

## Introduction: the construction of Japanese women's language

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Recent research on Japanese language and gender has started paying more attention to diversity among women's and men's speech (e.g. Okamoto and Shibamoto Smith 2004); however, the field has long been dominated by essentialism, which characterizes 'the Japanese woman' and her language – or *josego* 'women's language' – in terms of a number of stereotypical linguistic features in Standard Japanese which are assumed to be distinct from those of *dansego* 'men's language'. This is, we argue, part of a larger issue in sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology, where the focus of research interest has been on the 'authentic' speaker, whether that speaker is held to authentically represent an ethnic group, a social class, or a sex/gender identity. Eckert (2003: 392) defines the 'authentic' speaker as one who speaks directly from a particular location, in which she or he is maximally situated and to which she or he is maximally oriented, and who, thus, has 'direct access' to a particular language/dialect/variety 'untainted by the interference of reflection or social agency'. This underlying assumption, as discussed by Bucholtz (2003), has had consequences for the choice of speakers in much dialect and sociolinguistic research in the West – e.g. the choice of predominantly male, predominantly under- or working-class speakers studied as speakers of African American Vernacular English (Labov 1972; Abrahams 1976; Kochman 1981) – as well as in Japan – e.g. the overwhelming emphasis on speakers of Standard Japanese in research on language and gender (e.g., Ide and Yoshida 1999). Speakers who

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do not fit the social image of a particular group's 'typical' member are relatively neglected. Bucholtz (2003) characterizes the sociolinguistic and linguistic anthropological 'investment in authenticity as an implicit theory of identity' (Bucholtz 2003: 398), and stresses that it is, moreover, typically gendered. This is true of research on Japanese language and gender, where, until recently, one particular style of feminine speech – stereotypical *yamanote* Tokyo women's speech in contemporary Japanese – has come to be held up as the true 'sound', as it were, of Japanese femininity.

Arguing that this focus on authenticity has led to projects of essentialism (e.g., 'the' Japanese woman), Bucholtz (2003: 407) suggests that:

[r]ather than attempt to track down authentic speakers, sociolinguists might instead devote more time to figuring out how such individuals and groups have come to be viewed as authentic in the first place *and by whom* (emphasis added).

Further, we need to consider what bearings such 'authenticity' have to real speakers as social agents. In short, we need to problematize what Bucholtz calls 'ideologies of authenticity' aiming at clarifying both speakers' and linguists' relationship to the authentic. In this way, we hope to advance our understanding of the three-way relationship between the empirical realities of women speaking, research on women's speech styles, and the metapragmatic discourse about how women should talk. In modern Japan, this metapragmatic discourse, in particular, forms a part of the social science discourse on Japan (e.g., Benedict 1946; DeVos 1973; Doi 1971; Lebra 1976; Nakane 1967; Smith 1983) that assumes the boundaries of (a singular) Japanese culture to be isomorphic with the boundaries of the Japanese state (Ryang 2004: 4) comprised of its subjects, ideal Japanese men and women. This relationship is arguably a powerful part of the standard language culture (Milroy 2001) of Japan, but one that has yet to be fully explicated.

Assuming that the norms for women's speech have considerable influence on women's actual speech practices as well as on the scientific research on women's speech, this special issue focuses on how those societal norms for women are constructed through a variety of metapragmatic discourses about how women should talk, as well as representations of women's speech in the media. It offers a new look at (normative) Japanese women's language as a discourse which contributes to the construction of social relations and knowledge rather than emerging from pre-existing (and 'natural') social identities (see also, Okamoto and Shibamoto Smith 2004; Inoue 2006). Such constructions must necessarily be traced through time rather than being analyzed as isolated synchronic states. We take (ideal) Japanese women's language as historically constituted. Each article in this special issue critically examines one historical stage or aspect of the process of constructing norms for linguistic femininity, which

in the discourses of Japanese ‘national culture’, then come to be narrated as the language of ‘authentic’ Japanese women. This includes a reexamination of the roles of various agents in the construction process. Research on Japanese women’s language has mostly focused on its contemporary aspects. However, it is extremely important to historicize Japanese women’s language in order to fully understand the implications for both linguistic practice and analysis. There have been relatively few studies of women’s language from a historical perspective (e.g., Endo 1997; Nakamura 2001, 2005a, 2005b) and even fewer on the roles of agents or agencies involved (e.g., Inoue 2004a, 2004b, 2006; Washi 2003, 2004). There is a real need for more studies, especially those based on careful examinations of primary data that represent and/or discuss women’s language from a historical perspective.

This special issue consists of articles that investigate three different historical periods, including both pre- and post-modern Japan: the pre-modern period, or before 1868 (Endo); the Meiji and Taisho periods, or 1868–1912 (Nakamura; Bohn and Matsumoto); and contemporary Japan (Okamoto and Shibamoto Smith). Examining a variety of primary data (e.g. metapragmatic discourses about women’s speech in conduct books, textbooks, and other historical documents; representations of women’s speech in print and other media), the articles investigate how norms for linguistic femininity have been constructed in specific historical contexts and how they are related to each other, with particular attention to their ramifications for the linguistic practice of contemporary Japanese women.

Taken together, these articles address several inter-related issues:

- (1) The articles investigate the various agents responsible for the societal norm construction for women’s speech. They show that groups such as language planners, linguists/scholars, and popular writers played important roles in this process, and further, that these groups were often closely related to each other in ‘collaborative’ efforts to regulate women’s speech. It is particularly important to note that linguists/scholars were not neutral bystanders but active participants in this ideological process. Some of the articles also point out that these joint efforts to disseminate the ideology of women’s speech were not always straightforwardly accepted by actual speakers themselves.
- (2) The articles also examine the question of what kind of language was/is regarded as an ideal, or authentic, women’s language in each historical context and why. Special attention is given to the ideological underpinnings of the indexical process involved in linking femininity to specific linguistic forms (e.g. reference /address terms, honorifics, and sentence-final particles in Standard Japanese) via their association with general pragmatic meanings (e.g. to speak politely, gently, and in

a refined manner). We contend that it is necessary not simply to enumerate linguistic features said to be used by women, but to examine how these features come to acquire ‘feminine’ connotations. As part of this examination, the articles in this special issue demonstrate the symbolic role played by particular speech varieties, such as *nyooboo kotoba* ‘court women’s language’ and *yamanote kotoba* ‘the speech of upper/middle class women in Tokyo’, which were held up as ideal forms of polite, gentle, and refined speech, as well as other speech varieties, such as *jogakusee kotoba* ‘schoolgirls’ speech’, which were considered undesirable. In other words, while the articles illuminate hegemonic interpretations of particular linguistic forms, or speech variety, they also point out that such interpretations are not given but ideologically based, and that the social meanings associated with particular linguistic forms may vary among individuals and across time.

- (3) In relation to the second point above, some of the articles begin to interrogate the relation of normative linguistic femininity to Standard Japanese. Whereas general characteristics such as speaking politely, gently, etc. have been considered to constitute linguistic femininity across time, linguists’ characterizations of Japanese women’s language have tended to place more emphasis on specific forms in terms of Standard Japanese (e.g. sentence-final particles in Standard Japanese). This ideological bias and its relevance to the conceptions of linguistic femininity held by real speakers, the majority of whom are speakers of regional dialects, is a pressing concern for Japanese language and gender research. The essays in this special issue, by focusing attention on the deliberate constructedness of normative linguistic femininity through time, have opened the door for future inquiry into this relation.
- (4) Related to the second and third points, the articles interrogate the continuity and/or discontinuity between modern and pre-modern (ideal) Japanese women’s language. Is today’s Standard Japanese-based variety of ‘women’s language’, identified by linguists, a new phenomenon, the result of the State-led modernizing project of the early twentieth century (as argued in, e.g., Inoue 2002)? Or do the normative discourses about women and language today exhibit significant continuities with earlier prescriptions offered in the literature from the premodern period? This special issue reexamines this issue and argues that the relationship between modern and pre-modern (ideal) women’s language is much more complex than can be captured by a continuity vs. discontinuity measure. One of the points that all the

articles in this special issue make is that there is a clear continuity with regard to the notion of linguistic femininity in terms of politeness, gentleness, and the like, while at the same time demonstrating that there are also differences in the meanings and sociopolitical functions of the speech norms for women – in addition, of course, to the more narrowly restricted matter of the particular linguistic forms identified as ‘feminine’ in each historical period. Although beyond the scope of this special issue, the conclusions drawn here require us to consider carefully who is regarding what as an ideal women’s language and how such norms may be seen as relevant to women in all regions of Japan.

The article by Endo discusses the pre-modern speech variety *nyooboo kotoba* ‘court lady’s language’ and highlights its role in the historical development of the notion of linguistic femininity. She focuses on lexical formation processes used in this specialized speech variety, noting that many of the processes were believed to render words more polite and elegant. These justify the use of *nyooboo kotoba* as the model of linguistic femininity in late pre-modern and early modern eras. At the same time, she points out that the lexical formation processes used in *nyooboo kotoba* are similar to those used in today’s *wakamonogo* ‘youth language.’ Yet, the former receives positive evaluations, while the latter is commonly perceived as rude and corrupt. This difference, argues Endo, demonstrates the arbitrariness of these sorts of evaluations, which are based on ideological bias toward their users.

Nakamura’s article addresses the modernizing Meiji State’s involvement in developing Standard Japanese, which she claims to be based on an androcentric language ideology. Her detailed analyses of school textbooks trace this process over the roughly 50-year period from 1873–1922. Her analysis illuminates the processes through which ‘masculine’ language forms came to be privileged in the dissemination of Standard Japanese through education. At the same time, she shows how women’s language was relegated to the secondary sphere of conduct books, where the ideology of linguistic femininity as polite, gentle, and refined echoed the prescriptions of the earlier period.

Bohn and Matsumoto’s article also focuses on the Meiji period, but rather than focusing on the State’s involvement in the norm construction of women’s language, they examine representations of speech styles of young women drawn from a variety of popular print media. Their analysis demonstrates the existence of competing models of femininity expressed through dress and demeanor as well as language: the traditional model, emphasizing the link between, for example, honorifics and politeness vs. a transgressive model, symbolized by *jogakusee kotoba* ‘school girls’ language’, which was considered at the time to be ‘coarse’ and ‘unladylike.’ They argue that while the former was based on established norms originating in the Edo period, the latter served as trendset-

ting, 'cool' speech, created by young women without official sanction. Further, emphasizing the multiplicity of pragmatic and social meanings, they note that the very forms of *jogakusee kotoba* that were considered so unfeminine and rough in the Meiji era have been reinterpreted and come today to be iconic of linguistic femininity.

The article by Okamoto and Shibamoto Smith reexamines the notion of linguistic gender norms in contemporary Japanese society. We compare linguists' 'official' presentations of gendered speech patterns with presentations of *onna rashii hanashikata* 'womanly ways of talking' in popular culture. The analysis shows that both of these characterizations of feminine speech emphasize polite, gentle, and refined styles – styles that form the historically constant 'heart' of linguistic femininity. Further, both link these styles to Standard Japanese forms, but linguists' representations tend to include more explicit references to the female variety of Standard Japanese as women's language, while such references are absent or only made implicitly in non-linguists' representations. Further, we demonstrate that popular culture can be a site for negotiation and contestation over conceptions of linguistic femininity. The analysis illuminates the complex indexical process in which linguistic forms are ideologically linked to femininity, as well as the tenuous nature of the linkage.

Throughout, it is a contention of this special issue that only a fine-grained analysis of the relation between the discourses of women's language at particular points in time, the prevailing social relations, between relevant groups of women and men, and the ideologies which legitimate such relations will disclose the discursive practices that embody concrete relationships of power and influence as they manipulate the linguistic categories with which we think and act, and which act upon us.

## Note

- 1 The authors' names appear in alphabetical order.

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