase-Kotoba (Play Language)

Asobase-kotoba, a special kind of elaborately polite language, is used by women who wish to stress their femininity. It is a dialect used by upper middle and upper class women, though it is being used less and less these days, as social stratification becomes less distinct.

Asobase-kotoba is literally translated as "play language". *Asobu* means "to play" as opposed to "to work", and *asobase* is put after the polite and honorific forms of verbs which refer to the action of the second or third person. *Asobase* cannot be put in a sentence with a first person subject, because the use *asobase* is interpreted as the expression of esteem. To give some example;

1. Sensei ga *kuru*. The teacher comes. (+M, ?F), (-For)
Kuru is a plain form of "to come".
2. Sensei ga *oide-ni-naru*.
The teacher comes. (+M, +F), (+For)
Oide is a polite form of "to come", *ni* is a particle and *naru* is "to become, present"
3. Sensei ga *oide-asobasu*.
The teacher comes. (-M, +F), (+For)
(+*Asobase* dial.)

3 which is *asobase* dialect is as polite as 2. But 3 sounds softer and more elegant probably because of the original meaning of *asobasu* "to play" which is put at the end of the sentence. (One may wonder why the word *asobu*, "to play" have become an expression of esteem. It

may be assumed that traditionally "to play" had the connotation of the culture of leisure class which is enjoyable. To add "to play" for the second or the third person's behavior means that a speaker enhances the status of the person talked about by the connotation of the upper class culture.) Those women who still use this class dialect usually have control of their houses, free access to the money and free time to enjoy the aesthetic aspect of life.

Women's features in Japanese have been discussed as representing the view of women as weak, trivial and marginal (although graceful and elegant) as well as having lower status than men. However, from a different perspective, many Japanese interpret the use of these features positively. From the point of view of professional power and control of resources, the characterization of women as weak but elegant represents their devaluation. On the other hand, some take the feminine characteristics as a starting point rather than masculine ones, and define the world from that point of view. Thus the woman who does not have to involve herself in the mundane aspects of life, and can appreciate art, music, literature, nature, or love of people represents the highest cultural fulfillment. This might be supported by the fact that the elaboration of women's language abounds in the speech of the upper middle or upper class Japanese women who seem to enjoy the status of being women. One of the well-known secrets of Japanese women's positive attitude towards being women is that Japanese husbands often turn over their salary to their wives for their management. This is a the custom in almost all salaried families, regardless of the salary's amount. It is women's proud job to determine the household budget. And thus her apparent removal from the mundane world actually involves much power and responsibility. While they serve men completely, taking lower status in language as well as in behavior, they also control them completely, at least within their own domain, the house. These women do not seek the same fields of interest and roles in society as men. Instead, they enjoy activities as amateurs, not as professionals, and their "women's dialect" sustains the difference and gives them a quality of dignity

quite different from the dignity of men.

This should be explained further in the context of Japanese society. In Japan people identify themselves by their position or role in the groups they belong to rather than as individuals. For example, a woman, if married, identifies herself as a wife and a mother, rather than individual as a human being. A man would recognize himself as a husband and a father in the domain of home and as a person of a certain job, such as a taxi driver or professor in the domain of work. It is a characteristic of Japanese that they recognize group identity more strongly than individual identity. Role in the group are compartmentalized and individuals seem to feel secure and happy in their roles.⁴

Many women happily and proudly choose to act out women's sex roles and conform to stereotypes. I must hasten to and that personality and choice are important factors in whether a woman becomes this kind of "happy female". Women's favorite vocabulary, soft expletives rather than swear words, honorifics, particles, request forms, personal pronouns, scanty in Chinese words and *asobase-kotoba* can be examined from this positive perspective.

We can say that women's language in general follows Japanese women's interest in formalism, politeness, "softness", and the emotional side of life. Though women like to talk at length, they do not express much content. In serious discussions or in public speech men excel over women. Women are required to meet higher standards of politeness. What we find in women's speech is a direct reflection of what Japanese women are in real life.

Summary

Several features of women's language have been discussed from two perspectives. Those who view women as persons made to suffer dis-

⁴ This is why we cannot see women's oppression parallel with that of other oppressed group like Blacks in American society. Men's and women's interests work complementarily while White's and Black's interests do not. Blacks demand the same opportunity and rights as Whites, which is justice. But, women who enjoy different aspect of life taking the compartmentalized roles do not demand the same opportunity.

crimination and lower status will view these features as negative ones which are used to keep women in a disadvantaged position in society. People who are not satisfied with women's stereotyped role and limited opportunities and power. Those who view women as blessed creatures who can enjoy aspects of life other than the mundane, will view these features as positive features preserving women as they are. These two perspectives are two sides of the same coin. The same feature appears differently, depending on a person's viewpoint.

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(1976)