

# Re-examining Gender Differences in Contemporary Japanese Speech Patterns

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This dissertation aims to examine the differences in Japanese communication styles that are alleged to exist between genders. Differences in communication are often said to lead to misunderstanding between men and women. In other words, the main question posed in this study is whether the differences are related to gender.

This study examines how the style of conversation presented by Tannen are valid when applied to Japanese communication. We might think that there is gendered communication, but some scholars have become dubious about the credibility of the principles. I have undertaken this study more broadly with a view to gender styles in communication, and the validity of gendered communication applied to Japanese communication. This study explores the communicative strategies used by Japanese males and females in informal interactions.

There are many studies regarding male and female differences in the Japanese language (Inoue, 2006; Shibamoto Smith, 2003; Tanaka, 2009; Unser-Schutz, 2015). The majority of the studies focus on mixed-sex interaction, but empirical studies on single-sex interaction are rarely examined. This research analyzes Japanese all-male conversations and Japanese all-female conversations, focusing on stereotypically gendered communication styles. In this dissertation, employing methods of conversation analysis, I explore 1) language attitude and actual languages in terms of different generations and 2) Japanese translations of English conversations in movies, comparing whether Japanese translations are affected by the social norms.

In Chapter One, the goal of this study was to identify gender difference in language use empirically and to engage in empirical discussions about the language-gender relationship: e.g., whether women's language use has been changing or whether there is actually gender difference in language use. Part One of Chapter One indicated that it was difficult to separate an effect between biological and social factors that eventually leads to masculine and feminine behaviors. In Part Two the contents of each chapter were discussed briefly.

Summarizing the discussion up to this point, the following definition of gender can be outlined. Gender is a dynamic concept associated with factors, such as the speaker's sex, the speaker's action, and the speaker's role in the action, and the speaker's social relation to the interlocutor. Relying on these factors, the degree of masculinity and femininity will be adjusted. Therefore, gender is considered as follows.

- 1) Gender is not determined before birth, but it is constructed in the interaction between an individual and society;
- 2) Gender exhibits different behavior according to a situation;
- 3) Gender is unconsciously learned. Therefore, the correction of sexism does not automatically happen without conscious effort; and
- 4) Gender is constantly varying as an individual's environment changes. That is to say, an individual uses language variation in a particular situation.

Chapter Two provided a synopsis of related research, both in the Western culture and in Japan. Scholars have produced knowledge of how women speak differently from men, using both empirical and case study evidence. They have systematically examined male-female differentiation at all levels of language, such as semantics, morphology, syntax, speech acts, and discourse, as well as extralinguistic features, such as female-specific values, and social roles which are associated with speech forms in conversation. In addition, pronouns and final particles were said to function as exclusive gender markers indexing femininity and masculinity. Women's language was thus considered as a set of linguistic forms and functions of language used by women and often registered with polite, empathetic, and nonassertive.

Gender differences can be identified in the English language. These range from differences in vocabulary to communicative styles, such as the differences between what Tannen (1990) calls rapport talk and report talk in her best seller *You just don't understand: Women and men in conversation*. For a woman, the language of conversation is primarily a language of rapport. Tannen puts emphasis on establishing rapport by sharing her personal experience. On the contrary, a man uses report talk, gathering information and giving a report. It might be an explanation that men and women learn their styles of talking in sex-separate peer groups. In this sense, they grow up in different cultural environments, so they develop different habits for expressing their understandings.

Gray (1992) claims in his best seller *Men from Mars and women from Venus* that one gender is not better or worse at communicating, but just different. *Men from Mars and women from Venus* speak different languages. The men's and women's languages have the same words, but the way they are used gives different meanings. Their expressions are similar, but they have different connotations. That is to say, the men's and women's languages have the same words, but their expressions have different connotations. Thus Gray focuses on how communication styles can create misunderstandings and disappointments, and then how women and men can deal with each other.

On the other hand, Gray's work is not supported by empirical research, and indeed his statements are often contradicted by the findings of other researchers (Ahmad, 2012; Cameron, 2007). Gray and Tannen claim that there are certain styles in which men and women communicate. However, this is now controversial since not everyone agrees with them.

The stereotype of women's and men's communicative styles also applies in Japanese, e.g., women's speech is associated with politeness whereas men's speech is associated with assertiveness. However, recent studies challenge the dichotomous description of gender since women's language is diverse (Cameron, 2007; Tanaka, 2009). For example, exploring the communicative strategies used by Japanese males and females in television interviews, Tanaka (2009) shows that female guests are more assertive than male guests. In fact, Japanese women's language seems to be not as polite as was previously believed. It is therefore unreasonable to associate a communicative strategy with a specific gender because of the variation within the conversations of both men and women.

Empirical studies on single-sex interaction are concerned in this dissertation. In Japan, some researchers assert that women use more feminine-styled strategies in all-female interactions than in mixed-sex interactions (Tanaka, 2009). In addition, studies done outside Japan revealed further distinctions. For instance, in a study conducted in Netherlands schools, female students in the all-female dyads were similar in interactive behaviors or post-performance to males. Female students in all-female dyads had a more balanced interactive style than female students in the mixed-gender dyads (Harskamp, Ding, & Suhre, 2008). It is thus worth highlighting the empirical studies on single-gender conversations.

Chapter Three verified the awareness of native speakers of Japanese about differences in the Japanese language between men and women by means of a written questionnaire. The participants generally shared a common knowledge about these differences, but they did not actually use in the real world the characteristics mentioned. Women's language was also a self-conscious parameter of social change. An opinion poll was conducted on whether women's language is becoming corrupted and if it is true, how it accounts for. This linguistic consciousness of how women speak was related to notions of culture in the assumption that women's language is uniquely Japanese. Women's language was thus viewed as a tradition against the Western countries and modernity, whose speech forms had been lost. Such an image of the loss of women's language was shared in this chapter.

In this chapter the awareness of Japanese native speakers on differences in language use between men and women is discussed. In 2017, a questionnaire was conducted among 75 native speakers of Japanese to examine differences in language use. The participants were all volunteers and they were between the ages of twenty-one and sixty. The questionnaire is divided into three distinct sections. The first section asks the participants about the male and female differences in the Japanese language. This section is concerned with the participant's own language. The second section consists of example stereotypes to be judged as men's and women's characteristic styles. The examples of each characteristic are mostly based on the propositions of Tannen (1986, 1990, 1994). The third section contains three statements derived from Gray (1992) to test if the participants agree with Gray.

Part One comprises of three questions: Do you feel there are any differences in the use of the Japanese language between males and females?; As a male or a female respectively, do you think that the Japanese language you are using sounds masculine or feminine?; Have you ever been told that the Japanese language you use sounds masculine or feminine? The main purpose of these questions is to detect whether there are any differences between male and female respondents when describing themselves. A majority of the male and female participants believed the existence of male-female language differences in the Japanese. However, less than those participants, who believed the existence of male-female language differences, agreed with actually using male sounding language or female sounding language respectively. Furthermore, very few of the participants were pointed out by others about their use of male sounding language or female sounding language.

Part Two comprises of 20 statements related to propositions by Tannen (1986, 1990, 1994). The purpose is to test whether there is indeed such a prevailing stereotype and whether Tannen's propositions could be replicated in Japan. The results showed weak support of men and strong support of women. Only 7 out of 20 statements were agreed by men, whereas 15 out of 20 statements were agreed by women. Thus the propositions of Tannen could not have been said to have successfully replicated overall in this study. However, one interpretation of these findings could be that women are more likely than men to hold stereotypes about other men and women.

Part Three comprises of three statements related to communication styles adapted from the book *Men are from Mars, women are from Venus* (Gray, 1992) to test if the participants agree with Gray. Any differences were hardly found between men and women among the three statements: "I am so tired, I can't do anything"; "This house is

always a mess”; and “Everyone ignores me.” In the light of the propositions that Gray stated in his book, Gray’s propositions about the three statements interpreted by a woman were actually true with many Japanese females. However, Gray’s propositions about the three statements interpreted by a man indeed cast great doubt on reliability.

The results of the questionnaire in Chapter Three show that a consensus among the participants exists about the differences in language use between men and women, although they do not actually use the characteristics in the real world. Furthermore, the participants know what characteristics of language men and women use in Japanese. Inoue (2006) asserts in her book *Vicarious language* that a public opinion survey is a useful technology for constructing knowledge of the society, but rather than merely reflecting existing beliefs, opinion surveys add a particular piece of knowledge in the common sense. Inoue examined a survey titled “Women and Language” conducted by NHK (the Japan Broadcasting Corporation) in 1986. It was administered to 363 working women in Tokyo, aged twenty and older. Inoue explains that the majority of the respondents agree or more or less agree that women’s language has become more masculine and that feminine characteristics of speech have diminished and thus women’s language have already started to change into modernity in Japan since three decades ago. The results of the survey seem to resemble findings in diminishing women’s language in this study.

Chapter Four addressed language choice of males and females individually. The fact is that most women in Japan did not systematically learn the speech forms identified as women’s language in their conversation. Particularly young people in the cultural and regional categories would tell us that statements such as “men and women speak differently” did not apply to their everyday linguistic experience. They were likely to be freed from an obsession about women’s language.

This study investigates the gender differences of Japanese communication, focusing on how valid Tannen’s styles are for Japanese communication. This project will use data that was collected by the researcher. Participants in the project were 20 males and 20 females aged 21-22 years at the time of the video recording. All participants in this study were university students. The opinion-exchange task involved a pair of same-gender participants exchanging opinions concerning their favorite movies. These sessions were video-recorded in their entirety by the researcher’s students. These participants carried out their recorded conversations in comfortable places such as restaurants, coffee shops, classrooms, and their homes. The proposed project focused on the video-recorded communication task, describing aspects of verbal and non-verbal communication.

Completion of the communication task took 5 minutes.

This study uses the analytic techniques of conversation analysis concerned with the organization of social action in interaction. The transcripts show aspects of speech content and provide a detailed record of the practices used during the opinion-exchange task interactions. A quantitative analysis was used where occurrences of strategies were counted in order to determine whether some speakers were more dominant or cooperative than others. Using a quantitative approach, this study analyses the following types of communicative strategies used by male and female in informal interactions; backchannels, tag questions, interruptions, pronouns, objections, neglect, topic changes, and assertions.

My analyses take account of the function of features of men's and women's speech and reveal how the male/female solidarity is associated with the speech of young men and women. The solidarity dimension is indeed influential. For example, when men talk to men in this study, their conversations focus on aggression and teasing. On the other hand, when women talk to women, their conversations share the feeling and affiliation with others. This study shows as follows: The *mhm* (*un* in Japanese) men use more frequently means "I'm listening" as well as "I'm agreeing"; Men and women ask the same amount of tag questions in an effort to build a relationship; and Men use interruptions a little more than women do. Also, men show a tendency to use the first-person singular pronoun *I* far more than women do, as Pennebaker (2011) indicates. This evidence may indicate that men are more self-aware and self-focused than women are. In same-sex conversation, not only men but also women frequently dispute, ignore, assert, and try to control what topics are discussed, but the differences in the use of the strategies between women and men are subtle.

The quantitative analysis shows in most cases that men and women are not using stereotypically masculine/feminine forms that the literature asserts that they use; in fact, the men and women favor neutral forms. Although men and women do use these forms occasionally, quantitative analysis alone does not give us any insight into the ways in which men and women, particularly young men and young women, are using these stereotypical masculine/feminine forms. I then look at qualitatively through a close discourse analysis, wherein this analysis shows how the men and women use stereotypically gendered styles to assert their own opinions.

The quantitative analysis shows that men and women, all university students from the western region of Japan, are most frequently choosing gender-neutral forms. However, when the men do opt to use such forms, there seems to be the intensity of self-display that

reflects a cultural expectation that young male students can be more stereotypically masculine than young female students. My analyses show that speech styles of Japanese men and women are not consistent as often implied in the literature. The men and women within the same age speak more alike.

In this study, the stereotype of women's and men's communicative styles often does not apply in Japanese. In light of the quantitative results, this phenomenon shows evidence that male and female university students are not conforming to a stereotype. This also suggests that the result of little difference between men's and women's speech behavior in same-sex conversation refers to the status and power dimension, which is relatively equivalent in this study.

Chapter Five compared male and female workers in different social positions with the youths in Chapter Four, on the level of actual language use. In general, different social positions were assumed to influence to differences between the language choice of males and females, because society expects them to speak differently (e.g., more politely) dependent on social factors such as status or age. Rather, there was variation in language use among them beyond such social factors. The language choice of males and females was more likely related to the relationship of solidarity as well as individual preference. In other words, the participants seemed to change their speech forms in informal conversations according to solidarity, yet within the range of society's expectation. If speakers deviate from a permissible range of solidarity, for example, they will be in trouble with "*tameguchi*" or "*tamego*" referring to casual talk (possibly too casual). This phenomenon has been one of Japan's social issues reported repeatedly through the media.

Since the language use of Japanese youths makes no such gender-based distinctions, as mentioned in Chapter Four, any differences can be explained by examining social norms. This chapter examines how men and women with a different status use gender styles. The researcher directly approached potential participants who are her colleagues at a university. Participants in the project were four males and four females aged between the 40's and 50's at the time of the video recording. A pair of same-gender participants were employed in exchanging opinions about any topics they chose. These sessions were video-recorded in their entirety by the researcher. These participants carried out their recorded conversations in the researcher's office after chatting for a while. Completion of the communication task took between 20 and 40 minutes.

This study uses the same analytic techniques of conversation analysis in Chapter Four. Objective of conversation analysis is to identify the recurrent practices of interaction and the transcripts provide a detailed record of the practices used during the



opinion-exchange task interactions. Data analysis involved the researcher repeatedly watching and transcribing the video recordings, and then analyzing them qualitatively. This study analyses the following characteristics of communication used by male and female in informal interactions: sympathetic responses, raise, politeness, topics, disclosure, and gossip.

Chapter Five challenged this model of the authentic Japanese males and females and their concomitant speaking styles by looking empirically at the linguistic practices of them. Overall, men and women did not necessarily use the speech styles that they are stereotypically assumed to use. As a result of the analysis focused on distinctive features such as sympathetic responses, raise, politeness, topics, disclosure, and gossip, the patterns hardly showed prominent differences between men and women, regarding their social status. Furthermore, their solidarity and individual preference seemed rather influential in their use of informal communication styles.

In general, it was said that women tend to discuss their personal lives, but men tend to discuss impersonal matters rather than personal relationships. In this study, however, both men and women talked about their relationships, children, and feelings about other people, in order to create a sense of in-group solidarity. If female speech style is a way of talking which solidifies relationships between women, then men's talk would appear to serve a very similar purpose for men.

In the light of this connection between a particular style of discourse and gender, I wish to move away from the traditional assumption that women's language is a way of talking peculiar to women. Men also participate in women's language. The main difference is that the seemingly casual and superficial talk of men is rarely defined as such. It showed here how the functional elements of female talk can equally be applied to the way in which some men talk. However, the data of this project is so limited that more investigation for evidence of the gender differences of Japanese communication will be needed.

Chapter Six analyzed English and American movies where "men and women speak differently" in Japanese. Men and women encounter women's language through the media, such as foreign movies subtitled into Japanese or dubbed with Japanese voices. In the movies, male and female actors spoke masculine and feminine languages in Japanese. However, this study showed that the statement that "men and women speak differently" does not apply to their discursive practice. Why then does it make sense that "men and women speak differently" in the movies? As a possible explanation, distinctively masculine and feminine languages are likely to help the description of characters. That is

to say, these actors speaking with a subtitle in Japanese or with Japanese voices are not authentic Japanese. As a questionnaire shown in Chapter Three, men and women believed that women's language exists in Japan. Another explanation could be that translators are fettered by the convention. Furthermore, the audience is also getting used to the different languages used in the movies. As long as the consciousness of women's language widely spreads in Japan, women's language is likely to be surviving most in movies.

Like actual conversation, an audience of a movie receives a set of valuable information, such as the speaker's sex, a rough guess about the speaker's age, and the speaker's status. However, even with this background information, an audience needs to match the subtitles on a screen with a character who is taking a turn in a conversation. How does an audience of a movie distinguish between the different characters? What kind of device does the translator use to avoid confusion? Chapter Six focuses on the means to convey to the audience whether the character taking the turn is male or female.

The movies *Legally Blonde* (2001) and *Angus, Thongs and Perfect Snogging* (2008) include "celeb" language and "JK" (*joshi kosei*, high school girls) language. Since such roles have a peculiar women's language, it is quite easy to imagine the language of such a character. Audiences of the movies may have a certain expectation towards the language used by the characters, based on their experience as native speakers of Japanese as well as other information, such as age and status, in the plot of the story. Most audiences have the same expectation of sharing the language. In addition, the translator can be expected to share this knowledge while putting Japanese subtitling on the English films. In terms of this shared knowledge, making clear whether a male or female is speaking can be an important clue for the audience. Therefore, this chapter focuses on which words or phrases that indicate the speaker's sex in conversation.

A striking feature of male and female utterances in the two movies *Legally Blonde* and *Angus, Thongs and Perfect Snogging* was that the translations of the characters' speeches used more gender markers than would currently be heard in the interactions of native speakers in the previous chapters. For example, grammatical forms such as bald imperatives (e.g., *nore*, "Ride") and negative imperative *-na* (e.g., *iu-na*, "Don't say") were described as strong masculinity. In addition, sentence-final particles such as *ro* that follows the imperative base form (indicating strong assertion used by men) and *wa* (indicating mild assertion used by women) were employed more often. Moreover, such roles of "celeb" language and "JK" language related to the movies had a peculiar women's language, and audiences seemed to have a certain expectation towards the language used

by the characters. This chapter explored the reasons why masculinity and femininity in the Japanese language was exaggerated in the subtitles of characters. One explanation was likely so that audiences could perceive a clue to figure out who is speaking through sharing the same expectation.

The current practice of Japanese translators is commonly the use of the now-defunct male-female distinction in the Japanese translated speeches. In other words, male and female characters' statements in translation are less used in real Japanese conversations. The gap may result in building a linguistic issue between the Japanese and the characters in movies.

Chapter Seven summarized the study outlined in this dissertation and examined the relevance of the study. In conclusion, the perceived disappearance of women's language attests to its imaginary existence. Women's language is now lost as a result of women becoming linguistically equated with men today, but many Japanese people believed that women's language exists. Indeed, conversation analysis enabled us to visualize the existence of women's language in Japanese translations of movies. However, the description of discursive practice questions the distinctions imposed by a deceptive statement such as "Japanese women speak women's language."