

Japanese “Standard Women’s Language” Viewed from the Perspective of Language Policies

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Abstract: Japanese women’s language is traditionally regarded as attributable to women’s physiological qualities as well as the linguistic characteristics of the Japanese language. This point of view, however, does not hold true for the “standard women’s language” that occurred in Japan’s modern history. This paper examines the “standard women’s language” from the perspective of language policies and, through citing and analyzing relevant documents, attempts to prove that the so-called “standard women’s language” is a concept resulting from the normalization of the relationships between gender, language, and power, and the product of the process of Japan’s modernization.

Keywords: Japanese women’s language; Language policies; The concept of “Standard Women’s Language”; Normalization

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1. Introduction

Gender differences are a common phenomenon in human languages and are particularly prominent in Japanese. Although the gap between male and female speech in Japanese has narrowed considerably since World War II, contemporary Japanese still retains a large number of women’s language expressions ^[1]. Numerous studies on the causes of Japanese women’s language exist both domestically and internationally, but most are confined to purely linguistic levels and inadequately address the underlying socio-constructive factors ^[2]. This paper focuses on the modern and contemporary standard women’s language in Japan, exploring the role that language policy played in the generation and dissemination of this concept.

Two concepts must be distinguished here: the broad historical women’s language, and the artificially constructed “standard women’s language” that emerged after the Meiji period. Japanese women’s language had its beginnings as early as the Nara period; gender-based linguistic distinctions gradually appeared in the Heian period; the *nyōbō kotoba* (court ladies’ language) used by female court attendants arose in the Muromachi period, and in the Edo period became the linguistic model for women of aristocratic and samurai families. In the Meiji period, through state educational intervention, an institutionalized standard women’s

language was formally established ^[3]. After Japan's defeat in World War II, the compulsory norms for women's language collapsed along with the women's liberation movement, and modern Japanese women's language as a whole exhibits neutralizing tendencies ^[4]. Although the two have historical connections, their connotations are essentially different.

2. Traditional approaches to Japanese women's language research

Early research on women's language was primarily philological, focusing on tracing linguistic changes. From Meiji to the 1970s, most researchers were male scholars, who mainly examined special linguistic registers such as *nyōbō kotoba* and the language of the pleasure quarters ^[5-6]. Kikuzawa Kisei, in his *Kokugaku kagaku kōza 3: Kokugogaku, kokugo isōron*, regarded *nyōbō kotoba* as an ideal language for women, considering it a spontaneous creation of women and representative of elegant, gentle femininity, while the language of the pleasure quarters was assigned a mundane aesthetic ^[7-8]. Mashita Saburō's *Fujin-go kenkyū* was the first systematic monograph in this field, treating respectful and gentle expressions as externalizations of women's innate virtues ^[9]. Kunida Yuriko compiled extensive primary sources, tracing the origins and compiling the vocabulary of *nyōbō kotoba* ^[10]. These studies treated women's language as part of Japanese language history, ignoring the social power relations behind it.

From the 1970s onward, feminist thought from Europe and the United States reached Japan, and scholars such as Ide Sachiko, Horii Reiyochi, and Endō Orieki expanded the research boundaries ^[11-15]. Some argued that modern women's language inherited from ancient *nyōbō kotoba* and stemmed from the natural evolution of refined living habits; others maintained that soft and indirect expressions were rooted in women's physiology and emotional nature ^[16]. These contributions enriched the study of women's language, but still viewed it as a naturally continuing linguistic phenomenon, failing to reveal the social nature of the modern standard women's language. This leads to the core question of this paper: how were certain linguistic forms designated as "standard women's language"? How did scattered speech habits rise to become nationally promoted cultural symbols?

3. Modern Japanese national language policy and institutional foundations

Japan is home to minority languages such as Ainu and Korean, but as a whole it has long pursued a single-language national language policy. Language policy refers to the language-related systems implemented by power holders toward the nation's citizens or populations under their jurisdiction, with goals including national unification, education dissemination, cultural heritage, and scientific development, and covering standard language promotion, writing reform, and control over dialects and minority languages. The current Japanese Constitution does not prescribe language rights or obligations in the public sphere, but from the late Meiji period the state had already begun proactive systematic language planning.

In 1903, Japan established the National Language Survey Committee; in 1934, the National Language Council under the Ministry of Education was formally established, responsible for Japanese language control, revision of kanji and kana, and stylistic reform, profoundly influencing the trajectory of modern Japanese. In 1941, the Ministry of Education issued the *Reihō Yōkō* (Essentials of Etiquette) to schools nationwide and the general public, which directly prescribed linguistic usages by gender—for instance, restricting pronouns such as *boku* and *kimi* to male peers only, and requiring wives to address their husbands as *shujin* (master)

in public (The explanatory volume *Reihō Yōkō Kaisetsu* (1941), produced by the Etiquette Research Society led by Tokugawa Yoshichika, who participated in compiling the *Reihō Yōkō*, contains references to *shujin*). The state intervened in daily language through institutional provisions, thereby solidifying social hierarchy and gender status order, laying the policy foundation for the dissemination of standard women's language.

4. Social context of the formation of standard women's language: "good wife, wise mother" education and standardization of spoken language

In the late Meiji period, Japanese capitalism developed rapidly, with comprehensive progress in heavy industry, media, and transportation, while legal and state institutions were restructured following Western models. After victories in the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese Wars, Japan accumulated industrial capital, and domestic nationalist sentiments surged. Compulsory education, census-taking, and tax systems integrated individuals into the state apparatus, shaping national identity, and gender ideology became a tool for state remolding of the populace.

"Good wife, wise mother" (*ryōsai kenbo*) became the core tenet of girls' compulsory education. This ideology absorbed the Confucian ethics of the samurai class, requiring women to manage household affairs, obey fathers, brothers, and husbands, and maintain chastity and frugality. The Imperial Rescript on Education of 1890 established a Confucian educational policy, extolling women's gentle and submissive traits. The Meiji government prioritized the primary goal of girls' education as fostering national morality and consolidating the imperial system, producing qualified housewives and mothers. At the same time, Western ideas on women's education entered Japan, and society recognized the value of educated mothers for national modernization, thereby promoting female education. Whether traditional ethics or modern nation-building demands, both required language as a means of disciplining women.

National modernization also drove the standardization of spoken Japanese. In 1912, the state published *Kōgohō* (Spoken Language Grammar), unifying written and spoken language and advancing the *genbun itchi* (unification of speech and writing) movement, which spread honorifics and women's sentence-final particles widely. In 1917, the *Kōgohō Bekki* (Separate Notes on Spoken Language Grammar) specified that standard Japanese was modeled on the spoken language of the educated class in Tokyo ^[17]. Language standardization produced a dual political effect: first, the state gained regulatory power over citizens' daily speech, deeply intervening in the private linguistic sphere; second, the language of the Tokyo elite acquired orthodoxy, suppressing dialects and non-standard expressions, thus creating linguistic stratification.

In the late 1920s, under the policy of "national language purification," scholars and commentators selected and constructed a set of normative women's language expressions, labeling them "elegant, refined, and respectful," and deliberately traced their origins back to the Muromachi-period *nyōbō kotoba*. In fact, early national language studies had only regarded *nyōbō kotoba* as a cryptolect used by a closed court group, without any connection to femininity; it was later, due to state ideological needs, that a legitimate ancestral origin was artificially conferred ^[18]. Around 1940, politicians and linguists further proposed that standard women's language was the national language that mothers should use in educating the next generation. Politician Minami Hiroshi argued that women bear the responsibility of raising the nation's future, and that national language promotion must rely on women; linguist Kindaichi Kyōsuke also called for women to acquire refined feminine honorifics. Through radio broadcasts and publications, this linguistic norm was

disseminated to women nationwide ^[19].

Like the general standard language, standard women's language was modeled on the speech of educated upper-class women in Tokyo, constituting a scarce form of cultural capital, not a linguistic competence naturally possessed by all women. It was not a product of natural linguistic evolution, but a political construct of modern power, serving the gender ideology of industrial society. In reality, the speech of ordinary women largely did not conform to this idealized paradigm, which is why, from Meiji onward, society produced numerous criticisms of women's linguistic deviance. Yanagi Yae (1934) criticized women's crude colloquialisms and flippant expressions; Hoshina Kōichi (1936) criticized women's use of male pronouns; and educators such as Ōtsuma Kotaka (1909) repeatedly admonished female students on linguistic etiquette ^[20–21].

Such criticisms were not unique to the modern period. Heian-period literary works already criticized women for speaking too quickly and arguing logically ^[22]; Edo-period didactic texts for women repeatedly admonished them to speak little, speak softly, and avoid male expressions, Chinese loanwords, and popular slang ^[23]. These recurrent didactic warnings that certain expressions were indecent and impermissible precisely prove that the institutionalized ideal women's language stood in great contrast to the diverse and authentic linguistic practices of women ^[24]. Many women's actual use of dialects and non-standard expressions was directly excluded from the scope of standard women's language ^[25]. This shows that the ideological construction of "women's language" preceded and legitimated the critique of real women's speech—language is filtered, selected, and rewritten by state and social forces to achieve its artificial creation.

5. Conclusion

The grammatical features of Japanese undoubtedly exerted some influence on the development of women's language, but the modern "standard women's language" cannot be simply attributed to an internal natural evolution of the language, nor to a linguistic externalization of female physiological nature. It was born in the particular historical stage of Japan's modern nation-building, and was an artificial social product actively constructed and promoted by authoritarian forces through state education, language policy, and mass media, carrying the political function of shaping "good wives and wise mothers" and achieving national spiritual integration—far exceeding the scope of a mere linguistic phenomenon.

This study suggests that in examining gender-specific language, people should not confine themselves to internal linguistics, but must situate language within social, political, and historical contexts, in order to fully understand the power operations behind linguistic norms.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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