

Research Forum

Gender, Japanese Pronouns and Social Change: A Preliminary Investigation

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Peng (1973) reported that Japanese female and male junior high school students used different pronoun address systems. His study was replicated, with modifications, in 1993 at a women's junior high school. This newer study found evidence of language change in pronoun use, with current women students feeling comfortable using previously "male" speech.

ジェンダー、日本語の代名詞、社会変化についての予備的考察

Peng(1973)は日本人の中学生が性別によって異なった人称システムを用いていることを報告した。この研究は、Pengの調査を一部改訂して1993年にある女子中学校で再度実施したものである。この研究は、代名詞の使用法に変化が起きていること、女子中学生が「男ことば」を使うことに抵抗を持っていることを明らかにした。

One of the first things a foreigner learning Japanese as a second or foreign language is told is that there are separate "languages" for men and women. This difference has been explored in a rich sociolinguistic tradition of language and gender studies (c.f. Ide, 1982; Ide, Hori, Kawasaki, Ikuta, & Haga, 1986; Ide & McGloin, 1990; Shibamoto, 1985; Smith, 1992; Takahara, 1991).

Smith (1992), in reviewing the literature, finds two main explanations for the differential in male and female speech. The first is the comparatively low status of women in Japan. As Kramer (1975) put it in her study of American address forms, "The asymmetry in address forms points to one way that asymmetry in social rights is reflected and maintained" (p. 209). Ide (1982) sees this asymmetry from a different angle,

claiming that "owing to their label-less status in society" women "by using honorifics, markers of good demeanor, ... try to impress others as being a member of a prestige group" (p. 382). Smith's second explanation finds the differential in the two domains men and women frequent. In Ide et.al.'s (1986) formulation, "men most frequently engaged in interactions in the domains of employment, while women most often engaged in sociable interactions in private domains" (p. 35). This suggests that as women enter the workplace, linguistic change may well follow.

Yet, if language can be shown to be in flux at a point before women join either domain, social or private, it would seem that the argument for differentiation based on status would be supported. Research using a comparative-historical perspective within micro-sociolinguistic analyses could show how language is situated in time and how much it has changed or is changing. A comparative-historical view would also require us to look at different domains within Japanese culture to see where change is occurring and where it is not.

Despite the general interest in Japanese language and gender, little research has been done on an everyday marker of gender difference in language: the male and female pronouns in Japanese. The exception is Peng (1973), who used interviews and questionnaire data in a survey of junior high school students in Tokyo to investigate pronoun usage. Junior high school was chosen as the domain to study because it marks the end of compulsory education and thus provides a wider sample than would be possible later. Peng did his research at three different junior high schools, each one in a different socio-economic area. One hundred and eighty-seven questionnaires (out of 275 given out) were deemed complete enough to analyze. Of the pronouns, only "atakushi" was not investigated; it was not included among the pronouns commonly used by junior high school students (p. 37).

Peng found that first-person pronouns "show complete complementation, in that the male subjects do not use a form that can also be used by the female students and vice versa." Second-person pronouns "show partial complementation; some of these words are shared by both sexes but some others cannot be so shared." Hearer's sex, age and relative status "seem to influence significantly the speaker's choice of a pronoun" (p. 38).

As Paulston (1976) pointed out, pronoun selection can give an interesting window on social change, with linguistic changes following from the social. Much has changed in the twenty years since Peng's study. If we find a different pattern of pronoun use in Japan today, we might

argue that this new pattern mirrors a change (or at least the beginnings of a change) in male/female relationships.

The Study

Because it is the change in women's roles and the subsequent change in their language that is of interest, a women's junior high school was selected for study. Admittedly, this was a convenience sample and some would argue that little can be generalized from it. Peng's sample was not representative of Japan at large either. The school selected is a Christian-affiliated junior high on a campus that also contains a high school and a college with both two- and four-year programs. The school is in the prefectural (indeed regional) capital of an agricultural area known for its conservatism. This conservatism can be seen as part of the argument: if linguistic change is in evidence in a conservative area, it is likely to be seen in the rest of society. A liberal area would not be generalizable in the other direction. The women surveyed are part of a student body of middle- to upper-middle class women who represent a well-off population not known for its cultural radicalism.

The questionnaire took its categories and pronouns from Peng's results, with one exception. Peng found that a large number (66.3%) of female respondents omitted second-person pronouns. Because the variable of interest was the pronouns that are used, my questionnaire substituted "other" for "omitted" and gave a space for comments. Respondents could choose as many "correct" answers as they wished.

Self-report data is notoriously difficult to interpret. An open-ended role play was added to the questionnaire to elicit pronouns in context and to look at the omission of pronouns. A situation revolving around a violation of norms of punctuality was constructed. The respondent was to write a dialog in which she spoke to a friend who had kept her waiting so long that the two of them had missed the beginning of a movie they planned to see together. This situation was chosen because it was hypothesized that, because the Japanese dislike tardiness, the speaker's imagined anger would elicit rougher, less polite, more "male" speech.

A total of 107 third-year (ninth grade) students were surveyed in their home rooms; the questionnaire was in Japanese. The students were asked, "Which pronoun would you use when speaking to the following people?" The people listed were male/female *senpai* (elder), male/female in the same grade and male/female *kobai* (junior).

Definitions

Japanese, when speaking, must assess the relative social importance of the hearer as well as assess his or her age in order to choose the correct pronoun to use. Japanese can also choose to omit the pronoun entirely. It is, however, "the distinction between male and female speech ... [which is], for Japanese, second in sociolinguistic importance only to the distinction between adult and child speech" (Shibamoto, 1985, p. 53). Not only pronouns, but post-positions, verb endings and honorific expressions are differentially used by men and women in Japan. Ide (1982) provides this table, with descending order (most polite to least) and asterisks indicating relative politeness (p. 358; her romanization has been kept):

	Men's Speech	Women's Speech
a.) first person	watakusi** watasi* boku ore	watakusi** atakusi* watasi atashi
b.) second person	anata kimi omae	anata anta

The traditional sociological categories of status, power and age are thoroughly intertwined in the case of Japanese schools. In schools, age is position and power. Everyone has a *senpai*, a superior, and a *kohai*, a subordinate. Even seniors have *senpai*, those who graduated before them. (Rohlen, 1983, p. 190).

Results and Discussion

The complete results are reported in the Appendix, in percentages, with Peng's data on the left and mine on the right in parentheses.

Data analysis presented a number of problems. Because respondents could select more than one pronoun as appropriate, statistical assumptions of independence of observations were not satisfied. This would not have presented an insurmountable problem if the percentages could have been seen as scores and means compared. Because this was a preliminary study, the best solution seemed to be to present the data descriptively, in percentages, let the numbers speak for themselves and perhaps reconsider the design of the questionnaire to make it easier to analyze.

The first thing that is clear from the comparison of 1973 and 1993 data is while no female respondents found "*boku*" or "*ore*" acceptable in 1973, small numbers of women felt free to use these "male" pronouns today, particularly with their same sex/same age peers (1.87% for "*boku*," 4.67% for "*ore*"). They also find these pronouns acceptable when speaking to young men of the same and of lower status. Though "*ore*" was acceptable, no one felt "*boku*" was an option when speaking to female *kobai*. Neither pronoun was acceptable for anyone of higher status.

For second person pronouns, "*omae*" is now considered acceptable for speaking to all but people of higher status and, curiously again, women *kobai*. "*Omae*" has been considered a "male" pronoun. Men use it typically to people of lower status: to younger people or to wives/partners. It can also "be used by older women to address children and pets" though its use even by older women "is very restricted" (Shibamoto, 1985, p. 56). Perhaps it is the masculine nature of the pronoun that makes its use inappropriate when speaking to younger women. Perhaps it is thought best to make an extra effort to be "ladylike" when speaking to one's *kobai*, to be a good example. Why, then, is "*omae*" acceptable when speaking to a male in the same grade (5.6%) or lower grade (4.67%) and to a same sex/same age peer (8.41%)? Follow-up interviews would make this clearer. What is clear is that Japanese junior high school women feel comfortable using language formerly used exclusively by men.

Also evident from the data is an increased casualness. The number of women saying they use "*watakushi*," the most polite form of "I," has decreased while the number using "*anta*," the most casual exclusively "female" pronoun, has increased in all cases. This might be seen as part of an increased sense of equality in Japan, or it might simply reflect adolescent usage that disappears with maturity.

Indeed, the extent to which all of these results may be attributed to the culture of junior high school is an open question. Reynolds (1990, pp. 140-141) notes in passing a rise in young women using "*boku*" in conversations inside school culture, but claims that they code-switch when speaking to people outside school. Reynolds suggests that this is done to equalize a situation in which young women and men are competing for grades. Yet this increased use of "male" pronouns has been documented here in an all-women school. She also asks whether their "rebellious behavior" might be part of adolescence, abandoned when they graduate.

There was some confusion in responses to the second-person question. Twenty-one respondents wrote words like "*sumimasen*," "*ano*," and "*nee*" under "other." These words are equivalent to "Excuse me."

These respondents were apparently unclear whether they were being asked which word they used to address people or whether they were being asked which word they use to catch people's attention. This might reflect confusion over the appropriateness of the second-person pronoun. Peng found that about two-thirds of his women respondents omitted second-person pronouns. Perhaps these 1993 respondents could not imagine using these pronouns and thought that the researcher must mean something else. This is another area that would be interesting to follow up with interviews.

The questionnaire also asked the students to write a dialog responding to this prompt (both the prompt and response were written in Japanese):

You were going to meet your friend. You were going to see a movie together. Your friend came late, so you couldn't see the movie. Write a conversation scolding your friend for coming late.

Of interest was the omission of pronouns. Indeed, only ten respondents (.09%) included any pronoun in their dialog. One respondent included two instances of "*anta*" and underlined both, suggesting she had been primed by the questions above. Of the eleven pronouns included, there were eight instances of "*anta*," two of "*watashi*," and one of "*omae*." The significance of the fact that more pronouns were omitted in this study (99.91%) than in Peng's (66.3%) is unclear. It probably has to do with the nature of the task; Peng asked only for judgments, soliciting no production of language. This once again shows that more than one method of data collection is necessary to get a complete picture of language use.

Conclusion

Despite its preliminary nature, this study does suggest that linguistic data mirrors social change. Japanese society is different today than it was twenty years ago and women's speech is adapting to it (Smith, 1992), apparently at a relatively early age and in a non-co-educational school domain. Some young women who answered my questions are not as gender-bound as their elders. They accept, at least for now, use of "men's" speech by women. Perhaps they feel, or will feel, more comfortable in "men's" roles than their elders. What seems to be clear, given the still small numbers of these women, is that the process of social change is slow.

Gender is not the only place where change has been felt in Japan. Other studies might look at changes within different areas of society, such as in parent/child or employer/employee relationships, to view the fit between societal change and language. Is language mirroring change, running ahead of it, or trailing behind? In these studies, as well, an historical, comparative approach to language and gender studies would prove useful.

Thanks to Christina Bratt Paulston, Marc Helgesen and Robin Guenzel for comments on and support of this project.

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Appendix

First person

	<i>kimi</i>	<i>omae</i>	<i>anata</i>	<i>anta</i>	omit/other
male <i>senpai</i>	0 (0.9)	0 (0)	15 (5.6)	0 (0.9)	83 (26.17)
female <i>senpai</i>	0 (0.9)	0 (0)	12 (3.74)	0 (0.9)	86 (26.17)
male same yr.	7 (3.74)	0 (5.6)	34 (14.95)	2 (25.23)	68 (23.36)
female same yr.	0 (5.6)	0 (8.41)	34 (14.95)	5 (27.1)	59 (23.36)
male <i>kobai</i>	26 (12.15)	0 (4.67)	11 (12.15)	2 (11.21)	56 (21.5)
female <i>kobai</i>	0 (7.48)	0 (0)	48 (16.82)	6 (7.48)	46 (21.5)

Second person

	<i>boku</i>	<i>ore</i>	<i>watashi</i>	<i>atashi</i>	omit/other
male <i>senpai</i>	0 (0)	0 (0)	59 (83.2)	9 (1.87)	9 (1.87)
female <i>senpai</i>	0 (0.9)	0 (0)	62 (82.2)	8 (1.87)	6 (1.87)
male same yr.	0 (0.9)	0 (1.87)	52 (61.7)	4 (0)	0 (1.87)
female same yr.	0 (5.6)	0 (4.67)	51 (64.5)	5 (3.74)	0 (2.8)
male <i>kobai</i>	0 (0.9)	0 (1.87)	60 (68.2)	3 (0)	0 (9)
female <i>kobai</i>	0 (0)	0 (0)	62 (65.4)	8 (0)	7 (2.8)

Peng, 1973 (author, 1993)