The Language of Feminine Beauty in Russian and Japanese Societies

Natalia Konstantinovskaia (2020)

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Reviewed by Judit Kroo

Konstantinovskaia's recently published volume *The Language of Feminine Beauty in Russian and Japanese Societies* offers a novel treatment of mediated and metalinguistic representations of the language of 'beauty'. It is also concerned with its relationship to actual use in Japanese and Russian as well as an interesting comparative perspective on the relationship between language and gender in two very different social contexts. The analysis is multimodal, combining close readings of Japanese and Russian beauty product commercials (Chapter 2), interviews with younger Japanese and Russian women in which they discuss their interpretations of ideal femininity (Chapter 3) and corpora of written and spoken language, notably Japanese blogs (Chapter 4). Throughout these chapters, Konstantinovskaia argues that comparing two seemingly disparate cultural contexts can provide a unique lens through which to perceive both the specificities of a given sociocultural context and the ways in which certain narratives of femininity recur across disparate sociocultural terrains. The volume forms part of a continuing interest in the relationship between mediated language and gender in Japanese. *Gender and Language* recently published a special issue on this topic that includes contributions by Konstantinovskaia (2020a) and other scholars (Fukuda 2020; Nakamura 2020; Saito 2020; Suzuki 2020; Unser-Schutz 2020).

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One of the more compelling proposals put forward by Konstantinovskaia is a tripartite system of interactional frames that create conditions under which elements such as utterance-final pragmatic particles can become implicated in gendered schema. The three frames identified are conventional, subcultural and discursive frames. A conventional frame encompasses 'general cultural norms and values' (176), while a subcultural frame highlights 'more specific features that characterize a delimited community of speakers in certain contexts' (177). Finally, a discursive frame 'comprises the stances chosen by speakers in a given interaction' (177). Using this tripartite system, Konstantinovskaia engages in a close discourse analytic reading of seemingly 'unconventional' uses of specific linguistic elements that appear to carry a strongly gendered cast, such as the Japanese pragmatic elements *zo* and *ze*,¹ and shows that they may actually be doing other kinds of social work.

Another of the text's strengths is the range of data covered. By placing Japanese and Russian side by side, the text structurally advances its own argument. Namely, there is a concurrent diversity of culturally specific gendered articulations and consistencies across contexts in how these articulations adhere to notions of 'what counts' as desirable femininity. At the same time, handling such a range of contexts and a variety of discourse modalities at times blunts the impact of the findings. For example, Chapter 2 considers the ways in which Russian and Japanese beauty product commercials express gendered stereotypes of desirable femininity, broadly locating women as performing for a male gaze. Here, Konstantinovskaia treats specific uses of linguistic forms (interrogatives and hortatives) while also considering large-scale quantitative patterns (the ratio of female to male utterances in the commercials). However, apart from a temporal frame (all the commercials aired between 2012 and 2017), it is unclear why these particular commercials were chosen, i.e. they might not constitute the entire body of beauty product commercials from this period. Questions of target audience (older versus younger women), socioeconomic status and type of beauty product are similarly not addressed in the text.

Indeed, issues of intersectionality and deeper questions concerning the formulation of complex stance alignments, which cut across core identity categories, are for the most part downplayed. Notably, Konstantinovskaia's work does not directly address the ways in which gendered alignments are imbricated in the socioeconomics of class, life path and spatiality. Investigating this would have provided a more impactful overview of the topic. While Konstantinovskaia describes the diversity of work roles that the Russian participants undertake and notes a contrast with the relative homogeneity of Japanese participants, who are for the most part students, there is no discussion of the ways in which these categories are themselves

inseparable from socioeconomic concerns. These elisions are consequential because, as a range of work (among others, Sunaoshi 2004; Inoue 2006) has noted, Japanese 'women's language' is not just indexical of gender but is also closely linked to both geography and social class. Specifically, it is understood to be a style that is associated with Tokyo (and Tokyo-based social alignments) and with women who are either middle class or above. Further, previous work on the non-use of 'Japanese women's language' by female farmers in the Japanese countryside (Sunaoshi 2004) has demonstrated that gender may not always be a salient aspect of identity performance in a given situation. However, while the construction of women's language is frequently referenced in the text, there is no space given to the ways in which the individuals interviewed may be conveying identity alignments that are not explicitly gendered.

This perspective is worth keeping in mind when considering data across modalities. While Konstantinovskaia's analysis of Russian individuals shows how speakers may invoke gendered language norms in an interaction even as their actual use departs from such norms, in the case of Japanese blogs (as indicative of 'actual' use of language) versus interviews (as indicative of metalinguistic perceptions of idealised femininity), it is more difficult to fully interpret the ways in which gender is intertwined with other aspects of a socially lived self.

Due to the breadth of the data and the use of multimodal analysis, the text will find a welcome audience in both linguistics and media studies. The relative absence of jargon and the division of the text into chapters that treat different data modalities make it attractive for assigning in undergraduate courses related to Japanese media, language or gender and society.

Notes

- 1 Both *zo* and *ze* are associated with the so-called 'manly' Japanese register. Whereas *zo* conveys characteristics like 'insistence, authority, aggressiveness' (SturtzSreetharan 2004), *ze* is frequently used between close friends and indexes closeness.

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