

SIL Electronic Book Reviews 2009-018

Japanese Language, Gender, and Ideology: Cultural models and real people

By Shigeko Okamoto and Janet S. Shibamoto Smith

Studies in Language and Gender. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. Pp. 300. hardback \$105.00, paperback \$65.00. ISBN 0-19-516617-5 (hardback), 978-0-19-516617-0 (hardback), 0-19-516618-3 (paperback), 978-0-19-516618-7 (paperback).

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Summary

While this book is a major text for the development of Japanese sociolinguistics, it also contains insights that can inform the study of how gender is encoded in other languages. The book is particularly valuable for its wide range of source texts and for its investigation of previously peripheral speech communities such as rural women and lesbians and gays. In proactively selecting these peripheral communities for study, the book challenges long-held ideologies behind traditional descriptions of Japanese and how it encodes gender.

Book Outline

Divided into three parts, the book is well-organised with a comprehensive introduction by the editors providing excellent overviews of each chapter and their relationships to the aims of the book.

In summary, these aims are:

1. highlighting the dominant linguistic and cultural ideologies in Japan
2. questioning binary distinctions in social and linguistic categories and that each category is internally homogenous
3. demonstrating that sociolinguistic research cannot remain focused on static and abstract descriptions of the relationship between language and social categories
4. examining how speakers choose language to construct identities desirable for particular social contexts
5. distinguishing between beliefs of language choice and actual practice

Part I: Historical and Theoretical Foundations

The first five chapters are essential background reading:

1. Cultural ideologies in Japanese language and gender studies : a theoretical review (Sumiyuki Yukawa and Masami Saito)
2. Ideology in linguistic practice and analysis : gender and politeness in Japanese revisited (Shigeko Okamoto)
3. Gender, language, and modernity : toward an effective history of “Japanese women’s language” (Miyako Inoue)
4. “Japanese female speech” and language policy in the World War II era (Rumi Washi)
5. Shifting speakers : negotiating reference in relation to sexuality and gender (Wim Lunsing and Claire Maree)

Each chapter demonstrates the historical underpinnings of ideologies which, the editors argue, have hampered the development of Japanese sociolinguistics. These ideologies have proposed and reinforced norms which differ considerably from “the range of real speaking practices that constitute Japanese verbal life” (p. 7) in particular those related to how speech encodes gender, not as a biological prerequisite, but as a socially mediated construct of the speaker.

Part II: Linguistic Ideologies and Cultural Models

This part analyses discourse from a diverse selection of texts:

6. Language and gender in the (hetero)romance : “reading” the ideal hero/ine through lovers’ dialogue in Japanese romance fiction (Janet Shibamoto Smith)
7. “Let’s dress a little girlishly!” or “conquer short pants!” : constructing gendered communities in fashion magazines for young people (Momoko Nakamura)
8. You are doing Burikko! : censoring/scrutinizing artificers of cute femininity in Japanese (Laura Miller)
9. Women and words : the status of sexist language in Japan as seen through contemporary dictionary definitions and media discourse (Orie Endo, trans. Shibamoto Smith)

This variety is one of the strengths of the work including men’s and women’s magazines, historical writings, dictionaries, romance novels, television shows and conversations in a variety of settings. Such scope enables readers, particularly those with limited Japanese cultural experience, some very rich insights into the world of Japanese.

Part III: Real Language, Real People

These chapters investigate the actual discourse of a range of speakers of Japanese: farm women, lesbians, office workers, middle-aged mothers, junior high school children and men.

10. Farm women’s professional discourse in Ibaraki (Yukako Sunaoshi)
11. Lesbian bar talk in Shinjuku, Tokyo (Hideko Abe)

12. Prosody and gender in workplace interaction : exploring constraints and resources in the use of Japanese (Yumiko Ohara)
13. Alternative femininity : personae of middle-aged mothers (Yoshiko Matsumoto)
14. Japanese junior high school girls' and boys' first-person pronoun use and their social world (Ayumi Miyazaki)
15. Japanese men's linguistic stereotypes and realities : conversations from the Kansai and Kanto regions (Cindi Sturtz Sreetharan)

Some of these communities have had little if any study before and so the data and discussion here are extremely valuable for contemporary Japanese linguistics.

Evaluation

That this is a very important book for Japanese linguistics is beyond question. Historically, Japanese sociolinguistics has suffered from the very limited scope of studies carried out so far. Through the sheer range of its studies, this book would provide valuable insights into the sociolinguistic variety of any nation. But for Japan it is, hopefully, a watershed beyond which there'll be considerably more evaluation of what people actually do with language on a daily basis.

Challenging dominant ideologies

For the wider linguistic community, I feel the book is important in at least two ways. First, it wrestles against dominant ideologies in order to bring real life language out into the open. Many field linguists work in communities where language planning has been influential for generations. In its very plain intent to challenge ideologies resulting from language planning decisions which do not reflect actual language practice, this book therefore provides inspiration.

From the late-19th until the mid-20th centuries, Japanese policy with regard to the national language set in place legislation that, fuelled by simultaneous nationalistic fervour, has left a lasting impression on the psyche of the average Japanese speaker today. Such diachronic perspective is vital for two reasons. First, it lays bare the hidden historical roots of contemporary ideologies of speech communities we investigate today. Second, and perhaps more importantly, it allows us the perspective to highlight ways in which some speakers choose to mark themselves as distinct from such ideological influences and therefore to begin to ask why.

Questioning social typologies

The second way that I feel this book is relevant to the wider linguistic community is the way that it questions social typology, particularly that of gender, as a precursor to examining how it relates to language use. The book questions the acceptance of categories as seemingly fundamental as that of man-woman and, while I found a number of the points made to have less than satisfactory bases of argument, I did appreciate the challenge that this questioning brings.

However, of the five aims outlined above, the second focussing on questioning established binary distinctions and homogeneity within social categories is, for me, the least convincingly achieved.

For example, the introduction states that “normative and non-normative patterns of language-use-in-context should be identified and accounted for in a principled way without delegitimizing the latter use by labelling it incorrect or marginal” (5). But surely by employing the label “normative”, non-standard forms are going to be, by definition, marginal.

As Abe demonstrates clearly in what is probably the book’s key paper, lesbian talk in bars is not “normal” in that it does not fit in with typical associations of what (women’s) Japanese speech should consist of. This is not pejorative, but purely descriptive. This makes non-normative forms worthy of study per se for their value linguistically in understanding the full range of language that goes to make up contemporary Japanese. But it does in no way challenge the common beliefs of how Japanese women *should* speak.

For example, in Nakamura’s exploration of stereotypical gender representation in both men’s and women’s magazines, she states that “[t]he constructive view of gender denies the dichotomous female/male distinction and emphasizes the diversity of female identities. But if the differences among women are so wide, we are forced to ask whether we should dispense with the single category of ‘woman’...” (132).

It seems to me that the danger in arguing against received and established categories as fundamental as *man* or *woman* is to leave yourself open to being hoist by your own petard. Nakamura helpfully obliges, in the very next paragraph, where she writes “it is crucial to distinguish the stereotypes and norms of women’s language use from *women’s actual language use*” (133, emphasis mine). Without allowing for *every* individual woman who speaks Japanese to be uniquely regarded as a type unto herself, it’s difficult to see how such a distinction can be made without employing some form of standard or norm.

Again, Shibamoto Smith, in her paper on sentence-final particles (SFPs) in romance novels comments in her data analysis that “these SFPs are clearly used much more to construct gendered images in fiction than they appear to be in real life” (126).

But the undefined term “real life” seems to me to be problematic in a book which details a stated aim as questioning established homogeneity in categories. Whose “real life” is Shibamoto Smith referring to? Lesbians in Tokyo? Farm women in Ibaraki?

Feminism

In truth, the book would be more helpfully entitled *Japanese Language, Women, and Ideology* and, at times, the obvious feminist overtones seem in danger of alienating some readers. Despite stating explicitly in the introduction that “this volume emphasizes the importance of examining and accounting for the real language practices of both female *and male* speakers” (5, emphasis mine), there is only one paper that focuses on men’s language and, elsewhere, men are ignored completely.

Take, for example, Endo's examination of racist terms in dictionaries. She says "[u]nfortunately, few of today's Japanese language dictionaries grapple seriously with biased language" (172). This may be true but, despite highlighting the problems of "sexist language" in her introduction, Endo goes on to focus exclusively on words that describe women. Is this not evidence of Endo's adherence to the very categorisation that they argue it would be useful to disregard?

Data limitations

I think it's important to recognise as you read this book and especially the data presented in the latter half that, because of the overarching dominance of theoretical linguistics in Japan for so long, practical applications of linguistics in areas such as discourse analysis of Japanese are in their infancy. This is reflected in findings being based on less data than I feel comfortable with in some papers. Thankfully, this is acknowledged by most authors with encouraging exhortations for linguists to gather more data to tap into what is obviously a rich and deep vein of insight into Japanese society.

Conclusion

In 2002, while living in Japan, I completed a Masters' program in Applied Linguistics which involved my investigating in detail how Japanese was used in a variety of contexts. As I read this book, I was inspired again to return to those contexts and continue my research. Many of the data presented in this book were being researched at the same time as my own and, knowing the dearth of literature of this kind available at the time, I can only applaud the writers of this book for pioneering research in these areas. This should now be a standard text for those involved in Japanese linguistics.

Having been away from Japan now for over five years and having specialised in the field linguistics of language assessment, I found this text no less relevant for my work than it was back in 2002. This is because of the book's constant referral to ideologies that inform, influence and, often, impose upon the speech of the people in my current research.

It's clear therefore that this text is of value to anyone who has a desire to discover not only what individuals and communities say but why they say it.