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Male and Female Speech in Japanese

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omae ('you'), koshoo ('forms of address'), shuujoshi ('sentence- final particles'), joseigo ('female words'), nyooboo kotoba ('court ladies' language'), danjo kyootsuugo ('common words for men and women')

In the Japanese language one can observe a wide variety of differences between male and female speech. Of course, these do not derive from the physical or physiological differences between men and women, but from their social and domestic status, and also from their expected norms of behaviour in the social environment.

1. OMAE(お前)

How do these characteristics of male and female language present themselves conspicuously in the Japanese language? As an example, let us examine the first part of a letter which the writer Hori Tatsuo wrote to his wife.

Soo soo, konya wa omae onou kembutsu datta no da na. Dou datta na. Boku wa jibun no shoosetsu dano, ie no katazuke da no ni muchuu ni natte ite...

そうそう、今夜はお前 お能見物だったのだな。
どうだったな？
僕は 自分の小説だの 家の片付けだのに夢中になっていて・・・。

(That's right. You went to see a Noh performance tonight, didn't you?
How was it? I was busy writing my novel, and tidying up in the house.. .)

Which parts of these sentences would change if it were the wife writing this letter to her husband? Firstly, omae, a form of address, cannot be used by women. In personal relationships between men and women, omae is never used by women. Omae can be a derogatory word and it is sometimes used between male friends. There may be certain situations where women might use this word, but such situations are very limited.

Omae, as it is used in this letter, is indicative of the typical Japanese marital relationship in which the 'strong' husband has the upper hand over his 'obedient' wife. As times change, though, this way of speaking is becoming less common and these days husbands tend to address their wives using their names.

2. Sentence-Final Particles

The sentence-final particle *da na* is used in the quoted letter, however, this particle cannot be used by a female speaker. Hori's wife Taeko would have said

Onoo o kembutsu datta no desu ne,

お能見物だったのですね

using *ne* instead of *da na* at the end of the sentence.

The sentence-final particles which women often use are *no*, *wa*, *da wa*, *wa ne*, *wa yo* and *kashira*, while those used frequently by men are *sa*, *da ze*, *da na*, *da zo* and *daroo*. Here are some examples:

Man: *Kyoo wa yasumi da zo.* ('I'm off today.') 今日は休みだぞ。

Woman: *Kyoo wa yasumi na no.* 今日は休みなの。

Man: *Ashita wa yasumi da na.* ('Tomorrow is a holiday.') 明日は休みだな。

Woman: *Ashita wa yasumi kashira.* 明日は休みかしら。

Man: *Sugu iku zo.* ('I'll go right away.') すぐ行くぞ。

Woman: *Sugu iku wa.* すぐ行くわ。

There are slight differences in nuances between these sentence-final particles. Men try to show their assertiveness by using such particles, while women's speech becomes tender and milder in expression as the use of these particles tends to weaken the statement.

The final particles used by men intensify their assertiveness while those used by women weaken their claims and suggest a sense of gentleness and reservedness. Generally speaking, it is not only the sentence-final particles used by women which have these attributes. Words used in female speech have a tendency to contribute towards the smooth interplay of human relationships.

The differences between male and female speech in the Japanese language are quite conspicuous. However, if one looks at similar expressions in other languages of the world, one may be able to attribute such differences to the various dispositions of women in a cross-cultural context, which might be described as 'polite, tender and self-effacing'.

Recently, however, the differences between male and female speech are becoming less distinct, especially in conversations between young people. Of course, in formal situations, men and women conform to a traditional way of speaking. At present, this trend of 'the gradual weakening of these differences', can be attributed to women's use of male speech habits. It will be interesting to observe how this trend will evolve in the future.

3. First Person Pronouns

The word *boku* appears in the letter quoted previously. This is one of the first person pronouns used by male speakers to refer to themselves. Such pronouns as *watakushi* and *watashi* can be used both by men and women alike, while *ore*, *washi* and *boku* are used exclusively by men. Similarly, *atakushi* and *atashi* are pronouns used only by women. Consequently, differences

between male and female speech in the spoken Japanese language are often revealed by the use of the sentence-final particles and by the way in which the speakers refer to themselves. Marked differences in male and female speech may also be observed in terms of the use of honorifics such as *watashi* and *boku* and also in the use of exclamations such as *ara*, *maa*, *hoo* and *naruhodo*.

These distinctive speech characteristics make it easy for the reader of a Japanese novel to ascertain the speaker associated with a particular remark without a reference to the actual person. Seidensticker, the translator of Kawabata's *Yukiguni* ('Snow Country'), draws our attention to the difficulty of translating Japanese novels into English. In 'Snow Country', there are sequences of conversation between the hero and the heroine Komako. The reader of the Japanese would have no difficulty in understanding who uttered which specific words. However, in the English translation, Seidensticker points out that it may be necessary to re-read the conversation in order to clarify the identity of the speakers. It is probably because of the differences in male and female speech that the translator is required to add such words as 'He said' or 'She said', which are not expressed in the original.

4. The History of Female Speech

It is difficult to determine a clear definition of the word 'feminine', but this word can certainly be used to qualify speech as well as to refer to behaviour, facial expressions and body-shape.

In the Heian Period (794 -1192), Murasaki Shikibu, in her *Nikki* ('Diary'), criticized Sei Shonagon's use of Chinese characters and stated that women should write in kana, leaving Chinese characters for the use of men. Shikibu felt that "women should maintain feminine speech and not interfere with men's affairs, placing them on an equal footing." In *Onna Choohooki* (a series of writings for women, on how they might lead their lives), published in the Genroku Period (1688 -1704), there is a remark to the effect, "women using male speech are disgusting and should learn to speak tenderly." The book recommends *nyooboo kotoba* ('court ladies' language') as depicted in such words as *Oko tachi ga omutsu karu*. ('The children are fretful'.)

How has this 'feminine' court ladies' language evolved? According to Reiichi Horii, the oldest literature relating to *nyooboo kotoba* is *Amano Mukuzu*, an instructive work addressing itself to the nobility and priests. In this work, *nyooboo kotoba*, as used in about the year 1420 is found. In the fifteenth century, this language was used in the Imperial Court and by the harem of the Ashikaga Shogun family. The use of *nyoubou kotoba* then spread to the court nobility, the samurai class and consequently, to the merchant class. In the middle of the Edo Period, court ladies' language came to be used by women-servants of samurai families. In the latter half of the seventeenth century, court ladies' language evolved as female language and came to be used by girls from respectable families.

In feudal society, the use of court ladies' language was regarded as an important element for women's upbringing and education, in that they might acquire an appropriate manner of speaking.

In modern times, the female language of the samurai families was strictly restricted under

the influence of Confucianism, while the language spoken by common women was not restricted to the same extent, which is revealed in the literary work *Ukiyoburo* ('The Bathhouse of the Floating World'). This is because women from farming or merchant households were as active as men, unlike the women of the samurai families who had the custom of remaining within the confines of the house. Thus, the changes in female language correlate closely to the social status of women.

5. Male - Female Speech - the Present Situation

In Japanese society today, there still exists the way of thinking that women should disassociate themselves from men's business. It is true that Japan now has the 'Equal Opportunities Act', and that there are some female government ministers and school principals, but these cases are somewhat exceptional. As long as current trends remain unchanged, a society where men play the central roles will continue to be a reality.

In a male-dominant social environment, female speech has to be based upon speech common to both men and women. As more women move into the workplace and gain common speech habits they may gradually lose the habit of speaking the female language irrespective of where they are.

In the world of children, many girls now use male speech. They may unconsciously feel that "they cannot get along with boys on equal terms if they use female speech." It is true that a girl cannot answer back saying, *Watashi iya da wa. Anata koso sooji shite ne.* (I don't want to. Why don't you clean up?) when a boy says, *Omae sooji shiro yo. Onna daroo.* (Hey, you are a girl, so you are the one who should be doing the cleaning!) It is natural for a girl to wish to retort, using male speech, *Iya do yo. Omae koso sooji sureba ii daroo.*

The differences between male and female speech will weaken further in the future.

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