JAPANESE

# Women's language as a group identity marker in Japanese

Sachiko Ide
Japan Women's University, Tokyo, Japan



## 1. Introduction

Whereas Shibamoto Smith (this volume) discusses some of the issues connected with present-day women's language, this chapter investigates whether the historical development of women's language has made any contribution to current female speech. It is intended to provide both the basis for an understanding of and a new perspective for the analysis of women's language in general.

It is generally said that Japanese women use what could be called "more polite" language, which is mainly characterized by the use of honorifics and sentence-final particles. This language has generally been interpreted as an indication of deference, and has been equated with an indication of women's powerless status. This seems doubtful in view of recent work such as that of Ide & Hori & Kawasaki & Ikuta & Haga (1986), in which it is argued that the source of women's more polite speech is the difference in their role rather than a

difference in their status. That is, housewives are more frequently engaged in socially oriented, more private activities, whereas men are more frequently involved in efficiency-oriented activities. Since it is a general tendency to use more polite speech in social interaction than in workplace interaction, it is natural for both men and women to use polite speech in ways that reflect this general distinction. Furthermore, the explanation offered in Ide (1991) is that features marking polite speech convey demeanor, by which is meant "good manners" (a feature associated with prestigious status, cf. Goffman 1967). Such features include the use of more polite linguistic forms, the use of more formal forms of personal pronouns, avoidance of deprecatory personal pronouns, avoidance of vulgar expressions and the use of beautification honorifics.

Ide & Inoue (1992) present evidence that supports this analysis based on the language of women working in Japanese corporations. It is generally believed that women of lower status, meaning those that have less power, use more polite forms of expression to acknowledge the difference in status. Contrary to such expectations, it was found that women with higher positions in the workplace use more polite expressions than women of lower positions. (For a discussion of these features, see Shibamoto Smith, this volume.) These executives use more polite expressions as a tool or even a weapon to express demeanor in keeping with their status, not to show deference to those they address.

## 2. The indigenous way of looking at women's language

The issues of feminism have certainly reached Japanese scholarship and have triggered a number of studies of women's language in the last two decades. However, in Japan, the interest in studies of Japanese women's language goes as far back as 1929, when Kikuzawa wrote an article entitled "On the features of women's language". Following this, a number of descriptive studies of women's language varieties were published. The approach taken in them reflects traditional Japanese linguistics, called *kokugogaku* ('Japanese linguistics'), where the study of language focuses exclusively on Japanese. Interestingly, these works do not deal with women's language in contrast to men's, but view it as a "section" of language termed *isoo* 'phase'. None of the roughly equivalent English terms such as *register* or *dialect* would really reflect the concept of *isoo*. This linguistic/pragmatic category is a prime example of the traditional Japanese way of looking at language; i.e. the variety of language used is an identification marker of the professional or social role of the speaker. In the Japanese view, the



speakers shape themselves into representatives of their profession. Molding oneself in this way is seen as an integral part of personality formation. The use of language specific to the domain of each professional world is both the means to mold oneself as a representative of that profession and the means to recognize and reinforce one's sense of self.

The analysis of *isoo* can be linked to the analysis of speech. If a sentence is divided into segments, the result is the parts of speech. On a larger scale, if one disassembles examples of various kinds of speech according to the group to which the speakers belong, the result will be segment languages, called *isoo go*, meaning *isoo* language. Fundamental to the segment language approach is the way Japanese linguists view language; i.e. they regard language as the sum of many different languages. These languages differ with regard to age, generation, social, regional, and professional background, as well as class, and gender. In other words, people are viewed as speaking different languages according to the groups they belong to. Among the many section languages of professions are the languages of monks, merchants, scholars, *samurai* (military), and craftsmen.

In the significant body of respected Japanese traditional linguistic literature, the field of women's language has secured its own position as one of the easily differentiated section languages.

## 3. Women's languages in women's worlds

The historical development of Japanese women's language may shed light on the current uses of women's language, and provide the context for its reanalysis. The focus here will be on two kinds of women's language in women's worlds: the language of what might be termed court ladies, in Japanese *nyoobo kotoba* ('court ladies' language'); and the language of the demi-monde or courtesans (lit. 'play ladies'), *yuujo go* ('courtesans' language'). Both these ways of speaking are specific to women's domains and both are said to have influenced contemporary women's language, though not as predecessors. Women today do not speak like court ladies or courtesans of old.

The earliest specific features that marked women's language in Japanese can be traced back as far as the 8th century, when *Manyooshuu*, a collection of poems composed by people of all classes, was compiled. It contains second person pronouns indicative of speaker's or addressee's gender. In the 11th century, *hiragana*, the phonetic writing system of *yamatokotoba*, the Japanese language of the day, was devised and used by women, while men were using

Chinese, similar to the use of Latin in Europe during the Middle Ages. It is known that the *Tale of Genji*, a novel by Lady Shikibu Murasaki (ca. 1010), was written in this vernacular. Thus, women were able to write in a language closer to their usual way of expressing themselves than men were allowed to do.

The beginnings of the language of the court ladies are documented in the 14th century, those of the language of the courtesans date from the 17th century. A closer look at these two varieties will reveal the implications these languages have for contemporary Japanese women's language. (For a detailed explanation of languages of court ladies and courtesans see R. Ide & Terada 1998.)

### 3.1 *Nyoobo kotoba*: The language of court ladies

*Nyoobo*, court ladies, lived in the inner quarters of the imperial court or in the residences of noble families, where they served imperial families and nobles. These women were originally members of the noble class and had a close association with the imperial family. They were hired to serve the imperial court with the official rank of "court ladies". Therefore, being a *nyoobo* was a profession, just like being a *samurai* 'soldier' was. Their job was to manage the bureaucratic tasks of controlling the accounting of the dynasty, and the daily affairs and activities in various aspects of life. In addition, it was in the hands of the court ladies to educate royal or noble children. They served as the transmitters of important information from emperor to public; press secretary would be the modern equivalent. This work brought with it the possibility that the *nyoobo's* personal opinion could be integrated and passed on to the public.

Court ladies placed themselves in a subservient position to the emperor and the nobles, but they were career women who played an indispensable role in court life. They had great influence over imperial and noble families through the education of their children and the management of their daily lives and events. This means that they had virtual power, though it was of a different nature than that of men.

Court ladies are known to have existed since the 8th century, but it was not until the 14th century that the language of the court ladies, *nyoobo kotoba*, emerged. It was during the Muromachi Period (between the 14th and the 16th century), a period of instability, that a special language developed in the world of the court ladies. This period was the transitional period from the Middle to the Pre-modern Ages. The power of the emperor was beginning to decline, even as the *samurai* began to gain power. It was a time when the imperial and noble families began to face economic difficulties. Secret words in the world of the



*nyoobo* were created in order (a) to conceal the difficult condition of the emperor and nobles, and (b) to avoid uttering words that could betray the poverty of the nobles; in other words, they needed to create secret words to avoid ill omens. Thus, the language of the court ladies functioned as a communicative code, useful among in-group members, and useful in excluding outsiders.

Court ladies, who cultivated high culture in court life, thus created a secret language in their secluded world. This secret language was different from ordinary language only in lexical aspects, while phonology and syntax remained unchanged. They created new lexical items in the field of daily life, such as food and clothing. An analysis of a large list of *nyoobo kotoba* ('words from the language of the court ladies') shows that the formation of lexical items follows some recurring patterns:

Mentioning only initial syllables:

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| (1) | *u* | for | *unagi* |
| | 'eel' | | 'eel' |

Reduplicating initial syllables while deleting final syllables:

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| (2) | *katsu-katsu* | for | *katsuo* |
| | 'bonito-bonito' | | 'bonito' (a kind of oceanic fish) |

Playing with language, here, an alternate reading for a Chinese character:

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| (3) | *o-yone* | for | *kome* |
| | HON-rice | | 'rice' |

Honorification of nouns and verbs:

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| (4) | a. | *o-mi-ashi* | for | *ashi* |
| | | HON-HON-foot | | 'foot' |
| | b. | *mesh-agaru* | for | *kuu* |
| | | HON (suppletive form)-eat | | 'to eat' |

Alternative adjectives are created. An example which is common in present-day Japanese is (5):

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| (5) | *oishii* | for | *mumakikoto* |
| | 'tasty' | | 'tasty' |

(1) to (5) were created in the domain of court ladies so that outside people could not comprehend the meaning of these codes. The common function of these secret words is to obscure explicit meanings of words.

Devices for secret codes are as follows. In (1), only the initial syllable is uttered. In (2), only the two initial syllables are repeated. In (3), the different reading of the Chinese character is uttered. In (4a), two honorific prefixes are placed before the noun. In (4b), a suppletive honorific form is used. In (5), an alternative secret element is created.

Why was it necessary for court ladies to create a secret language? Primarily, as mentioned, they needed to conceal the economic difficulties of court life. If they were overheard saying that a certain family "was running out of rice", in a country where rice is the most basic food, it would soon have been widely known that that family had fallen on hard times. The word for rice is written with a Chinese character which has at least three different readings (*kome*, *yone*, and *bei*), so they chose *yone* instead of the ordinary reading *kome* and prefixed it with the honorific *o-* (see example (3)). Court ladies could thus discuss a family's real difficulties with no fear that outsiders would understand what they were saying. In addition, they needed to have a special language to emphasize their gentle appearance while in actual fact holding virtual power. To balance the strength supported by power, court ladies dissembled, acting as though they were weak and gentle by avoiding the use of straightforward lexical items, using instead a language of their own. Imitating children's repetitive words as we see in example (2) was one way of making themselves appear like innocent children and thus non-threatening, incompetent and charming.

The language of court ladies began to spread into the world outside the royal court in the course of time. It first spread in inner quarters of the imperial household, then among *samurai* (soldiers') households, then into the ordinary people's world. Since the social rank of a *samurai* was not as high as that of the court ladies, the language of the court ladies was the model to which they aspired. In the 17th century, in the Edo Period, the language of the court ladies was portrayed as the model of expression for women in etiquette books, as it was regarded as a prestigious language.

The spread of the language of court ladies has continued into contemporary Japanese, making the language rich in synonyms. A number of vocabulary items that originated in the language of court ladies are now used by both men and women; some of them still carry the nuance of women's language. The addition of vocabulary items from this language variety has made the language as a whole seem softer and more polite to the speaker of Japanese, as can be seen in the following examples:



| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| (6) | *o-mi-otuke*<br>HON-HON-miso soup | for | *misosiru*<br>'miso soup' |
| (7) | *o-me moji*<br>HON-eye word | for | *au*<br>'to see' |

### 3.2 *Yuujogo*: The language of the courtesans

It was between the 17th and the 19th centuries, in the stable time of the Edo Period, that the play ladies' language came into existence. While the country was ruled by the Tokugawa Shogunate and closed itself off from the outside world, the common people enjoyed a blossoming of popular culture. On the surface, the people were categorized into four rigid ranks: soldiers, farmers, engineers, and merchants, as listed in descending order. But in red light districts, people were treated equally as long as they had money. *Yuujo*, courtesans, literally 'play ladies', were much respected professionals. Japanese courtesans had to master the art of making *haiku* and other types of poems, and were expected to have a reading knowledge of Chinese. They were supposed to be versed in playing music, singing and dancing. They entertained their clients with witty conversation supported by sophisticated knowledge and creative talents in the arts, and they charmed them with aesthetic performances. In the entertainment districts of well-populated areas in Kyoo, Naniwa and Edo, present day Kyoto, Osaka and Tokyo, special languages were created to achieve a common means of communication among people from different regions and different social backgrounds, and speaking different dialects. This special language was also a useful means of concealing a courtesan's accent, which would otherwise have reflected the rural regions they came from. Speaking the special language of the night, the play ladies created a unique atmosphere of indulgence and amusement. The real world was forgotten in this special world.

Some of the linguistic features of the language of the entertainment district have special forms of predication: auxiliary verb endings attached to the verb, and first and second person reference terms. The elaboration in ending forms and the use of person reference terms reflects the world of the entertaining business, where sensitivity in interactional behavior has the highest priority, because these linguistic features do not add anything to the meaning but give richness in the choice of expressions according to the mood of the speaker-hearer, cf. the following examples:

(8) *o-yomi-ni* *naru*
REF.HON-'read' 'do'

(9) *o-yomi* *nasaru*
REF.HON-'read' REF.HON-'do'

Instead of the ordinary honorific formation (8), the form *nasaru* as in (9) was created and used by courtesans.

In the domain of courtesans, new terms for first and second person reference were created and used: for the first person, instead of *wacchi*, *wachiki* was used, and for the second person, *somoji* was used instead of ordinary *nushi*, cf. (10) and (11):

(10) *wacchi* *wachiki*
1st pers. sing. 1st pers. sing.
'I'

(11) *nushi* *somoji*
2nd pers. sing. 2nd pers. sing.
'you'

The language of the courtesans was shared by people in the entertainment districts, or at least passively understood by those men and women who came and went. The courtesans, who were sophisticated and had high culture, attracted the attention and admiration of the public. Their language was described in *Kabuki* (classical Japanese drama) and the literature of common people, which ordinary women began to imitate and use as a part of their ordinary language. As in the case of the language of court ladies, the language of courtesans was first disseminated among ordinary women. In the course of time, the vocabulary items lost their original status as belonging to the language of courtesans, and eventually the language of one special women's domain came to be used by both men and women in contemporary Japanese.

## 4. The impact on present-day women's language

To recapitulate, women's language can be shown to have existed since *Manyoo-shuu*, the earliest collection of poems dating from the 8th century. It is assumed that men and women were speaking slightly differently at this time, but as yet no studies exist on this aspect of the language. Women's languages in women's worlds have had a great impact on women's language today, but not because contemporary Japanese women's language has simply incorporated these languages. The following three aspects of impact can be observed.



### 4.1 Establishing women's language as a group language

What remains from the concept of the languages of court ladies and courtesans is the function of language as the language of group identity. In women's language, lexical items are constantly changing, since the freshness of a word or an expression can be believed to decrease as people use the same word for some time. For example, *nasu* 'eggplant' for *nasubi* was adopted from the court ladies' language and was frequently used by women. It has gradually lost its particularly feminine flavor, and now men and women both use it as an ordinary word. This made necessary the creation of a new form that could express the aspect of women's language. Thus, *o-nasu* was created with the honorific prefix *o-*, and its use indexes the speaker's gender identity as a woman. This honorific does nothing to honor the delicious eggplant, the prefix is merely a beautification honorific added to express the demeanor of the speaker. Thus, the languages of court ladies and courtesans are not direct predecessors of present-day women's language etymologically, but rather they were the first recorded instance of gendered usage, in which new lexical items continue to be created today.

### 4.2 Indexing group identity and molding the speaker's self

As has been discussed, another aspect of women's languages is their function as markers of occupational group identities. By using the special languages of the special worlds, these women (a) created a feeling of group solidarity, (b) identified themselves as members of these groups, and (c) molded themselves into people suitable for membership in that group. Thus, these women's languages should be regarded as having functioned as a means of creating solidarity within the group, as identity markers of the group and as a means of molding selves into appropriate models of their respective occupational roles.

### 4.3 Adding valuable image

The dissemination of women's languages from women's worlds should be interpreted as an indication of how positively they were regarded. There are many lexical items in present-day Japanese that stem from those languages. Examples (12) to (16) show a variety of forms of the lexical item 'eat':

Vulgar form:

(12) *kuu*
eat.INF

Plain form:

(13) *taberu*
eat.INF

Polite honorific form:

(14) *o-tabe* *ni-naru* (ordinary honorific form)
HON-eat.INF become-HON

Polite honorific form from the language of court ladies:

(15) *meshi agaru*
meal eat.HON

Polite honorific form from the language of courtesans:

(16) *tabe* *nasaru*
eat.INF do.HON

This addition of expressions is felt to have enriched contemporary Japanese, especially because the expressions from the women's worlds such as (15) and (16) are more sophisticated and carry more elegant connotations. In other words, the image of women's language was one of something valuable.

## 5. Conclusion

The goal of this survey of language in the past was to highlight two possible pitfalls in language study that can be avoided in the future. The compartmentalization of research, which led to the idea that one could study a language without recourse to the history of that language, may have led scholars to overlook the contributions of past developments in the language and past research on the language to topics of current interest. It is to be hoped that this investigation of communication in Japanese culture at different times, and between different groups, in connection with the analysis provided by traditional Japanese linguistics, has indicated new possibilities for similar investigations in other cultures.

There may have been the tendency, also followed by scholars, to transfer every-day assumptions without scrutiny into scholarship; this led to the commonly-held belief that women's language is associated with lower status and lesser power. In view of the evidence presented here and elsewhere pointing



to a rather different function of Japanese women's language, a new analysis seems warranted, since it appears there are positive aspects that have been disregarded. If these positive aspects have been overlooked in Japanese, a relatively well-studied language, this may also have been the case elsewhere.

The value of looking at the history of these languages and their traditional treatment does not lie in trying to trace these early languages into their present form as women's language. An analysis of both what has happened to these languages and the way traditional linguists have understood them shows that Japanese women's language is yet another of the many group languages. Every person belongs to several groups, and therefore has learned several group languages, for example, teachers' language, women's language, Tokyo language, downtown language, mother-of-a-child language. But the group languages taken together do not make up the whole of the Japanese language like mosaic stones (with each one having a distinct border and a form distinct from all others). Instead, the group languages overlap like colored oil drops heated on a projector slide. Thus, women's language, Tokyo language and teachers' language, for example, all play a role in determining how a female teacher from Tokyo will express what she has to say, since her language will reflect her identity as a member of all three groups.

The idea that many groups have a jargon, and that the use of this jargon is obligatory to mark membership in the group, is not new. Even the field of linguistics has such a vocabulary, and work has been done on the languages of many other groups. Nor is the fact that Japanese women use words that Japanese men would not use limited to language use in Japanese. Other languages have words that only women or only men would use (for example, *ducky* or *love* in British English, not to mention words or expressions felt to be unsuitable in mixed company).

Much of the work to date concerning Japanese women's language has asserted or implied that women's language in Japanese was rooted in the subservience and powerlessness of Japanese women in contrast to men. Any value attributed to it was assessed in terms of its effect on and in society.

What is new in the approach used here is the discovery of history, and with it the source of the positive value of women's language. By showing the function of women's language as a group identity marker as well as a marker of the speaker's position in society, it becomes obvious that women's language is an important factor in strengthening both the woman's sense of self and the group as a whole. A serious consideration of work done in the tradition of Japanese linguistics led to the discovery that it has much to offer to the analysis of current

linguistic topics more generally. It has identified concepts that apply not only to phenomena in Japanese, but may well prove useful when applied to other languages and other cultures.

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ORIYA

# Linguistic and socio-cultural implications of gendered structures in Oriya

Kalyanamalini Sahoo
Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim, Norway