# Gender, Dialect and Society in Japan

Purabi Gangopadhyay

**Abstract**

In this paper I attempt to discuss about various linguistic pattern that are gender specified for the speaker among the Japanese nationals. -This gender specified language pattern in Japanese Society have had their variations in different historical periods and also in the system of social hirerarchy. -The gender specified language in Japanese society might start on and from the Heian Period (C. 794 to 1185 A.D.).- During the Kamakura Period (C.1185-1333 A.D.), along with the classification of different social castes, based on social ranks, women's social roles were also ascertained by gender specified pattern.-"Court Ladies Language" was introduced during the Muromachi period (C. 1333- 1573 A.D.) and it made women's speech distinctive from the men's language and henceforth started a new dimension of women dialect in Japan.- A radical change of Japanese Society after the Meiji Restoration and then after World War II, the pattern of women dialect also took a new dimension. -In modern times there is little difference between men's and women's speech in the work situation and public speaking. -In personal conversation, however, there are some differences. In polite conversation, women, especially older women tend to speak more politely and use some feminine sentence endings.

**Keywords:** *Language and society, Gender specified linguistic pattern in Japan, Women's status in Japanese society, Present scenario in Japan and women's dialect.*

**Introduction**

Language plays a vital role in our life as a powerful weapon to express human feelings. Language is not just the vocabularies. But it controls the reciprocal relations and social customs too. The usage of language varies from country to country depending on cultural hierarchy. Study of language and linguistic pattern gives an idea about the social perspective of a country and also of that community.

In this paper I attempt to discuss about various linguistic pattern that are gender specified of the speaker among the Japanese nationals.

**Women and Japanese Society**

At the outset, I try to give an overall impression about traditional women's status in Japanese Society. Though Japan was predominantly a male dominated society, but Japanese history provides remarkable changes in the status of women. The changes occurred according to the varied socio-economic and political trends of the country from era to era.

Ancient Japanese Literature, the *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki* mentioned *Amaterasu Omikami* or the Sun Goddess as the head of the divine imperial lineage that continues till today. Since late *Nara* or *Tempyo* period, i.e. 8th century A.D. to 11th century A.D. the women-centred marriage pattern known as *MUKOIRIKON* contributed commendable position for the women in the society, politics and religion. In this system the groom was known as *MUKOYOSHI* or an adopted son-in-law who moves to his wife's family and assumes the surname of father-in-law's family. This system was prevalent among the court aristocrats as well as in the other levels of the society. It continued for a long time. Later, the upper class, especially the warriors adopted the system of sending the bride to join her husband's family. But this system of adopting son-in-law is still popular mainly among framers' family where there is no male offspring and among a few communities of traditional labourers, such as fishermen.

In the 7th - 8th Centuries AD Japanese women also held prominent position in the politics. It was acceptable for a woman to rule the country as '*TENNO'*, i.e. the

emperor and there were at least six powerful and prominent women *Tenno*. But surprisingly, after the shifting of the Imperial Capital to *Heiankyo* (modern *Kyoto*) from *Nara* in 794 i.e. in the *Heian* period, women *TENNO* (emperor/empress) did not appear in the political history of Japan.

Besides playing important role in the Society & Politics women also enjoyed a prominent role in the religious field especially in the SHAMANISTIC practices. Like many other countries of the world, in Japan also women's procreative power was regarded as sacred and the women held a very important position in the agricultural rites especially in rice planting. The importance of Japanese women in the religion is also manifested in the designation of *AMATERASU OOMIKAMI* (sun-goddess) who "is thought to have evolved from the concept of a shamaness mediating between humanity and supernatural beings." Therefore ancient literature of Japan bears testimony to the fact that, ancient Japanese Society was matrilineal. However, with the passage of time, the position of women changed and a rigid patriarchy seeped into the society till beginning of the Meiji era.

But why and how the position of women had changed so much? Different views are there regarding the change of Japanese Society from women-centred one to the patriarchal form. One of the most popular views is that, like any other ancient civilization of the world the introduction of agriculture might be the sole reason. But in Japan agriculture introduced in the Yayoi period (i.e. from 300 B.C. to 300 A.D.) with the development of wet-rice cultivation culture. After that also the women held significant position till the 7th - 8th century A.D. Most acceptable view is that, in 6th-7th Century A.D. Japan accepted the Buddhism and Confucianism. The acceptance of Confucian and Buddhist views on women's' inferiority considered to be the pivotal for the change into a patriarchal form of the Society in Japan. The introduction of the system of political marriage and sending hostages to the Imperial Court by the local chieftains for maintaining cordial relation with the Emperor after 794 A.D., affected the lives of many women of the royal and high-ranking families of Japan.

Moreover, the land distribution system by the Japanese Government after Taika Reform in 794 A.D. deprived women to own the equal limit of land holdings like their male counterpart. After the Taika Reform women used to enjoy half quantity of land than that of her male counterpart. But the situation became more difficult from 12th century onwards when the system was changed a lot

and the women lost all rights of land holding. Naturally, women had to depend on their male relatives for their livelihood.

But in spite of all these social degradation many women especially court-ladies and women of upper class of the society were often highly literate and enjoyed social and political power. *MURASAKI NO SHIKIBU,* a noble lady wrote first novel of Japanese literature in around 1010 A.D. Later also many ladies devoted their times in the literary works and many of them were very famous litterateur of Japanese Literature.

Again during the Edo period (1603 to 1867 A.D.) the position of women in Japan had remarkable changes. In the Edo period the strictures, considered to be proper for women were outlined. It stressed on the women's obedience on parents before marriage and to her husband & sons in later days. It also stated that a woman could be easily divorced for any of her misconduct or disobedience. Women adultery was punished by death. But the novel or other literary works said that the day-to-day reality of women's domestic lives might not usually have been that much harsh, as prescribed by the strictures.

After the Meiji Civil Code was promulgated in 1898 the traditional family law and ideology was established. In this Code, the idea of *RYOSAI KEMBO* , i.e. the ladies should 'only be the good wives and wise mothers' became very prominent in the Society. Even when the government introduced the institutional education for women through *TERAKOYA* schools based its education policy on the principal that the girls should be educated as homemakers. That principal continued for a long time. In 1899 the Higher Girls' School Order or the *KOTO JOGAKKOO REI* stipulated that there should be at least one high-school for girls in each prefecture (an administrative division in Japan, which may be compared with our District) where the girls should taught only the literature and domestic science. But at the same time, some liberal ideas from the west were also campaigned and became popular.

Later the industrial revolution played significant role in the economic development of the country. During the early phase of this industrialization the trend of employing young unmarried women in the lowest-paid position on temporary or part-time basis and excluding them from management level position was started. This tradition has continued, making it difficult for the

women even in 19th-20th Centuries to take the responsibility of any management job. But article 14 of the Constitution, promulgated in 1946 states "All of the people are equal under the law and there shall be no distinction in political, economic and social relations because of race, creed, sex, social status or family origin."

Thus by and large, Japanese women have achieved legal equality with men, but the belief that men should work and women stay at home still holds sway in Japanese society. The voices for freedom of women were stronger in the late Meiji and Taisho period (1912 – 1926). From that time women no longer could take oppression and broke all obstacles and demanded freedom. It was basically the result of sentiments that had long been imbibed inside their mind.

**Women Dialect in Japan**

This varied social structure of Japan influenced the dialect of the common people especially of the women. Like all other language Japanese Language also has formal, polite or informal expressions, which actually varies from situation to situation or from person to person. But in Japanese Language use of *Keigo* or polite form of speech plays a significant role in the social behaviour The modernization of the country and the exchange of cultural views with the foreigners has changed the rigid pattern of polite form of expression in modern Japanese. But some aspects are still very predominant. Gender specified form is one of them. Women tend to use more polite words than men and they also add "O" to the words to make it softer. Besides this, women are allowed to use emotional expressions more freely than men. For example when a man just praises something by saying 'good (*Ii-ne*)' a woman may use 'marvelous (*suteki*)' or 'cute (kawaii)'. Some differences can also be seen in the use of interjection as well as in the difference of tone. Women's voices rise and fall within a greater range than men's when freely expressing feelings. Besides these female deserve to be moresofter and much polite in selecting their words.

In general, the differences in gender specified speech can broadly be classified into two aspects. One of those differences is based on vocabulary and other based on style. Pronouns used by women are different from that of the pronouns used by the men. The most important characteristic of a female speech

is that it is generally considered to be extremely polite and usages of formal verb ending or usage of hedges to express unassertive and inconclusive form of their speech is very natural. In terms of style in Japanese Language, the use of Sentence Final Particle denotes the mood and feelings of the speaker concerned. With this also speaker can add tone or emotions to the words. This Sentence Final Particles are also quite different for the women and the men.

This gender specified language in Japanese society might start on and from the *Heian* Period (C. 794 to 1185 A.D.) which was evident from the writing of noted female writers of that period. In Japanese language there are two kinds of writing system. One of those is writing with pictorial character which was borrowed from China. That pictograph is known as *Kanji* and in the ancient days all official papers were written in that pictorial character. And ladies did not use those pictograph for any writing. They were not taught those scripts. Later, the development of phonetic alphabet system, known as *Kana* is much easier and earlier it was commonly used by the women.

The papers written in *Kanji* in the Chinese pattern of writing were known as *Kanbun*, which was regarded as the letter of elite people and ladies did not use those letters. Eminent writer Murasaki-no-Shikibu who is regarded as first Novel Writer in Japan wrote her all compositions in *Kana* or the phonetic writing system. Not only Shikibu but other woman writers of that period like Sei Shinagon preferred to use *Kana* than *Kanbun*. Moreover, according to many scholars, gendered-specified speech exhibited relatively fewer gender distinctive traits as women expressed their views vey politely.

Later, during the Kamakura Period (C.1185-1333 A.D.), Japanese society was classified into different social castes, based on social ranks. The emergence of *Shogunate* and establishment of feudalism resulted in a caste based society depending on Social rank or hierarchy. For women also social roles were ascertained and society expected from the women to have an appropriate behavior that reflected not only their social position, but also their gender.

In *Muromachi* Period (1333 – 1573 A.D.) a new form of women language was introduced in Japanese speech system. That particular system was known as "Court Ladies Language" ( i.e. *nyobo no kotoba* in Japanese). Introduction of this particular pattern of speech by women and use of that particular speech pattern

by the court ladies as well as the female members of the aristocrat or elite families made women's speech distinctive from men's speech. Women used honorific language, indirect expression, prefix "O" or some particular soft suffix as expression. Between 12th century and 18th Century A.D. several books on social and moral code of conduct were written mainly for the girls who are preparing for marriage. These books on women conducts, known as *Jokun* were exclusively etiquette manual which not only advised women how they should behave in the society but also how women should talk, what they should talk and how much they should talk. One of the very famous of such books *"Niwa no oshie"*, published in 1283 taught that, women should speak ambiguously, speak as less as possible and never use rough or harsh language. It also narrates that women should be very careful in selecting the words of their talk or speech, should not express their emotion loudly and in writing they should never use pictorial character, *Kanji* or should not use Chinese style writing system or *Kanbun*.

In the Edo period as I mentioned earlier that, the strictures, considered to be proper for women were outlined. Accordingly, the language for women expression also took a new shape and dimension. During this period women were expected to talk indirectly and hesitantly along with their submissive behaviour. Even some books of conduct and encyclopaedias were published. One of those books was *Onna Chohoki*, written in 1692-1693 A.D. by *Namura Johaku* noted a detailed list of the words, which are forbidden for the ladies to use. Many books taught women of four behaviours or *shigyo* in Japanese. Among these four behaviours chapter on female language is very important.

Another radical change of Japanese Society took place during the Meiji period (1868-1912 A.D.), which influenced the manners, customs and behaviours among the Japanese Nationals also. But still the nation and society demanded proper use of the feminine speech pattern. Suddenly a new trend was introduced in Japanese Female Speech by the School Girls of Japan. In this speech they started to use short form of the verbs, which are very much informal and regarded as harsh speech by the linguists and social reformers. Initially this type of speech pattern, known as *"Jogakusei Kotoba"* or 'School Girl Speech" was regarded as vulgar and unsophisticated. Even a few litterateurs

condemned this type of speech pattern. But on the other hand, famous Novelist of Japanese literature *Natsume Soseki* was one of the first few writers who did not hesitate to use this so called vulgar or unsophisticated language in his works and which had been accepted even today as a standard speech pattern for women of all classes.

After the Meiji Restoration another flow of tremendous changes occurred in the Japanese Society after the World War II. The social changes those were initiated during the Meiji Period were actually executed after the World War II. The voice raised by the women in the late Meiji early Taisho period for the social equality irrespective of sex, social status and race was materialized after the World War II. Due to social and economic need women had to be appointed by many factories and offices. For some families women became the bread earners in place of their male members of the family, who had to join the army. This was beginning of the era from when the long awaited break down of patriarchal tradition was replaced by the new idea and legacy of modernization. Gradually the rigidity and gender specified usage of the language by the women became dormant and the age paved the way for gender neutralized languages officially.

But Japanese women like to speak in softer tone and mood than that of their male counterparts and which had became a tradition to their society since long back.

In modern times there is little difference between men's and women's speech in the work situation and public speaking. In personal conversation, however, there are some differences. In polite conversation, women, especially older women tend to speak more politely and use some feminine sentence endings.

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**Bio Profile of the Author:**
PhD., Japanese language Faculty. Currently attached with School of Languages and Culture, Rabindra Bharati University, Kolkata
Joint General Secretary, Indo-Japan Welfare and Cultural Association, Kolkata.
Translator and Interpreter in Japanese Language.
**E-mail -** purabi2001@gmail.com