

***Gender, Language and Ideology: A Genealogy of Japanese  
Women's Language***

**Momoko Nakamura (2014)**

**Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 253 pp.**

*Reviewed by Hannah E. Dahlberg-Dodd*

In *Gender, Language and Ideology*, Momoko Nakamura explores how sociopolitical forces have acted in concert to construct the idea of 'women's language' in the Japanese-speaking world. An expansion on its Japanese language counterpart *Onna kotoba wa tsukurareru* [*Constructing Women's Language*] (2007), this monograph is, as described by Nakamura, a direct response to the 'widespread notion that [the ideological construct known as] women's language equates with the way Japanese women actually use language' (3). Though this myth has been addressed in various academic venues, including in this journal by participating authors in a recent special issue edited by Nakamura (2020), the assumption of a deterministic relationship between gender and linguistic form remains readily observable in popular outlets; in the case of Japan, such outlets range from newspaper editorials and media conversations to children's entertainment media, and stereotypical usages of women's language are especially salient in works translated from other languages into Japanese (13–15). In contrast to many works on women's language, which often focus on a discrete set of linguistic features associated with female speakers, Nakamura utilises an historical discourse approach to analyse how commentaries by intellectuals have framed and critiqued language use by women. Through her analysis

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spanning the period from the thirteenth century to post-World War 2, Nakamura demonstrates how the values and meanings assigned to women's speech in one period were reinterpreted in the next, resulting in the multilayered ideologies surrounding women's language today.

The book is divided into four parts that correspond with the different time periods. Part 1 focuses on the premodern period, with data covering the thirteenth century to the latter half of the nineteenth century. In these first two chapters, Nakamura analyses conduct books and etiquette guides in order to lay critical groundwork for understanding the eventual form of ideologies concerning women's language. In Chapter 1, Nakamura discusses how, under the influence of Confucian values, women's speech was regarded as 'a dangerous act that could destroy the proper order among relatives, family, and even within the country', and accordingly, women were encouraged to limit their speech (49). Chapter 2 shifts focus to a variety initially known as 'court-women's speech' (*nyoobo kotoba*), a code-like, secretive style which emerged at least as early as the end of the fourteenth century among women serving at the imperial court (Sugimoto 1998:17). Nakamura demonstrates how linguistic innovation on the part of a small group of women was reinterpreted as upper-class speech more generally and, from there, was coopted to serve as a basis for a sense of refinement in women's speech more broadly.

In Part 2, Nakamura draws on discourses from the end of the nineteenth to the middle of the twentieth century in order to demonstrate how gender ideologies factored into the standardisation and nationalisation of the Japanese language. In particular, she explains that the standardised forms were imagined to be spoken by men, with female speakers factoring little into the discussion (Chapter 3). Meanwhile, the premodern ideological standards for women's speech were updated for the modern era, which elevated the status of women from that of 'the borrowed womb' to 'an educating mother' charged with imparting moral teachings on the next generation (Koyama 1991:33–34) (Chapter 4). Chapters 5 and 6 conclude this section by illustrating how the ultimate form of standardised Japanese emerged through the indexicalisation and codification of 'schoolgirl speech' and 'schoolboy speech' in grammar textbooks and school readers.

Part 3 centres on the wartime era from 1914 to the end of World War 2 in 1945, during which, as Nakamura shows, the ideology of a gendered national language was established through national mobilisation and colonisation. Japanese occupying forces in East and Southeast Asia took an aggressive approach to teaching the Japanese language as a part of their policy of cultural assimilation, and within this framework, women's language was framed as an imperial tradition dating back to the use of court-women's speech (Chapter 7). Meanwhile, at home, women were

expected to contribute to the war effort through 'love, comfort, and friendship' – qualities that were grafted onto women's language itself and perpetuated in wartime grammar textbooks both in Japan and in occupied territories (Chapter 8).

In Part 4, Nakamura demonstrates how the ideology of women's language transformed under the gender equality policy of the US Occupation from 1945 to 1952. She illustrates in Chapter 9 how, when a number of rights for women were introduced by the US occupying forces, women's language came under fire as a factor preventing Japanese women from gaining social status. As a result, discourses reframed women's language as an extension of the innate, biological disposition of women, which distanced the language from its previous framing as an imperial, top-down duty. That being said, though the discursive connection between women's language and the emperor was dropped in the post-war era, the nature of women's language in grammar textbooks remained largely unchanged (Chapter 10).

*Gender, Language and Ideology* provides a comprehensive, longitudinal look at the evolution of language ideologies relative to shifting sociopolitical climates. Specific to Nakamura's work is the critical interaction between language use, power and gender, of which she highlights two major analytical findings. The first of these is the exploitation of local, subversive linguistic practice in order to maintain a hegemonic power structure, as in the case of court-women's speech and schoolgirl speech. The second relates to the use of language ideologies to 'both provide resources for and restrict linguistic practice', as in the case of the pivot to 'innate femininity' as a justification for imposing certain linguistic standards on women (229). For researchers of the intersection between gender and language ideologies, Nakamura's work is an enlightening analysis of language and power during periods of war, modernisation and colonialisation that is accessible to Japanese speakers and non-speakers alike.

## References

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