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## PART III: FEMININITIES

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### Exploring Women's Language in Japanese

SACHIKO IDE

#### The Awakening of a Female Sociolinguist

It was not until I read Robin Lakoff's article "Language and Woman's Place" in *Language in Society* (1973) in the mid-1970s that I awakened to the realization that a woman could be a full-fledged scholar. Lakoff keenly analyzed the mechanisms handicapping female students, who have to be "bilingual" in order to be perceived as appropriately serious in class and when talking to professors. As she noted, "It may be that the extra energy that must be (subconsciously or otherwise) expended in this game is energy sapped from more creative work, and hinders women from expressing themselves as well as they might otherwise, or as fully or freely as they might otherwise" (1973: 48, n. 2; cf. *LWP* 41–42). When I read this passage, I could not agree more. As a beginning linguist I had believed that to be a scholar meant to abandon my femaleness and think and talk in a male way, that any other way was unacceptable. Having been brought up as the daughter of a medical professor, I took as a compliment my father's words to me: "Sachiko, you're so smart that you could even be a secretary."

Without Lakoff's work in "Language and Woman's Place" (and in *Language and Woman's Place* [*LWP*], the 1975 book that grew out of the article), I could not have established myself as a sociolinguist. This work inspired me to think about language in relation to social reality. It also made clear to me that the world was governed by men who were in the mainstream and that women were usually pushed into a marginal position. It was then that I realized that as a woman in a non-Western culture I am doubly marginal (see also Morgan, this volume). This recognition led me to create ideas from a nonmainstream perspective.

#### The Acceptance of *Language and Woman's Place* in Japan

While I was in the United States during the academic year of 1974–75, I was much influenced by the women's movement. Having read Lakoff's

work on women's language several times, I was convinced by her arguments and was determined to introduce them when I returned to Japan. I wrote such articles as "Women's Liberation and the Study of Women's Language" (1975) and "Language and Women's Consciousness in the Contemporary United States" (1976) for a Japanese audience, trying to advocate this new movement to liberate women in Japan by changing sexism in language. Meanwhile, Katsue Akiba Reynolds translated *LWP* into Japanese in 1986 and provided an accompanying and articulate explanation of the text.

Teaching at a women's university, I felt a mission to liberate my female students through lectures and seminars. Contrary to my expectation, however, I was to be faced with an unwelcoming reaction. The reality in Japan was quite different from what I had presumed based on my experience in the United States. I learned from my students that they did not feel that they were oppressed or marginalized; instead, they were content as they were. Even if they did elevate men and chose to put themselves in subordinate positions, they enjoyed relationships in which women and men took different roles. They were polite enough not to challenge my ideas outright, but they clearly showed that they weren't buying my newly imported ideas on language and woman's place. (The translated version of *LWP*, incidentally, did not seem to circulate as widely as the original did.) What went wrong? It took me all of the 1980s and 1990s to explore the reasons behind my failure.

### Not Gender Difference but Role Difference: A Survey Result

In the early 1980s I was offered a Japanese Education Ministry research grant to investigate the use of women's language in Japan. Takesi Sibata, a leading sociolinguist who was the general director of the Special Research Project on Language Standardization in the Age of Information Technology, told me that unless I did a thorough survey of women's language, one couldn't be sure that what I had written about Japanese women's language was true. He was reluctant to accept my articles on women's language written under the influence of American feminism. The grant made it possible for me to form a research group and conduct a survey with more than five hundred subjects. The research focused on the use of honorifics, linguistic devices that mark varying levels of politeness. The research question posed in this project was how and why women speak more politely in Japanese. It was assumed from the outset that women do speak more politely than men, but this question was tested as well.

Our survey of the use of honorifics by women and men asked subjects which honorific forms for the verb *iku* (to go) they would use when asking the question "When do you go?" in a variety of hypothetical contexts, such as when addressing a workplace superior, a neighbor, a spouse, and so on. It was found, as expected, that women did use more polite honorific forms

than men. However, the major finding was that this tendency was due not to gender difference per se but to the different roles in which women and men engage in their everyday lives. That is, women, who usually work inside the home, are more frequently engaged in more private, socially oriented activities, whereas men are more frequently engaged in public, 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 women and men to use polite speech in ways that reflect this general distinction. It became clear that the women's use of more polite language was not due to their subordinate position in society. Instead, it was because most female subjects were housewives whose roles primarily involved social interaction. This was the reason for their use of more polite honorifics (S. Ide et al. 1986; S. Ide 1991).

Consequently, it was predicted that women's language would change as women began to work outside the home and assume roles in the workplace. Two decades after this survey was conducted, we see that women's use of language is now diversified (see Matsumoto, this volume). While women have acquired the variety associated with men's repertoire in the workplace, they still use more polite forms as an index of femaleness in social interaction.

### Group Identity Markers and Molding the Self: Tracing the Origin of Women's Language

Contrary to an almost universal tendency to view women's language negatively, Japanese women's language tends to have been regarded positively—that is, as beautiful and elegant. It has no tinge of being the language of lower status or lesser position. What makes it appear nonnegative? I will explain from two different angles, first from a historical perspective.

The issues of feminism certainly reached Japanese scholarship and triggered a number of studies of women's language. However, interest in studies of Japanese women's language goes as far back as 1929, when Toshio Kikuzawa wrote an article entitled "On the Features of Women's Language." Subsequently, a number of descriptive studies of women's language were published. The approach taken in these studies reflects traditional Japanese linguistics (*kokugogaku*), in which 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 called an *isoo*. None of the roughly equivalent English terms such as *register* or *dialect* really reflect the concept of *isoo*. This linguistic-pragmatic category is an example of the traditional Japanese way of looking at language: the variety of language used is an identification marker of the professional or social role of the speaker. In the Japanese view, speakers shape themselves into representatives of their profession. Molding oneself in this

way is seen as an integral part of personality formation. During the Edo Period (1603–1867) when Japan closed itself off from the rest of the world (except for interaction with China and Holland) for almost three centuries, an indigenous philosophy was established in which Confucianism was revised to match the closed society. The teaching of this philosophy was that in order for society to work harmoniously, everybody must fulfill a specific role. Role fulfillment has been one of the moral ideals underlying the working of Japanese society up to this day (S. Ide & Peng 1996).

If one disassembles language into various kinds of speech based on the group to which the speakers belong, the result will be *isoo* languages (*isoo go*). These languages differ according to age, generation, and 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 to which they belong. Among the many *isoo* languages associated with professional roles are the languages of monks, merchants, scholars, samurai, and craftsmen. In the traditional Japanese linguistic literature, the field of women's language has secured its own position as one of the differentiated *isoo* languages.

Every person belongs to several groups and therefore has learned several *isoo* or group languages (e.g., women's language, teachers' language, Tokyo language, and mothers' 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 border and form distinct from all others. Instead, the group languages overlap like colored oil drops heated on a projector slide, so that women's language and 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 these groups.

Looking back in history, women's language can be shown to have existed since the eighth century, the time of *Mannyooshuu*, the earliest existing collection of Japanese poems. The poems show that women and men were speaking slightly differently at that time, but there have been no studies done on this aspect of the language. Women's languages in women's social worlds throughout history have had an impact on women's language today but not because contemporary Japanese women's language has simply incorporated these languages. The impact of earlier women's languages can be seen in the following three areas. First, they established the domain of women's language as a group language. There are literatures describing the language of court ladies in the fourteenth century and the language of courtesans in the seventeenth century. The languages of court ladies and courtesans are not direct predecessors of present-day women's language; rather, they were the first recorded instance of gendered language (S. Ide 2003; R. Ide & Terada 1998).

Another impact of women's languages is their function as markers of

role identities. By using the special languages of special social worlds, court ladies and courtesans (1) created a feeling of group solidarity, (2) identified themselves as members of these groups, and (3) molded themselves into people suitable for membership in each group.

A third impact of earlier women's languages involves the value placed on them. There are many lexical items in present-day Japanese that stem from such languages. The dissemination of women's languages from women's worlds to Japanese society more generally should be interpreted as an indication of how positively they were regarded. This addition of expressions is felt to have enriched contemporary Japanese, especially because expressions from women's worlds are felt to be more sophisticated and to carry more elegant connotations. Women's language was viewed as something of value.

### Signifying Elegance or Dignity: The Reflexive Function of Women's Language

Another approach to explaining the positive aspect of Japanese women's language may be in order. Here, I examine the reflexive function of natural language use in context and discuss the mechanism whereby elegance or dignity can be signified by higher linguistic forms. (For more details, see S. Ide forthcoming.)

Research on the language of women working in Japanese corporations presents evidence worth noting in this regard (S. Ide & Inoue 1992). It is generally believed that women of lower status use more polite forms to superiors in order 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 those with lower positions. How can we explain this seeming contradiction? These executives use more polite expressions as a tool or even a weapon to express a dignified demeanor in keeping with their status, not to show deference to those they address. Why is it that linguistic forms can function to signify elegance or dignity?

The use of polite forms expresses or, more precisely, indexes context: the appropriate relationship between the speaker and the hearer and the formality of the situation. But polite forms do more than this: they can index the speaker's attributes. While polite forms that index context are geared to politeness toward others, their usage to index the speaker's attributes is quite different in nature. Polite forms index the speaker's identity through the metapragmatic function of language use. Listening to the kind of forms speakers employ, we get a metapragmatic message about what kind of people speakers are.

How can we account for this phenomenon? Even though talking

about varieties of language in terms of social class is somewhat taboo in a democratic society, it is a fact that there are dialects that differ on the basis of social class. Female executives are one case in point, since they are indexing their high status by the use of more elaborate linguistic forms.

Geographical dialects are a familiar occurrence the world over, so let us look at an example from Japanese geographical dialects. People in Kyoto speak in what is called Kyoto dialect. If we listen to somebody speaking Kyoto dialect, we understand the meaning of the propositional content, but we also get the metapragmatic information that the speaker is from Kyoto. That is, the speaker's accent signifies an attribute of the speaker, in this case, that of being from Kyoto.

Parallel to geographical dialects, people tend to have different dialects according to their social class. The higher the social status of the speaker, the more elaborate and formal linguistic forms they are likely to use. Regardless of an individual's ability to employ the elaborate linguistic forms, people in a speech community share as common knowledge at least passive communicative competence concerning their use. Just as we know that people are from Kyoto by their accent, we are able to categorize the social status of speakers by the speech forms they use.

There are varieties of language that differ on the basis of geographical, social, gender, and generational differences in a society. To the extent that a society is complex, the same propositional content can be expressed in a range of linguistic forms. And it is by their choice of form that speakers index their attributes. If you use forms that signal the Kyoto dialect, women's dialect, middle-class dialect, and young people's dialect, you index with great precision where you belong in the society. Listeners who share common knowledge concerning the structure and configuration of the paradigmatic variety of linguistic forms in the speaking context will in return understand the metapragmatic message about what is meant by the very choice of linguistic form.

It is very often the case that high-status people, such as executives in large corporations, use elevated linguistic forms appropriately and with a relaxed tone. In the minds of the members of a speech community, the correlation between type of speech and type of person is widely recognized. It is because of the reflexive nature of language use that the linguistic forms chosen by the speaker, together with contextual knowledge of the speech community, is negotiated to yield metapragmatic meaning. Since speakers who choose elevated linguistic forms are very often those who hold high status, those who belong to the group of sophisticated women, and those whose behavior exhibits dignity or elegance, we connect this information with the user of such speech. In this way, the use of polite linguistic forms signifies elegance or dignity.

## Everything Started with Lakoff

It was Lakoff's groundbreaking article "Language and Woman's Place" that inspired me to believe that it is acceptable to speak out from my own perspective. It became the foundation of my scholarship. The article also awakened me to the realization that language could be insightfully analyzed in relation to social reality. At first glance, I thought Lakoff's analysis could be applied in parallel fashion to women's language in Japanese society. However, the reality was not so simple. While Lakoff argues that "linguistic imbalances" between women and men should be corrected (1973: 73; cf. *LWP* 69), the parallel argument was not successful in the case of Japanese women and language, as I have illustrated in this essay. I eventually realized that the underlying assumption of Lakoff's argument about linguistic imbalance came from the egalitarian idealism of an individualistic society. Japanese society, on the contrary, assumes role differences, as stated above. If one is subordinate to the other, it may be called imbalance under egalitarian idealism. However, if one has a different role from the other, it is a matter of difference that may work complementarily. Thus, Lakoff's keen look at language and society and her articulate writings not only led me to think about the interaction of language and Japanese women's place but also led me to investigate the workings of language and social phenomena from my own perspective, as a woman and a scholar claiming her place in Japanese society.

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