

# Re-examining Gender Differences in Contemporary Japanese Speech Patterns

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#### 審査結果の要旨

##### Summary

This dissertation questions whether gendered speech is actually used in contemporary Japanese. Ms. Nishimura started her investigation with an experiment conducted with university students. In conversations with their peers, the students did not use those linguistic forms traditionally defined as “feminine speech markers” in Japanese. This discovery led Ms. Nishimura to further pursue the question of whether gendered speech actually exists in contemporary Japanese language use. Using questionnaires as well as empirical data, the researcher pursued her intuitive conviction that, while Japanese native speakers of various ages pay lip service to the existence of gendered differences in Japanese, in practice there is little empirical evidence for such a claim.

Ms. Nishimura’s original interest in the question of gendered language came from her study of such popular treatises as Deborah Tannen’s *You Just Don’t Understand* and John Gray’s *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*. While these works are not empirical studies of an academic nature, they greatly influenced popular perceptions of differences in male and female language use. These works, according to Ms. Nishimura’s analysis, belong to the “cultural difference” group of studies on gendered speech.

The researcher also examined “deficit” models of women’s language such as Robin Lakoff’s *Language and Women’s Place*, a work that asserts that gendered speech differences

reflect social inequalities. Lakoff's work elaborates the features of "feminine speech" such as nonassertive patterns of employing question intonation with declarative sentences, the use of tag questions, the overuse of polite forms, etc. Ms. Nishimura used some of Lakoff's criteria to test for the presence of such "gendered differences" in the data she gathered from experiments and questionnaires. "Cultural difference" models from the 80's are also considered in the dissertation as providing possible markers for the detection of gendered speech. Ms. Nishimura employs ideas from Daniel Maltz and Ruth Borker's "A Cultural Approach to Male-Female Miscommunication," including their assertions that women question more, make greater efforts at facilitation, and use more inclusive pronouns in their speech.

While such Western studies were the root of Ms. Nishimura's research interest, her research question is about the extent to which such gendered language differences exist in Japanese. A pioneering work on the applicability of Western formulations of linguistic gender differences to Asian subjects that serves as a bridge for the researcher is K. Ahmad's "An Empirical Test of the Propositions by Gray and Tannen Relating to Gender Communication in Malaysia." Ahmad's conclusion in his study of communication within the Malaysian post office system was that communication styles were not related to gender and that the gendered language picture drawn by Gray and Tannen did not apply to Malaysia.

Ms. Nishimura points out that studies of gendered language in Japanese have stereotypically focused on differences in men's and women's language. The majority of such studies look at interactions between men and women, or on language exchange between women. There has not been much research on language exchange between men. This researcher takes note of Y. Matsumoto's claim that Japanese women's language is not homogeneous even within similar boundaries of class and geographic region. Studies of pronoun use have often been carried out in analyses of gendered Japanese speech. While many studies have described feminine speech formulas, researchers have noted that language use is changing among young people and some traditionally masculine speech forms have been adopted by young females.

Ms. Nishimura carried out a survey to obtain data on Japanese native speakers' beliefs about gendered elements in contemporary Japanese language use.

There were 75 respondents, between the ages of 21 and 60. All respondents were part of a university community in Hiroshima, either students, staff, or faculty. All participants were volunteers.

She listed 20 statements from Tannen describing gender differences in language

between men and women. These statements were well known gender stereotypes such as “Men interrupt women more in conversation,” “Men are less likely to open up and discuss personal matters,” “Women want to chat to keep in touch,” etc. Respondents were asked to choose between three options: agree, neither agree nor disagree, or disagree. Prior to responding to these items, respondents were asked three questions about their opinions on whether gendered language existed in Japanese, whether they would describe their own language as masculine or feminine, and whether they had ever been told that their language was particularly masculine or feminine.

A high percentage of respondents answered positively to the question of whether gendered speech exists in Japanese. As for the question regarding the gendered nature of their own speech, more than half of male respondents answered that they considered their own speech to be masculine, while almost exactly half of female students thought their speech could be considered feminine. These students said they preferred to use neutral language. Some female students felt that the Hiroshima dialect made their speech more masculine than what they imagined the standard to be.

As for the respondents’ evaluation of Tannen’s statements, Ms. Nishimura found a high percentage of female subjects agreed with Tannen’s claims, while men showed weak support for the statements, supporting only 7 of the 20 statements. One conclusion found in this part was that women are more likely than male respondents to stereotype the speech of other woman and men.

The last section of Chapter Three presented three statements regarding communication styles adapted from Gray’s book *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*. Here again the purpose was to determine if the respondents agreed with the validity of these statements for Japanese speakers. Almost all female respondents agreed with Gray’s interpretation of such statements as “I am so tired, I can’t do anything,” “This house is always a mess,” and “Everyone ignores me.” Once again, however, male respondents showed little assent to Gray’s interpretations of these statements.

Chapter Four reports on the researcher’s experiment in interactive communication conducted with her own senior students at the university. Twenty females and twenty males took part in this project, in which pairs of students discussed what their favorite movie was. The exchange took place in coffee shops or classrooms or other settings where the students could be informal and relax. The conversations were recorded on video and then analyzed by the

researcher.

Ms. Nishimura used the analytic techniques of conversation analysis. Data analysis was derived from the researcher's repeated viewings and transcriptions of the student's interactions. Quantitative analysis was used in cases where occurrences of communicative strategies were counted to determine whether some students were more dominant or cooperative than others. Tag questions, interruptions, backchannels, pronoun choice, objections, neglect, topic changes were among strategies analyzed in a quantitative way.

While Western research into gendered language has asserted that backchannels such as yes, ok, that's right, yeah, really, uh-huh, mhm indicate that someone is listening and that such speech behavior is characteristic of women's speech, Ms. Nishimura discovered in her study that males used more backchannels than females. The same type of discovery came with her investigation of tag questions. Tag questions have been described as more characteristic of women's speech in Western research, and claims have been made that they indicate a lack of confidence on the part of the speaker. In Ms. Nishimura's research, she found that men used tag questions 84 times as opposed to 71 times on the part of females.

While Ms. Nishimura's project did show that men interrupted women more than vice versa—a rather famous characteristic of male speech in Western research on gendered language—she found that such interruption was more involved with teasing and playfulness, and did not seem to cause any resentment at perceived loss of power. In general, her findings showed that these young student subjects did not conform to stereotypes of gendered language, but tended to use neutral forms.

This dissertation also examines the speech of working adults to see how social status affects the use of gendered speech. Anticipating that her study with student participants might be criticized for examining young people in relations of friendship and without any difference in social status, Ms. Nishimura also conducted a conversation experiment with middle-aged participants working at her university.

Once again, the conversations were video-recorded for later analysis. The participants were instructed to engage in a conversation on a topic of their choice. In her analysis of these conversations, Ms. Nishimura found that the middle-aged subjects did not conform to gender stereotypes with regard to such distinctive features as sympathetic responses, politeness, topics, disclosure, and gossip, features which have been described as

gender-specific in Western research. The participants' solidarity seemed to be more influential than gender stereotypes in determining their communication.

#### Evaluation

The committee felt that Ms. Nishimura's research was a genuine contribution to the literature on gender stereotypes in Japanese. We hope she will continue to contribute to the field, exploring these deviations from stereotypical expectations in more depth. Her interest in the field was kindled by her reading of those popular books by Tannen and Gray mentioned above. The committee had some reservations about such heavy reliance on Tannen, not only because it was not really an example of academic research, but also because it is quite dated at this point, and more recent research points out some deficiencies in Tannen's work.

Another point the committee focused on was the gender imbalance in Ms. Nishimura's questionnaire. As her university is a women's institution it is natural that her access to respondents should be easier with female subjects, but the ratio of male to female in the questionnaire section was too heavily female at 62 versus 13 male respondents. In her investigations into conversational interaction (Chapters 4 and 5) a good gender balance is maintained. The committee pointed out these shortcomings, but still felt that Ms. Nishimura's work was a valuable contribution to the field, and hence voted to award this researcher the Doctor of Philosophy degree in English.