

# **A Review of Studies on Gender Differences in Japanese Language and Suggestions for Future Studies**

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## **1. Introduction**

In modern Japanese, there are vocabularies and linguistic behaviors which are characteristic of women and men. Gender differences are seen in this language. How have such gender differences been made? And what kind of viewpoint or method should we have to approach them? To consider the issue, it is very important to look at evidence from Japanese history. In this paper, I will review some main studies, as well as point out some problems with these studies. Finally I would like to propose some suggestions for future gender difference studies in Japanese language.

## **2. Review of Some Studies**

There are two types of studies focused on gender differences in Japanese language. One is to examine the historic changes in Japanese history. The other is to describe the consciousness and performance of women and men from sociolinguistic viewpoints. These studies are utilizing different approaches, but the ultimate aim is the same. Which is, to elucidate the mechanism of the Japanese gender differences. Here, I will review the two types of studies.

### **2.1 Studies on Historic Changes in Japanese**

#### **2.1.1 Gender Differences in the Nara and the Heian period**

Concerning gender differences in the Nara period, Mashimo(1969:8) points out: “It was still doubtful if there were some words different in general conversations between women and men. Even if there was, I think it was very slight.” (My translation from Japanese.)

On gender differences in the Heian period, many studies point out that the distinction of *kanji/otokote* ← → *kana/onnote* was seen between the use of men and women. In other words, there was a model for the language use in those days. Men were supposed to make poems in *kanji*, while women were expected to write *waka* in *kana*. We can see the language evidence in some literary works: “*Tosa nikki*” (935), “*Genji monogatari*” (1008), “*Murasakisikibu nikki*” (1008-1010), “*Tsutsumiyunagon monogatari*” (in the latter Heian period). Among the works in the period, I would like to look at one document named “*Makura no soshi*” (1017), an essay written by a court lady named *Seishonagon*. There is a following description in it.

“*Koto koto naru mono. Hoshi no kotoba. Danjo no kotoba.*”

(A thing different thing. Language of a Buddhist priest. Languages of men and women: My translation from Japanese.)

It is observed that men and women used some different words in those days. However, she did not show us what they were. There are various interpretations for this description. Mashimo (1969:5) interpretes as follows:

“In *Maeda Bon* it is written that ‘*Koto koto naru mono.*’, and it can be interpreted that words were different. But in *Sankan Bon* and *Sakai Bon* it is written that ‘*Kiki mimi kotonaru mono*’, and I can understand that not only voices were different but also intonation was different between men and women.”

(My translation from Japanese.)

And Kunida (1964:2) mentions as follows:

“According to *Seishonagon*’s “*Makura no soshi*”, there were differences in language use between men and women in the Heian period. But it is difficult to

consider the actual differences without any written evidence.”

(My translation from Japanese.)

According to the studies on the historic changes, it is thought that there was no gender differences in the vocabulary or the grammar in the Nara and the Heian period.

### **2.1.2 Gender Differences in the Muromachi and the Edo period**

The “phase theory” is used to consider the gender differences in the Muromachi and the Edo period. The concept of “iso”, or “phase” was introduced by Kikuzawa (1933:6). Kikuzawa(1936:311) dealt with ten “*isougo*”, or “phases” and pointed out that *the court-lady language* and *the play-lady language* were different from others.

#### **2.1.2.1 Studies on *the court-lady language***

Many studies are conducted on the court-lady language: for example, Sugimoto (1956,1967), Kunida(1964), Masimo(1969). The linguistic phenomena were examined by these studies. The court-lady language was originally created among the court ladies as a kind of jargon. The oldest document on the court-lady language is “*Amanomokuzu*”(1420). The court-lady language was generally used for nouns such as food, clothing, and tools. In Masimo(1969:85), he divides the court-lady language into 11 kinds. Sugimoto(1967:744) points out that the court-lady language is “an artificial language”. Kunida (1964) points out that some of the court-lady language such as “oimo” (a potato), “onasu” (an eggplant), have become the words in the modern female language.

#### **2.1.2.2 Studies on *the play-lady language***

Many studies are also conducted on the play-lady language: for example, Yamazaki(1963), Yuzawa(1964), Masimo(1966). The play-lady language is a kind of language used by the women who worked in red-light districts in the early Edo

period. It is considered that their special language was created to entertain the customers and was established as an important tool for the women in red-light districts.

Yuzawa(1964) describes the characteristics of the play-lady language: that is, they often used some special auxiliary verbs and verbs in the end of a sentence to express their respect and politeness to the customers.(e.g. “arinsu” “gozansu” “ozansu”)

### **2.1.2.3 Problems of “phase theory”**

Here, I would like to point out the problems with these studies on gender differences based on the “phase theory”.

- (1) *The court-lady language and the play-lady language* are originally a special minority language that developed among the women whose community was removed from other people.
- (2) Therefore, we cannot generalize the female language in those days from *the court-lady language and the play-lady language*.
- (3) It is hard to say that *the court-lady language and the play-lady language* are the source of current Japanese gender differences.

### **2.1.3 Gender Differences in the Meiji period**

Concerning the linguistic gender differences in the Meiji period, many studies focused on the sentence final expressions: Ishikawa(1972), Komatsu(1988), Morino (1991), Nakano(1991), Suzuki(1998), Endo and Ozaki(1998), Matahira(2000), Terada (2000), Nagamoto (2002), Ren (2003). Although their viewpoints were varied, we can find a common point among them. That is, the gender differences in sentence final expressions were formed in the Meiji period.

Komatsu(1988:105) points out: “In the Tokyo dialect the gender differences at the end of a sentence were made by the early 1900’s.”(My translation) He also mentions that it developed together with the formation of the Meiji Tokyo accent.

Suzuki(1998:162) points out that “When the Meiji period began, a special language for women was gradually established. The women’s language system which was different from the men’s was completed.”(My translation)

## **2.2 Studies from Sociolinguistic Viewpoints**

About gender differences in modern Japanese, many studies examined the current language use and showed the gender differences from sociolinguistic viewpoints: Peng(1981), Ide(1984,1985), Kawaguchi(1987), Kawanari(1985), Gendai Nihongo Kenkyukai(1997,2002). These studies consider gender differences in the natural discourses in modern Japanese from a sociolinguistic viewpoint, and show us some significant points as follows:

- (1) Women are more aware of a lower polite degree than men on most linguistic forms.
- (2) The linguistic gender differences come from the differences of their situation, and their social roles.
- (3) A gap is seen between the actual use and the descriptions in some academic articles and dictionaries.
- (4) In a working place, neither men nor women tend to use the sex-exclusive expressions.

## **2.3 Problems of Preceding Studies**

The studies above have significantly contributed to the study on gender differences in Japanese. However, I would like to point out some problems here.

- (1) One of the major problems, is the viewpoint of binary opposition. They tend to categorize the linguistic phenomena into so-called “Female language” and “Male Language”. From this viewpoint, they are considered in the relations of the opposite poles. As a result, the compatibility, the continuity, and the

middle domain are neglected.

- (2) They tend to focus on the parts where gender differences are seen clearly, such as, personal pronouns, and sentence final particles.
- (3) Most of the preceding studies focus on so-called “Female Language”, and the analysis of the male counterpart was not well considered.
- (4) The frequency of some linguistic elements has been the point of the analysis, and the meaning has not been analyzed sufficiently.

### 3. Some Suggestions for the Future Studies

Here I would like to propose another viewpoint. I believe that my view may contribute to an effective approach for future studies.

- (1) Instead of the viewpoint [Figure(1)] of binary opposition (so-called “Female Language” and “Male Language”), I propose a viewpoint named «joseisei/danseisei» [Figure(2)]. (I translate it into «female-ness/male-ness»)

Figure(1)

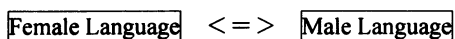
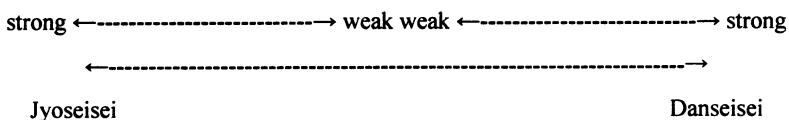


Figure (2)



- (2) I would like to describe the language phenomena, using one scale as shown above. For example, some sentence final particles such as “kashira” “sa” “ne” and “na”, can be regarded not as a “gender marker”, but as an element on the scale.
- (3) I would like to explain each verbalization form again, which has been

explained from the viewpoint of “Female Language” and “Male Language”, in a new viewpoint of 《joseisei/danseisei》

#### 4. Conclusion

In this paper, I first reviewed some studies on gender differences in Japanese language. Then, I made some suggestions for future studies. In this field, the viewpoint of “Female Language” and “Male Language” has been the mainstream. Although my novel viewpoint of 《joseisei/danseisei》 I proposed in this paper may not be well recognized. I believe that it will prove useful in the pursuit of a better understanding of gender difference in Japanese language. In addition, I am hopeful that future studies based on my view will indeed contribute not only to gender difference found in Japanese language, but will contribute for a better understanding of gender difference on a global scale.

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