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An Interview with Momoko Nakamura

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Welcome to the July/August edition of TLT Interviews*! In this issue, we feature an interview with Dr. Momoko Nakamura, Professor of English at Kanto Gakuin University and winner of the 2007 Yamakawa Kiue award. Dr. Nakamura presented an analysis of the features of the gendered language used to translate non-Japanese speech into Japanese at the 2018 JALT plenary. Her fascinating 2014 book,* Gender, Language and Ideology: A Genealogy of Japanese Women's Language*, denaturalises the assumed common sense relationship between language and gender. By taking a historical approach, she explains the role taken by educators, the media and government in forming the Japanese women's language and gendered norms of today. Before her plenary presentation at JALT2018, she was interviewed by Joanna Hosoya and Quenby Hoffman Aoki. Ms. Hosoya teaches at Seijo University and Tokyo Women's Medical University. She has a Masters of Education in Applied Linguistics and has many years of experience teaching English in Japan. She is interested in the various ways gender and language intersect, such as the adaptation and resistance to Japanese language acquisition in foreign women married to Japanese men. She is a long-term GALE member and former editor of the GALE newsletter and journal. Ms. Hoffman Aoki holds degrees from Georgetown University (Japanese Language) and California State University (Education/TESOL). She has taught at universities in Japan since the 1990s, and currently works at Seikei University in Tokyo. Her research interests include intersectional gender, race and social class issues, CLIL/Content-based Instruction, fluency, and the writing process. She is Coordinator of the GALE SIG. So, without further ado, to the interview!*

Joanna Hosoya: *Your research is fascinating. We are so glad that you could join us for the interview. During the plenary, you will explain some conventions that are used for translating foreign female and male speech in novels, movies, and on TV. These categorise gender through speech. Why is there a need to categorise gender like this?*

Momoko Nakamura: In thinking about the relationship between language and gender, I try to take the perspective of social constructionism. Social constructionism does not deal with reasons but effects. But there are many reasons why a translator has these practises. For instance, the translation company tells them to do it. Or, they are working in a group so they cannot say, "No, I can translate this in a different way." There are many reasons, and if you talk about reasons, it becomes very difficult to get a grasp of the phenomena related to gender. At least I can talk about the effects and the results of such practices. I will mention in my plenary that as for women's language, to translate the speech of non-Japanese women into women's language functions to naturalise Japanese women's femininity, as if women speak like that all over the world—Japanese femininity is associated with the polite, indirect, and soft femininity of Japanese women's language. I will speak about the "cool, laid-back" style of translation of non-Japanese men too, and I will show that it functions to distinguish casual non-Japanese masculinity and potential Japanese masculinities. In other words, by translating non-Japanese speech within a very specific casual style, the translator can tell Japanese people that these are non-Japanese men, and they legitimize acceptable Japanese masculinities which are polite and formal. Those Western men are too casual, and they speak a strange style so those masculinities are not acceptable in Japanese. One of the reasons that non-Japanese men's speech is translated into strange styles is to legitimize the ideal status of polite, formal Japanese masculinity.

JH*: Do you think this "cool, laid-back" style of translation is marginalising?*

Yes, exactly. It serves to marginalise Western masculinities and legitimise hegemonic Japanese masculinities. That is one function, but there are more.

Quenby Hoffman Aoki*: Nobody actually speaks that way in reality, do they? But when people watch a movie, they don't even consciously notice that this is strange speech.*

Are you familiar with the term *yakuwari go*? Fictional characters are often assigned a set of artificial styles of speech that are associated with specific types of characters. They call this economy of interpretation. The casual non-Japanese male style and Japanese women's language have an aspect of this *yakuwari go.* Stereotypical Japanese women's language is not really spoken by Japanese women anymore. However, in fiction, the way a character speaks is often odd. Western women speaking Japanese women's language is like this. Translators that I interviewed said that they noticed that the translation of the speech of non-Japanese women into Japanese women's language, as it is actually spoken, would seem odd to Japanese viewers.

Those female non-Japanese speakers [the characters being translated] have a very large role in maintaining the Japanese tradition of women's language. Isn't it interesting? Although, previously only white women were translated into Japanese women's language, and women of colour, such as the slaves in *Gone with the Wind*, were translated into Tohoku dialect [a lower status Japanese dialect].

JH*: Given what students see of foreigners on TV and the movies, what sorts of preconceptions might they hold about their male or female English teachers?*

It is dangerous to generalise perceptions. Students watch different TV shows and movies. With respect to female English teachers, if students are watching the kind of TV and movies I analyse in my plenary, they expect their non-Japanese women teachers to share the same traditional Japanese femininity, as translations into Japanese women's language make Japanese femininity seem to be something all women are born with. There is the possibility that they see their male teachers as more casual, but it is just a possibility. There are many other ideologies about foreign men and women and also about teachers. Linguistic nationalism, for example, holds that only ethnic Japanese can possess Japanese culture and language. As a result, students may think you cannot understand Japanese. Also, each student has certain expectations of teachers based on their experiences. Students have had more chances to interact with non-Japanese teachers in recent years. Many of such various preconceptions could be interrelated.

QHA*: How much do trends in the popular media influence the way students actually speak and their ideas about gender?*

This question is also very general. Jannis Androutsopoulos said it is getting harder and harder to talk about a one-way influence from the media. Media are participating in SNS. In addition, there is the interesting notion of uptake. Media consumers sometimes use a fragment of language from the media in their own conversation. There is this interaction between media language and speech. From my observation, younger people are much more sensitive than me as to when to use what kind of language.

JH*: How can we make students aware of the potential limitations that gendered language places on their lives?*

Gendered language works in two ways: firstly, as a norm, and secondly, as a resource of identity construction. Japanese students can be restricted by norms. Whenever I give a talk, I ask students, "Have any of your parents told you to talk in a certain way?" Secondly, norms work as resources that students can use. They have the knowledge of language features, and they know the appropriate time and place to use it, who to use it with, and how to use it as a resource to construct their identity. So, when we talk about gender knowledge it is not always limiting. For example, a young female student might speak women's language to an old man at a job interview and masculine language talking to her friends.

JH*: What sorts of barriers might students experience when they enter the workplace because of the way they are expected to express gender in speech?*

Usually they are not expected to express gender too much at the workplace. But for female workers, there are occasions when expectations for the norms of feminine speech will be added on top of the politeness norm. Being polite is important for both boys and girls, so male language is not the norm at the office. Only women's language can be a norm. Nobody tells the boys, "Oh you are a boy. You should talk more impolitely."

QHA*: Have there been changes this century in the way that Japanese use or think about women's or men's language?*

A survey of attitudes toward language shows that compared to 1995, more people in 2000 felt that differentiating between the genders in speech is preferable. They think that this differentiation is traditional. However, in my book, I claim that these differences were actually created by the Japanese government during war time because it was necessary to emphasise that the Japanese language was distinct and superior, in order to convince people in the colonies to learn it.

JH*: How is the knowledge of gendered language taught at schools?*

I studied some of the elementary Japanese *Kokugo* [national language] textbooks. I found a very interesting point. They don't explicitly say that a girl or boy should speak in a particular way. Instead in textbook dialogues for show-and-tell for example, the children use gendered first-person pronouns. Nowhere is there any explanation for this. The differences in first person pronouns are naturalised. If they had explained that they must use different pronouns explicitly, I think students would ask why. Of course, rules for gender equality in textbooks are emphasised nowadays and each textbook must be approved by the education department. But the officials do not notice these differences. In fact, if a boy in a textbook referred to himself as "*watashi,*"[I/me, informal or formal, for both genders] instead of "*boku*" [I/me, informal, male] I simply think it would be considered too formal or unnatural and it would be rejected without any deeper consideration. That is why they need linguists like us to do research—to make them aware of the limitations of norms. When a girl calls herself "*atashi*,"[I/me, informal, female] she learns all the other norms and limitations, too.

QHA*: Does the public familiarity with transgender speech gained from media celebrities such as Matsuko Delux, make it easier or harder for non-heterosexual students to be accepted and participate in class?*

It is better not to generalise. Not all non-heterosexual people like talking using *onee kotoba* [the effeminate speech style of some homosexuals]. But I think such personalities make people aware of gender diversity. The transgender role of TV personalities looms large, as most heterosexual Japanese people have not even had a chance to think about non-heterosexual existence. It is problematic, isn't it? Because you don't see many transgendered people playing normal people. They are often comedians. It is important to show ordinary transgender people living everyday, ordinary lives. That is what TV should show. It is actually very dangerous to talk about transgender people as one group. Some transgender students love going to *Shinjuku 2-chome* [a gay district] because they can speak *onee kotoba.* Others hate it. Most don't always want to reveal their transgender identity.

QHA*: Is this a case of transgender celebrities speaking out and establishing a public presence, but using a voice which could be marginalising because it is very particular?*

Maree Clair writes that it is important to distinguish between the language of *onee talent kotoba* [the language of generally flamboyant male celebrities, often cross-dressing, who claim feminine identities] and *onee kotoba*. Talent use *onee kotoba* to perform a certain character in the media. According to her, talents are depicted in captions as deviant, as monsters, non-normative characters. Other people on the program often make fun of them.

JH*: So, the emergence of transgender celebrities does not necessarily indicate greater acceptance of non-binary genders. Yet, many teachers aspire to create classrooms where students feel safe enough to discuss norms, and to think critically. In reality though, when teachers ask for an answer or an opinion on even simple subjects, Japanese students' speech tends to be indirect, hesitant, and shy. This is generally true for students of any gender. Are there Japanese cultural barriers to speaking up clearly in a confident manner?*

In every country, there is a norm concerning how to behave in a class. From your perspective, Japanese students can be described like that. But from my point of view, they are performing according to norms. When giving an opinion, there are many Japanese formulated expressions or clichés which students use to answer. But they are waiting for an appropriate time to say what they really think. There is an appropriate time. These are Japanese pragmatic norms. It does not mean they are not thinking. They *are*.

QHA*: Do you personally find that speaking and writing in English gives you freedom from any of the normative influences of the Japanese language?*

I feel freer using Japanese. I am Japanese, so I need to push to express myself directly when speaking English. I think academic papers in English may come more swiftly to the point, and I prefer presenting at conferences with international Feminist linguists. However, mainly I feel that what makes me feel freer is age. By the way, when I was study-

ing in California forty years ago, girls waited to be asked to dance. "Coupleness" in America seemed to strongly contradict independence. So I did not feel freer there.

QHA*: I'm thinking about cultural baggage. Can learning a language give a student a new identity and freedom from some of the more restrictive cultural norms?*

A beginner is busy learning vocabulary and pronunciation, but if they have a higher level or study abroad, they may be able to develop another identity. The largest problem I experienced in California was when I was expected to make a choice—such as how to address my professor, or when I was asked about the choice of dressing or sauce in a restaurant.

JH*: Perhaps giving an opinion is also similar to making a choice, as there are so many possible responses. How do we release students from feeling that they can only express opinions in an L1-type formulaic way?*

As I said earlier, formulaic expressions are not necessarily restrictions. Japanese women use these norms as a resource to construct their identity—for example, in a job situation, and it can be creative too. Using forms correctly and appropriately shows their sophistication and ability as a speaker. Then after they establish their credibility, they can give the person their message. But to answer your question, Japanese people like to play a role and they can assume different identities. In the classroom, if you give students a chance to become a teacher (I do that in class), they change. They give orders. I also give them a chance to sing or MC in a karaoke contest and they can really change their personality under the spotlight. I require students to ask questions of guest speakers and give them time to prepare and practise. I think if you tell them the expectations of the teacher and give them the opportunity to do it, they will learn. Did I answer your questions?

Yes, thank you so much for giving your perspective and for such an enjoyable and informative conversation. We are really looking forward to your plenary talk.

Further Reading

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