Indexical Meaning, Linguistic Ideology, and Japanese Women's Speech

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1. INTRODUCTION*

Gender differences in speech patterns have been widely studied in Japanese sociolinguistics (e.g. Ide 1979, 1982, 1990; Jugaku 1979; Kindaichi 1957; McGloin 1990; Mizutani & Mizutani 1987; Reynolds 1985; Shibamoto 1985, 1990; Smith 1992). A number of linguistic features (e.g. sentence-final particles, honorifics) have been correlated with gender: Compared to Japanese men's speech, Japanese women's speech has been characterized as polite, gentle, nonassertive, and empathetic. Previous studies, often relying on either the researchers' introspection or self-report surveys, have tended to essentialize these differences as constituting distinct Japanese men's and women's languages. However, the actual speech of Japanese men and women does not always conform to such dichotomous categorization. Hence the need for empirical studies of within-gender variation in speech styles is now increasingly being recognized (Jorden 1990; Okamoto & Sato 1992). This study, an extension of my earlier work (Okamoto 1995), examines variation in Japanese women's speech styles through an analysis of actual conversations. Based on my analysis, I will reexamine the relationship between language and gender and consider the nature of the indexical processes in which linguistic forms are related to social meanings.

2. DATA

The data consists of 10 audio-taped informal conversations, each between two close friends. A total of 20 women, all residents of Tokyo, participated as subjects. There were 10 college students, ages 18 to 20, and 10 middle-aged women, ages 43 to 57.¹ The subjects were asked to tape-record their *oshaberi* 'chat' with their close friends for about 45 minutes.² Each conversation was transcribed to obtain 150 consecutive sentence tokens for each speaker.³

I analyzed the uses of four linguistic features that are often associated with gender: 1. sentence-final forms, 2. "vulgar" or "strongly masculine" lexical expressions, 3. honorifics, and 4. the prefix *o-* for nouns.

2.1. Sentence-final forms

For the sentence-final forms, each token was identified as feminine, neutral, or masculine. This identification was based mainly on the classification given in the literature (e.g. McGloin 1990; Mizutani & Mizutani 1987). The feminine and masculine sentence-final forms were further subdivided into moderately feminine/masculine forms and strongly feminine/masculine forms. (See Okamoto & Sato (1992) for a detailed description of the gender classification of sentence-final forms.)

The results of the analysis regarding the use of sentence-final forms are shown in Tables 1-3 below. Table 1 compares the two age groups, and Tables 2 and 3 (next page) show the use by each subject in each group.

TABLE 1. *Use (in %) of gendered sentence-final forms for the two age groups*

Sentence-final forms	Students (ages 18-20)	Middle-aged women (ages 43-57)
Feminine forms	12.3	36.3
• Moderately feminine forms	7.8	18.1
• Strongly feminine forms	4.5	18.2
Masculine forms	18.9	12.3
• Moderately masculine forms	17.5	12.2
• Strongly masculine forms	1.4	0.1
Neutral forms	68.8	51.4
Total	100.0	100.0

The number of subjects is 10 for each age group.

Total number of tokens = 3,000 (150 tokens for each subject)

Although there is wide within-group variation, the older women tended to use more "feminine" sentence-final forms than did the younger women. All the older women except one used "feminine" forms more often than "masculine" forms. In contrast, all the younger women except two used "masculine" forms more often than "feminine" forms. Further, many of the older speakers used "strongly feminine" forms quite frequently, but the younger speakers hardly used them. For example, the younger group used a typical "feminine" particle *wa* only twice in the entire data set. The older group used it 55 times. Most of the "masculine" sentence-final forms used by the subjects were "moderately masculine" forms. But many younger subjects did use "strongly masculine" forms, though on a limited basis. Examples of "strongly masculine" and "strongly feminine" sentence-final forms are shown below:

Examples of "strongly masculine" sentence-final forms

<Students>

(SP1) *Iya, dattee tooi zo.* 'But it's far away.'

... *kamo shin nee kedo ne.* 'It may be that ...'

(SP6) *Nanda yoo.* 'What do you want?'

(SP10) *Katte ni ittero tte.* 'Say whatever you want to say.'

TABLE 2. *Use (in %) of gendered sentence-final forms for individual speakers*
<Students>

SP=speaker; F=feminine forms; MF=moderately feminine forms; SF=strongly feminine forms; M=male forms; MM=moderately masculine forms; SM=strongly masculine forms; N=neutral forms

[illegible]

TABLE 3. *Use (in %) of gendered sentence-final forms for individual speakers*
<Middle-aged women>

[illegible]

Examples of "strongly feminine" sentence-final forms

<Middle-aged women>

(SP3) *Un, sorya omou wa yo.* 'Right, of course, they must think so.'

(SP4) *Ara, ureshii wa.* 'Oh, I'm happy.'

(SP9) *Soo desu tte yo.* 'I hear that's the case.'

(SP10) *Haru-saki datta kashira.* 'Was it early spring?'

2.2. "Vulgar" or "strongly masculine" lexical expressions

In addition to the "strongly masculine" sentence-final forms, the speakers occasionally used lexical items commonly perceived as vulgar, strongly "masculine," or very informal. As shown in Table 4, generally, the younger group used these expressions more than the older group, although one subject in the older group (speaker 7) used 6 such expressions.

TABLE 4. "Vulgar," strongly "masculine," or very informal lexical expressions
Number of tokens per 150 sentences

	SP1	SP2	SP3	SP4	SP5	SP6	SP7	SP8	SP9	SP10	total
students	5	3	3	2	7	9	3	3	1	2	38
middle-aged	1	0	2	1	0	0	6	1	0	0	11

Examples of "vulgar," strongly "masculine," or very informal expressions in the data include:

<students>

koitsu 'this guy'; *aitsu* 'that guy'; *yatsu* 'that guy'; *nama yuu na yo* 'Don't be cheeky'; *bakayaroo* 'stupid'; *toshi kutte n da mon ne* '(she) is older'; *yabai* 'troublesome'; *nukasu* 'say'; *dekai* 'humongous'; *kuu* 'eat/chow down'; *umai* 'delicious'; *mukatsuku* 'angry'

<middle-aged women>

chau chau 'no, no'; *acha kocha* 'here and there'; *furo yatta* 'gave a bath'; *aniki* 'older brother'; *kuso* 'Damn it!'; *mukatsuku* 'angry'; *nyooboo* 'wife'

2.3. Honorifics

The subjects did not use honorifics for each other, because they were close friends. However, when they talked about certain third persons (i.e. their superiors and persons they did not know well), they sometimes used nominal and verbal (referent) honorifics. The use of these honorifics was relatively rare among the younger group (5 instances). In contrast, such honorifics were frequently used by the older group (64 instances). In particular, speakers 5 and 6, who used many "feminine" sentence-final forms, also used such honorifics most frequently. Note, however, that there were also 35 instances in which the older speakers did not use honorifics when applicable. Table 5 summarizes the use and nonuse of (referent) honorifics.

Table 5. *Use and nonuse of referent honorifics*

	Students	Middle-aged women
Number of relevant tokens	43	99
Number of tokens with honorifics	5 (12%)	64 (65%)
Number of tokens without honorifics	38 (88%)	35 (35%)

Examples of the honorifics used by the subjects are shown below:

<students>

(SP1) *Kekkoo otoshi o meshita kata da kara*

'She is a pretty old person, so ...'

(SP8) *dannasan yurushite kureta tte.*

'Her husband allowed her (to go).'

<middle-aged women>

(SP1) *Kore totte kudasatta no ga wakai josee no kata datta n de ...*

'The one who kindly took this (picture) was a young woman, so ...'

(SP5) *Go-shujin mo issho ni irashita kara ...*

'Her husband also came with her, so ...'

(SP6) *Okeeko ni wa ne sore de ii tte ossharu n da kedo.*

'(The teacher) said that for practice that will do.'

2.4. The prefix *o-* for nouns

The prefix *o-* for nouns is said to be used for showing respect or refinement (e.g. Niyekawa 1991). I examined the latter usage, which is considered to be particularly common among women (Martin 1987:332; Mizutani & Mizutani 1987:70-71). The speakers' use of this prefix is shown in Table 6.

Table 6. *Use and nonuse of the prefix o-*

	Students	Middle-aged women
Number of relevant nouns	65	86
Number of nouns with <i>o-</i>	28 (43%)	58 (67%)
Number of nouns without <i>o-</i>	37 (57%)	28 (33%)

Although the data is limited, the older group used this "feminine" *o-* more often than the students did. In particular, speakers 5, 6, and 10, who used numerous "feminine" sentence-final forms, also used this prefix most frequently. But speaker 7 in the older group did not use this prefix at all. Examples of the use and nonuse of *o-* are shown below:

Examples of the use of the prefix *o-*

<students>

o-tomodachi 'friend' (SP1), *o-sashimi* 'sashimi/raw fish' (SP5), *o-uchi* 'house', *o-sakana* 'fish' (SP6), *o-kyuuroo* 'salary' (SP7), *o-wakare* 'farewell' (SP7), *o-bentoo* 'boxed lunch' (SP10)

<middle-aged women>

o-shooyu 'soy-sauce' (SP1), *o-bentoo* 'boxed lunch' (SP2), *o-uchi* 'house' (SP5, SP6), *o-sooji* 'cleaning' (SP5, SP6), *o-tomodachi* 'friend' (SP5, SP10), *o-matcha* 'powdered green tea' (SP5), *o-keeko* 'lesson' (SP6), *o-toire* 'bathroom' (SP6, SP10), *o-benkyoo* 'studying' (SP5, SP6), *o-zashiki* 'drawing room' (SP9), *o-satou* 'sugar' (SP10), *o-furoba* 'bathroom' (SP10), *o-sooshiki* 'funeral' (SP10), *o-senkoo* 'incense stick' (SP10)

Examples of the nonuse of the prefix *o-*, where applicable

<students>

kane 'money' (SP1, SP6), *toire* 'bathroom' (SP3), *futon* 'futon' (SP6), *niku* 'meat' (SP7), *matcha* 'powdered green tea' (SP7), *sara* 'dish' (SP8)

<middle-aged women>

furo 'bath' (SP7), *haka* 'grave' (SP7), *tera* 'temple' (SP7), *kane* 'money' (SP7), *mimai* 'visiting a sick person' (SP7)

3. DISCUSSION

3.1. Norms and Variations in Japanese Women's Speech

The subjects in this study show a great variation in speech styles. Generally, the younger group used "unfeminine" styles more frequently than the older group; the same tendency has also been reported by Okamoto and Sato (1992) and Kobayashi (1993). The present data also show that the within-group variation is much larger in the older group, compared to the younger group. Further, it is noteworthy that several older women used "unfeminine" styles relatively frequently. In fact, only three subjects in the older group (Speakers 5, 6, and 10) used very "feminine" styles--styles that fit the stereotypical women's language.

It has been pointed out that gender distinction in speech style in Japan is more an urban phenomenon than a rural one (Kitagawa 1977:292). Sunaoshi (1995), for example, notes that her subjects, speakers of Ibaraki dialect, rarely used "feminine" forms; in particular those with a thicker regional accent used features considered "masculine" according to the normative characterization. In Tokyo itself there are two regions, *Yamanote* 'the hillside' and *Shitamachi* 'the downtown', although their boundaries are now less clear than they once were. And it is the "feminine" speech style of the former that is usually described as "women's language."⁴ Further, as the present data show, the same speaker may use both "feminine" and "unfeminine" styles, depending on the context (see below for further discussion).

It is evident from these observations that what is commonly characterized as "Japanese women's language" does not accurately reflect Japanese women's actual speech practices. "Japanese women's language," however, is not simply an overgeneralization in linguistic description. Rather, it is a constructed category based on standard Japanese--in particular, the speech style of traditional women in the upscale *Yamanote* area of Tokyo. It is what "proper" women are expected to use; it represents the hegemonic linguistic norm for Japanese women (see also Inoue (1994) and Okamoto (1994, 1995)). Speech styles that do not fit "women's language" may be criticized as unfeminine, unattractive, ignorant, and symptomatic

of improper upbringing. Such ideological conflicts are sometimes expressed in the media:

It's tasteless—Women's use of men's language

... young women have even started using men's language. Speaking in men's language is one thing, but there are girls who even use dirty words such as "*Aitsu, nani nebokete yagandai. Bakkeyaroo. Fuzakenjane yo*" ['That guy, is he sleeping or something? You fool. Cut the crap.'], which makes me wonder how in the world their parents and teachers are raising them. But then, their mothers are also actively using men's language. On TV, I even saw a female professor using men's language proudly; I felt it was deplorable and questioned her educational level. ... In Japan there is an attractive and adorable women's language. ... (Letter from a 59-year-old man to the readers' columns, *Asahi Shinbun*: November 2, 1992, translated from the Japanese original)

It is often said that young women nowadays--whether they are students or working women--cannot use honorifics well. ... I sometimes hear female teachers use the same language as male teachers. ... women using men's language unnaturally. Are they ignorant or lazy, or are they making foolish efforts not to be dominated by men? (Sumie Tanaka, *Kashikoi Hito ni Narinasai*, 1986; translated from the Japanese original)

3.2. Gender, Indexicality, and Linguistic Ideology

Thus Japanese women do not always speak in stereotypical feminine styles. The use of "masculine" forms by women indicates that language cannot be directly related to gender, as assumed by the notions of distinct male and female languages. Gendering language, or treating linguistic forms as direct indexes of gender, is problematic in two respects: One is the treatment of gender as a unified category functioning as an independent social variable, and the other the direct mapping of linguistic forms to a social aspect of the context. My analysis suggests that social categories, such as gender, status, and intimacy, cannot be abstracted from the context as independent variables determining language choice (see also Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992). Rather, the choice of speech styles is a strategy based on a speaker's consideration of multiple social aspects of the context (e.g. gender, age, intimacy, domain, speech-act type) as well as on the speaker's linguistic ideology, or beliefs and attitudes concerning language use. Based on their perception of multiple social aspects of the context, actors employ the linguistic expressions they consider most appropriate.

Treating linguistic forms as direct indexes of gender leaves little room for linguistic variation and change. Drawing on studies such as Silverstein (1979; 1985; 1992) and Irvine (1992), I argue that in order to adequately account for speech-style variations in Japanese, we need to consider the complex nature of indexical processes in which the relation between social contexts and forms of speaking are mediated by linguistic ideologies. Ochs (1993:146) claims that the relation between language and gender is mediated and constituted through the pragmatic meanings of linguistic features, such as affective stances, social acts, and social activities. For example, she explains that certain sentence-final particles in Japanese (e.g. *ze* and *wa*) directly index affective stances of "coarse versus delicate intensity," which in turn relate to gender and gender images as indirect indexes

(1993:150-151). The notion of indirect index is particularly important in accounting for many apparently inconsistent uses of "gendered" linguistic forms. Ochs, however, focusing on stereotypical speech styles for men and women, does not analyze the multiplicity and diversity of linguistic ideologies that mediate indexical processes. As the results of the present study indicate, not all Japanese women wish at all times to project the image of "traditional" femininity through the use of "women's language." The expression of femininity or masculinity itself also depends on the individual.

Furthermore, the pragmatic meanings of "gendered" linguistic forms may not necessarily be associated with femininity or masculinity. Rather, depending on the social context, they may be thought to indirectly index other social meanings. For example, in choosing linguistic forms characterized as "masculine" in the normative usage, women may express--through their pragmatic meanings (e.g. directness and assertiveness)--various social meanings, such as intimacy, solidarity, power, emotions (e.g. anger), and speech-act types (e.g. criticism). On the other hand, the indirectness or formality of linguistic forms regarded as "feminine" may be interpreted as implicating such social meanings as class status, distance, and speech-act types (e.g. sarcasm). In other words, the potential values of indirect indexes of linguistic forms are multiple and indeterminate. (See also Faier (1995), in which she argues that the relation between language and gender may shift between utterances, even if the same linguistic features are employed.)⁵ I argue that the same linguistic form, or its pragmatic meaning, may be interpreted differently (as indirect indexes) due to the diversity of linguistic ideologies that mediate the relation between the pragmatic meaning of the linguistic form and the social aspects of the context, including gender. Associating, for example, the delicate intensity of the particle *wa* with femininity and the coarse intensity of the particle *ze* with masculinity is not automatic, but rather based on one's particular attitude toward speech styles. Different attitudes thus may evoke different associations.⁶ In the remainder of this paper, I will elaborate on this argument, using examples from the data.

3.3. Indexical Meanings in Specific Social Contexts

As we saw earlier, the young speakers in the present study rarely used "strongly feminine" sentence-final forms (e.g. *wa*, *kashira*). However, they did use them when quoting their mothers and female teachers. Some young women told me that they think feminine speech is elegant and nice, but they do not want to use it. They also said they find the use of feminine speech styles among themselves to be inappropriate because they sound "*aratamatta*" (formal) and "*kidotta*" (prudish). "Strongly feminine" particles, such as *wa* and *kashira*, make speech acts indirect or less assertive (Ide 1990; Reynolds 1985; Uyeno 1971), which in turn may be interpreted as indexing distance. On the other hand, the younger group used "moderately masculine" sentence-final forms (e.g. *da*, *da yo*) frequently. A number of young women told me that they do not perceive "moderately masculine" sentence-final forms to be masculine at all. For them, the directness or assertiveness of such forms seems to index intimacy rather than roughness.

The young group also used "vulgar" or "strongly masculine" expressions (i.e. sentence-final forms, lexical items) but their uses were very limited. Some of the subjects explained that they use such expressions only with close peers. Although their use of "moderately masculine" forms is rather casual, their use of

"strongly masculine" forms seems to be a highly conscious decision. Subjects often qualified "strongly masculine" expressions by giggling or using hedges. Such devices indicate that the speakers are aware of the "markedness" (Ochs 1993:154) of these forms, particularly for conversations that are recorded. Yet they choose to use them, which in turn serves to reinforce solidarity. Further, young subjects used "vulgar" expressions for emphasis, when telling a joke, or when criticizing or protesting. And one of the older subjects used "vulgar" expressions (e.g. *kusho!* 'Damn it!') when expressing her anger toward her in-laws. These examples suggest that women may use "strongly masculine" or "vulgar" forms to express their emotions or particular types of speech-acts.

Turning to the older group: According to the normative characterization, the conversation between speakers 5 and 6 is "feminine," while that between speakers 7 and 8 may be considered "unfeminine." However, the two conversations may also be perceived differently. Speakers 5 and 6 are married to white-collar businessmen and have recently started working part-time as secretaries. They became friends through a tea ceremony class. Speaker 7 is a manager at a craft shop; she is a widow, raising three children. Speaker 8 is married to a white-collar businessman and has a part-time job as a computer technician. During the interview, Speaker 7 criticized the *yamanote* style of "feminine" speech as insincere and as a device for distancing. Thus the indirect and relatively formal speech styles of speakers 5 and 6 could be interpreted as an index of class status or even as a device for distancing. On the other hand, the direct and forceful speech styles of speakers 7 and 8 may be intended as expressions of intimacy or solidarity.

As we saw, there was also wide variation in the speakers' use of (referent) honorifics. The use of honorifics is often explained by directly linking it with social relations such as status difference and degree of intimacy (e.g. Harada 1976; Niyekawa 1991). Moreover, women are said to use honorifics more often than men (Ide 1990; Niyekawa 1991). These explanations may concur with the canonical honorific usage, but in actual speech speakers do not always follow such conventions. For example, there were many instances in the present data in which speakers did not use referent honorifics when talking about their superiors or people whom they did not know well. However, these speakers did use (both referent and addressee) honorifics in the conversations I had with them, which were carried out in formal styles. The nonuse of referent honorifics in the data, then, seems primarily motivated by the concern that the formality expressed toward the referent who is not present might be taken as a sign of formality or distance toward the addressee, hence inappropriate for a conversation between close friends.

According to Ide (1982:382), Japanese women may also use honorifics and formal forms "to impress others as being a member of a prestigious group." Thus the frequent uses of referent honorifics by some of the older subjects may also be taken as an index of class status. In sum, depending on the situation, referent honorifics may indirectly index a variety of social meanings, such as the referent's higher social status, distance vis-a-vis the addressee, the speaker's class status, and femininity. The multiple indexical values of honorifics can be adequately accounted for only by considering the linguistic ideologies that mediate the process of applying honorifics in specific social situations.

4. CONCLUSION

As the examples discussed above illustrate, the choice of indexical expressions, such as sentence-final forms, lexical items, and honorifics, cannot be

correlated with a single social variable. Rather, speakers' choices reflect the consideration of multiple social aspects of the context, including the attributes associated with identity and relationship (e.g. gender, age, social class, intimacy), the types of domain or genre, and the types of speech acts. The examples also demonstrate the ways in which linguistic ideologies mediate the relation between the social aspects of contexts and forms of speaking, and how linguistic ideologies may lead to variations in the use and interpretation of indexical expressions. Further, the choice of linguistic expressions may sometimes involve an ideological conflict, as suggested by the way younger subjects used "vulgar" forms (with qualifiers). To give another example, in Japan professional women, such as teachers and politicians, are often criticized for their unfeminine speech styles, as illustrated by the media excerpts in section 3.1. However, as Reynolds (1990:138) explains, such usage by professional women may be intended to strengthen solidarity without losing authority--i.e. to express and construct both power and solidarity. In other words, women may at times employ "unfeminine" expressions, even when they are aware of their social markedness. In sum, whether marked or unmarked, Japanese women select the linguistic strategies that they find most appropriate in a given social situation in order to communicate desired social meanings.

NOTES

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¹All of the college students were attending private colleges: Speakers 1-8 were attending a two-year women's college, and speakers 9 and 10 a four-year coed college (see Table 2). Three of the middle-aged women (speakers 3, 7, 9 in Table 3) had full-time jobs; one of them (speaker 1) worked for the family business; five of them (speakers 2, 5, 6, 8, 10) had part-time jobs, although they identified themselves as housewives; only one of them (speaker 4) was a full-time housewife.

²The college students' conversations (the same ones used in Okamoto (1995)) were tape-recorded in 1992, and the middle-aged women's conversations in 1993. Topics for conversation were not specified, although sample topics were suggested, among them school matters, friends, shopping, and travel.

³This study employs basically the same method of data collection and analysis as used in Okamoto and Sato (1992) and Okamoto (1995). See these previous studies for a detailed description of the kinds of sentence tokens that were not included in the analysis.

⁴See Kondo (1990) and Okamoto (1995) for further discussion of *Yamanote-kotoba* and *Shitamachi-kotoba*.

⁵For example, Faier (1995:7) points out that "accommodating language"--the communicative style of WMC U.S. American mothers (Ochs 1993)--may be used by women sarcastically to patronize, that it may be used when speaking to a pet to "humanize" the animal, and that it may also be used by men/fathers.

⁶It is possible that the interpretation of the pragmatic meanings of linguistic forms themselves are mediated by linguistic ideologies. For example, the pragmatic meaning of the particle *wa* may be interpreted as delicate intensity or indirect assertion; and that of the particle *ze* as coarse intensity or forceful assertion. Further study must consider this issue.

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