

The Shifting Sub-text of Japanese Gendered Language

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Abstract

Sociolinguists (e.g., Holmes, 2008; Meyerhof, 2011) generally describe Japanese as a language with gender-exclusive elements. Personal pronouns, sentence-ending particles and lexicon used exclusively by one gender have been cataloged in English by researchers such as Ide (1979), Shibamoto (1985), and McGloin (1991). While there has been some research showing that Japanese women's language use today is much more diverse than these earlier descriptions suggested (e.g., studies in Okamoto and Shibamoto Smith, 2004) and that some young Japanese girls use masculine pronouns to refer to themselves (Miyazaki, 2010), prescriptive rules for Japanese use still maintain gender-exclusive elements today. In addition, characters in Japanese movies and TV dramas not only adhere to but also popularize these norms (Nakamura, 2012). Thus, Japanese etiquette rules and media texts promote the perpetuation of gender-exclusive language use, particularly by females. However, in the past three decades, Japanese society has made significant shifts towards gender equality in the legal code, the workplace and education.

I therefore decided to investigate how Japanese women use and view their language in the context of these changes. I draw data from three focus groups which I conducted in 2013 and 2019, and which comprised female university students who went through the Japanese school system after the Japan Teachers' Union adopted a policy of gender equality. The goal was to determine whether Japanese women's language use is shifting over time.

The study suggests that Japanese women are slowly changing the gendered nature of

Japanese, using very few of the traditional elements of *onna kotoba* (women's language), and slowly adopting such traditionally masculine features as the use of *omae* and *kimi* as second-person pronouns, omitting *bikago* honorifics, and employing masculine lexical items such as *umai*, *ku*, *hara*, and *kuso*, which were until recently considered taboo for females to use. Although these trends are not yet evident in most public contexts, the language use and views of the participants in this study suggest that the shift in Japanese usage is steadily ongoing and forms a sub-text of Japanese language use.

Keywords: *Japan, gendered language, linguistic anthropology, sociolinguistics, GLOCAL CALA*

Introduction

Sociolinguists generally agree that in all speech communities, the linguistic forms used by males and females differ to some extent (Holmes, 2008). However, in most communities around the world, these differences are referred to as gender-preferential variations, wherein both males and females use all forms, but some are used more by men and others by women. For example, in casual speech in English, both sexes may pronounce the 'ing' form at the end of words as 'in,' but males have been found to do this more than women (Holmes, 2008; Trudgill, 1983). As such, Trudgill (1983) argues that females tend to use more standard forms of speech than men in almost all of the societies that have been studied.

In contrast to gender-preferential speech differentiation, researchers have found that some languages have gender-exclusive patterns of use, with some linguistic forms being reserved for women and others for men. In general, examples of languages with gender-exclusive features are limited to indigenous languages, such as the native American languages Yana and Koasati, and the Australian aboriginal language Yanyuwa (Holmes, 2008; Meyerhoff, 2011; Trudgill, 1983).

The single exception is Japanese. Although Japanese is one of the world's top languages in terms of the number of speakers (Ethnologue, 2019), it is probably the only major language that has gender-exclusive features. These include differences in first- and second-person pronouns, sentence-final particles, lexicon, polite terms for nouns known as *bikago*, and exclamatory words and phrases.

In this paper, I will discuss the gender-exclusive features of Japanese, in that I will articulate traditional prescriptions for their use, and I will explore the degree of adherence to these prescriptions. The paper largely constitutes a descriptive study of this aspect of the Japanese language. I arrange the paper as follows: In the second section, I summarize recent research on gender-exclusive features, while also discussing the social and cultural contexts of these features within Japan. In the third section, I will present the methodical framework, as it pertains to this paper. After this, I will discuss the data set, which includes three focus groups of female college students. In the fourth section, I will then discuss the data and the analysis of the data. In the final and fifth section, I will conclude the paper.

Gender-Exclusive Features of Japanese

One of the most pronounced differences in male and female speech in the Japanese language involves personal pronouns. In Japanese, there are six fundamental first-person pronouns which correspond to the English pronoun 'I.' All pronouns used by females are variants of *watakushi*, the most formal first-person pronoun. Two of these are also used by males in formal contexts. However, it is not considered appropriate for females to use the masculine pronouns *boku* or *ore*, especially since *ore* is considered to be a very coarse or macho-sounding word.

	Male	Neutral	Female
Formal		<i>watakushi</i>	
↑			<i>atakushi</i>
		<i>watashi</i>	
	<i>boku</i>		<i>atashi</i>
↓			
Informal	<i>ore</i>		

Adapted from Ide (1979)

Figure 1: First-person pronouns

Similarly, second-person pronouns in Japanese are also normally employed in a gender-exclusive way, though they are often omitted or replaced by occupational titles or kinship terms in conversation (Suzuki, 1973). Figure 2 shows four basic second-person pronouns in Japanese which correspond to the English pronoun 'you.' The two pronouns generally used by females are *anata* and its abbreviated form *anta*. Males may also use these pronouns. However, it is not considered appropriate for females to use the pronouns *kimi*, or *omae*. *Omae* is considered deprecatory (Ide, 1997, cited in Miyazaki, 2004).

	Male	Neutral	Female
Formal		<i>anata</i>	
↑			
	<i>kimi</i>	<i>anta</i>	
↓			
Informal	<i>Ore</i>		

Figure 2: Second-person pronouns

The third aspect of Japanese considered as gender-exclusive is the sentence-final particle. McGloin (1991) divides these particles into three categories, according to their tone and function; 1) those which are used to express insistence, 2) those which are used to seek confirmation, and 3) those which are used to create a sense of rapport. She explains how these are typically classified according their use by gender, as in Figure 3.

	Male	Neutral	Female
Insistence	<i>zo ze sa</i>	<i>yo</i>	<i>yo</i>
Confirmation	<i>na</i>	<i>ne</i>	<i>ne</i>
Rapport			<i>no wa</i> 
Stronger ←			→ Softer

(Adapted from McGloin, 1991, p 36)

Figure 3: Sentence-final particles

According to McGloin (1991), the masculinity of *zo*, *ze*, and *sa* can be attributed to their greater assertiveness. She cites Reynolds' (1985) argument of a direct correlation between the degree of assertion expressed through the use of these particles and relative power in society, and reasons that, in Japan, "women are not supposed to talk in a strongly assertive manner" (McGloin, 1991, p. 29).

She also reasons that the femininity of *wa* and *no* are related to the ways in which they are employed to show camaraderie, which is one of the marks of politeness and women's language described by Robin Lakoff (1975).

In addition to the particles discussed by McGloin (1991), another well-known sentence-ending softener generally employed only by women is *kashira*, which indicates a degree of uncertainty and can be translated as 'perhaps' or 'I wonder.'

A fourth area of gender-exclusivity in Japanese appears in its lexicon. A number of kinship terms and words related to eating are generally used only by men. For instance, males often refer to their fathers as *oyaji* in casual speech, rather than using the standard terms *otoosan* (honorific) or *chichi* (humble), while their mothers may be referred to as *ofukuro* rather than the polite terms *okaasan* (honorific) or *haha* (humble). The casual masculine term for one's older brother is *aniki*, while females would normally use *oniisan* (honorific) or *ani* (humble). Words employed by males in the context of food include *hara* rather than *onaka* for 'stomach,' *ku* rather than *taberu* for 'eat,' and *umai* instead of *oishii* for 'delicious.' Holmes (2008) argues that these differences are more matters of formality and politeness than gender. In practice, however, the terms considered masculine are normally reserved for informal contexts, yet are considered too macho or coarse for women to use.

Shibamoto (1985) notes that there are many Japanese nouns to which the honorific prefix *o* is always added by women or added more often than it is by men. This type of wording is known as *bikago*, and is classified as one of the five types of polite language in Japanese (Bunka Shingikai, 2007). However, in general, women are expected to employ *bikago*, while men often do not (Shibamoto, 1985). Among the most common *bikago* are *obentoo* for *bentoo* (boxed lunch), *okane* instead of *kane* (money) and *ohashi* for *hashi* (chopsticks).

Another area of gender-exclusive Japanese expressions which Shibamoto (1985) discusses includes exclamatory expressions. Men may employ *hoo* to express surprise, *oi*, *naa*, and *yai*, to gain someone's attention, and *kuso* as an expletive. Women often employ *ara* and *maa* to express surprise, and *chotto* to gain attention or to express disapproval (Shibamoto, 1985). Overall, the 'feminine' expressions create a softer, more polite, and less assertive style of speech.

These gender-exclusive features appear mainly in spoken Japanese; they are generally not seen in expository writing. In everyday speech, however, it is almost impossible to avoid using them, and women are expected to refrain from using strongly masculine features.

While Japanese society considers the above as conventional, recent research has raised a

number of issues with descriptions of ‘male’ and ‘female’ Japanese. First of all, while features of Japanese reserved for women, referred to as *onna kotoba* (women’s language), are often argued to be an inherent element of the Japanese language, a number of scholars have traced the history of these features back to movements that emerged during the processes of nation-building and industrialization of the late 19th and early 20th centuries (e.g., Inoue, 1994, cited in Yukawa and Saito, 2004; Endo, 1997; Nakamura, 2012). These researchers argue that *onna kotoba* is closely linked to ideological views of women that were constructed and disseminated in order to consolidate the nation-state. Nakamura (2012) explains that the idealization of Japanese women’s language began during the prewar period and then was called a long-held Japanese tradition to help boost national pride.

A second problem with this description of the gender-exclusive characteristics of Japanese is that they reflect an ideal more than they do a reality. They are considered to be elements of standard Japanese and appear at times when women speak in the standard variety of the language, but are absent in a number of regional dialects of Japanese (Nakamura, 2012). Several studies presented in Okamoto and Shibamoto Smith (2004) provide empirical data suggesting that current language use is much more diverse than suggested by earlier descriptions of gendered language use. For example, Miyazaki (2004, 2010) found that girls in a junior high school regularly used *ore* and *boku* to refer to themselves during in-group talk. Matsumoto (2004) found that middle-aged housewives often used so-called male sentence-final particles and exclamations in daily conversations among themselves, “sometimes to express frustration but at other times to accommodate others’ views and be friendly” (p. 250). Sunaoshi (2004) found that the speech of female workers and farmers at an agricultural cooperative in Ibaragi Prefecture, in Japan, lacked many of the morphological and lexical features of stereotypical “Japanese women’s language.” Moreover, studies by Hideko Abe in the volume edited by Okamoto and Shibamoto Smith (2004), as well as in her book *Queer Japanese* (2010), suggest that sexual minorities negotiate identities for themselves by co-opting some of the features of stereotypical gendered Japanese. As such, the explanations of gendered Japanese language may appear as more ideological or prescriptive than as accurate or factual descriptions of the use of Japanese.

Nonetheless, such descriptions do have a normative value. Miyazaki (2010) reported that most young women who use *ore* and *boku* to refer to themselves in junior high school shift to more traditional Japanese women’s language when they move on to high school. More importantly, females in Japanese movies, television dramas, and even commercials, almost always use *onna kotoba*. Even Japanese subtitles for female characters in non-Japanese films employ these feminine markers. Nakamura (2007) argues that such use affords Japanese women the impression that this is the correct way to speak, an adherence to gendered norms in the mass media that ultimately popularizes these norms.

Methodical Framework

I began studying Japanese in the United States after a three-month exchange program in Japan in high school. I then earned a major and master's degree in Japanese studies. Yet despite extensive engagement with the Japanese language, I was not taught how to speak 'as a woman,' nor did I develop an awareness of the gender-exclusive features of Japanese while living in America.

After I returned to Japan following the completion of my master's degree, people began correcting my Japanese, and encouraging me to use female speech patterns, while at times warning me against using masculine forms. In one instance, while speaking to a male student and telling him about a visit my older brother had made to Japan, I used what I believed to be the casual expression for older brother, *aniki*. The story was fairly long, but partway through, the student—a very polite, soft-spoken young man—interrupted me and said in a pained voice, "*Sensei, 'aniki' wo yamete.*" [Professor, stop using *aniki*.] When I asked why, he explained that it is not appropriate for women to use that word—only males are allowed to use it.

As a life-long feminist, I bristled at the pressure to conform to gender norms in Japanese. Yet as an ardent student of the Japanese language, I sought to enculturate myself. As such, I struggled with the extent to which I could accept restrictions on ways to express myself.

While the World Economic Forum (2020) still places Japan very low in its ratings of gender equality—ranking Japan 121 out of 153 nations in 2019, the country has made significant strides towards gender equality in the past three decades in terms of its legal code, working conditions, and its educational system. The Equal Employment Opportunity Law, passed in 1985, and revised in 1997 and again in 2005, has gradually ensured a more—if not truly—equal playing field for women and men in the professional sector in terms of hiring and promotion, while also providing measures to eradicate sexual harassment in the workplace.

The Japanese education system has seen even more progress in ensuring equality between the sexes, mostly due to efforts by the Japan Teacher's Union, which began pushing for gender equality in the late 1980s and mid-1990s. This movement has experienced a great deal of backlash, especially concerning the Union's early use of the term 'gender free.' Even now, the application of the concept of gender equality is not universal. Nonetheless, in many elementary schools around the country, and slowly, in higher institutions of learning, these concepts have taken root, and to a large extent, girls and boys are afforded a more equal education than they were previously (Yagi, 2008).

Yet despite such progress, in my academic work, I have not perceived any changes in my female students' language. Since the women I taught interacted with my male students on a seemingly equal basis, I began to believe that my inability to see changes in gendered language may have been a result of my observation being limited to the classroom, where a

more formal register is generally used. These students may well resort to using different language with friends and family. I therefore turned my investigation to how Japanese women use and view their language in the context of this shift towards greater gender equality.

I began my formal work of exploring Japanese language and gender in 2013 by organizing two focus groups at the university where I teach. My motives for working with focus groups included the possibility of increasing my knowledge of actual language use through observing small groups of Japanese women brought together in comfortable settings, to discuss intimate issues with like-minded people of a similar age and occupation, and to “respond to and build on the views expressed by others in the group” (Litosseliti, 2003, p. 2).

I composed a questionnaire related to the personal use of a range of first- and second-person pronouns, sentence-ending particles, plain nouns and *bikago*, and exclamatory words and phrases—some of which are gender-exclusive and others neutral—as well as the extent to which it is appropriate for females to use these expressions. I also asked whether they ever felt it was difficult to express themselves fully because they are women.

After having the participants fill in the questionnaire individually, I moderated discussions about these expressions, while bringing in research findings such as that of Miyazaki (2004, 2010) on junior high school girls’ use of *boku* and *ore* to refer to themselves, and that of Matsumoto (2004) on the use of masculine sentence-ending particles by middle-aged housewives. I also drew on my own experiences of being corrected for using male language to transition and to stimulate deeper discussion (Litosseliti, 2003). I conducted these discussions in Japanese, which I audio recorded and then transcribed. Participants identified themselves using letters of the alphabet (“A”, “B”, “C”, etc.) each time they spoke.

While Litosseliti (2003) mentions that the power differential between a lecturer and students would render it inappropriate for a lecturer to moderate a focus group, I did not feel I could entrust someone else to lead these discussions, even though one of the 2013 focus groups involved students in my senior seminar, who had self-selected for participation after school. Fortunately, I was able to create a relaxed atmosphere with a good deal of interaction and laughter. The resulting discussions drew out several confessions about non-standard use of language, which in turn sparked other admissions of similar behavior.

In addition to this first focus group, the second focus group I moderated in 2013 comprised older women members of a university human rights research group that focused on gender issues. All were full- or part-time instructors at the university. This study purported to contrast the findings of the group of younger women, who had all gone through the Japanese school system after the Japan Teachers’ Union adopted a policy of gender equality, with those of the older women, who were avowed feminists but were raised and had worked in an era when Japan’s gender norms were much stricter. The results of this

study were presented in 2014 at the IGALA 8 in Vancouver (Noguchi, 2014). This study found that the older women's attitudes towards females using masculine Japanese were more liberal, but it was the younger women who employed some of the men's language features, albeit only with family and close friends.

In the years following these discussions, further changes in female language use became evident both in the mass media and in student responses to questions in my lectures. I therefore organized two more student focus groups in the fall of 2019. As with the student focus group in 2013, the participants in 2019 were enrolled in my senior seminar. This time, rather than allowing students to self-select on the basis of interest in language and gender, I asked all 12 female students in the seminar to participate, dividing them into two groups of six. I asked the students to complete the same questionnaire as I gave the 2013 group, and again, I audio recorded the discussions.

Results

For this paper, I draw data from the interactions with the three student focus-groups, and compare the results of the 2013 group with those of the two groups from 2019, to locate and describe changes in use and ideology.

One of the more interesting findings of this study was a growing rejection by young women of many of the typical markers of feminine speech. A greater number of participants in the 2019 groups reported that they never use the feminine first-person pronoun *atashi* than in the 2013 group, as shown in Table 1 (below). While none of the students in either year felt that women should never use *atashi*, the proportion of students who absolutely never use or seldom use *atashi* rose between 2013 and 2019. Although the proportion of participants who said they often employ *atashi* was still large (33%) in 2019, a full 42% reported that they absolutely never employ the term for themselves, and another 8% admitted that they seldom use *atashi*, compared to 40% of the 2013 group who said they seldom or never employ *atashi*. One participant in the 2013 group explained that she refrained from using it because she felt it sounds "too childish."

	2013	2019
Absolutely never use	1 (20%)	5 (42%)
Seldom use	1 (20%)	1 (8%)
Sometimes use	1 (20%)	2 (17%)
Often use	2 (40%)	4 (33%)

Table 1: Frequency of use of *atashi* as a self-referent

The rejection of other elements of *onna kotoba* was stronger. All students in both years indicated that they never or seldom use the ultra-feminine items *desu mono* or *kashira*. While the majority of the participants in both years reported that they never or seldom use *ara* (ooh!), that percentage rose in 2019. In addition, whereas none of the students in 2013 indicated that they never use *ara*, in 2019, 25% rejected it completely. The rejection of *maa* (my!) was also greater in 2019 than it was in 2013, as I show in Table 2.

	<i>ara</i>		<i>maa</i>	
	2013	2019	2013	2019
Absolutely never use	0 (0%)	3 (25%)	2 (40%)	3 (25%)
Seldom use	3 (60%)	5 (42%)	2 (40%)	7 (58%)
Sometimes use	0 (0%)	3 (25%)	0 (0%)	1 (8%)
Often use	2 (40%)	1 (8%)	1 (20%)	1 (8%)

Table 2: Frequency of use of *ara* and *maa*

During the group discussions in both years, several participants indicated that they associated these words with *madam* (well-bred upper class middle-aged or older women). In 2019, one participant explained that the older women who frequent the store where she works use that kind of language. Thus, to these young women, these expressions seem outdated and inappropriate for women their age.

Nonetheless, none of the participants in the focus groups in either year indicated that they use *boku* or *ore* to refer to themselves. However, on the questionnaires, the students in the 2019 group displayed far fewer negative attitudes about females who employ these terms than did the students in the 2013 group, as I present Table 3.

	<i>boku</i>		<i>ore</i>	
	2013	2019	2013	2019
Should absolutely never use	2 (40%)	1 (8%)	3 (60%)	4 (33%)
Not very good to use	3 (60%)	6 (50%)	2 (40%)	4 (33%)
OK in some cases	0 (0%)	5 (42%)	0 (0%)	4 (33%)
No problem for women to use	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

Table 3: Appropriateness of female use of *boku* and *ore*

In all group discussions, I described Miyazaki's (2004, 2010) study and asked the participants what they would feel about young girls using these 'male' pronouns to refer to themselves. In the 2013 group, most participants expressed their concern that females who use these pronouns may develop or already have a gender identity disorder. In the 2019 group, however, several participants suggested that they might consider the use of these pronouns odd at first, but would not condemn it. One participant suggested that such a girl might like manga (Japanese comics) very much, as some female characters in manga refer to themselves as *ore*. Overall, attitudes towards other females using these first-person pronouns were more tolerant in 2019 than in 2013.

Similarly, attitudes towards female use of the masculine second-person pronouns *omae* and *kimi* were somewhat less negative in 2019 than in 2013, as seen in Table 4.

	<i>omae</i>		<i>kimi</i>	
	2013	2019	2013	2019
Should absolutely never use	1 (20%)	2 (17%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Not very good to use	3 (60%)	6 (50%)	1 (20%)	3 (25%)
OK to use in some cases	1 (20%)	3 (25%)	2 (40%)	4 (33%)
No problem for women to use	0 (0%)	1 (8%)	2 (40%)	5 (42%)

Table 4: Appropriateness of female use of *omae* and *kimi*

As Table 4 presents, attitudes towards females using *kimi* were more forgiving overall than were feelings toward females employing *omae*. One of the more interesting findings was the difference between participants' initial written responses to the questionnaire about their own use of these pronouns and their suggestions during the group discussions, particularly with respect to the 2013 group. On the questionnaire in the 2013 group, only one of the students indicated that she employs *omae*, while another answered that she employs *kimi*. However, after these two participants confessed that they sometimes use *omae* and *kimi* during the discussion, all of the other participants admitted that they also employ *omae*, mainly with good friends of the same age. In two cases, however, these good friends were very good male friends. Table 5 contrasts responses to the questionnaire and during the focus group discussions.

Table 5 shows a smaller variation among responses and the discussions in the 2019 group. Three focus groups members reported that they sometimes use *omae*. One suggested that she sometimes uses *kimi*. One eventually admitted that she frequently uses *omae* when referring to others—good friends and family members, with the exception of her father and mother. Perhaps influenced by this, another participant changed her response from 'sometimes use' to 'often use.' Additionally, three members noted that they have friends who use *omae* but not *kimi*. The results suggest a growing acceptance of *omae* by women.

	2013Q	2013D	2019Q	2019D
Absolutely never use	2 (40%)	0 (0%)	5 (42%)	5 (42%)
Seldom use	2 (40%)	0 (0%)	4 (33%)	4 (33%)
Sometimes use	1 (60%)	0 (0%)	3 (25%)	1 (8%)
Often use	0 (0%)	5 (100%)	0 (0%)	2 (17%)

Table 5: Frequency of own use of *omae*: Questionnaire vs Discussion

A second area in which shifts away from conventional female norms appeared was the attitudes towards and personal use of masculine sentence-ending particles. The questionnaire responses concerning the appropriateness of women's use of the highly assertive particles *ze* and *zo* suggest an increasing tolerance towards this phenomenon, as Table 6 presents (below).

	<i>ze</i>		<i>zo</i>	
	2013	2019	2013	2019
Should absolutely never use	0 (0%)	1 (8%)	0 (0%)	1 (8%)
Not very good to use	4 (80%)	4 (33%)	4 (80%)	5 (42%)
OK to use in some cases	0 (0%)	6 (50%)	0 (0%)	5 (42%)
No problem for females to use	1 (20%)	1 (8%)	1 (20%)	1 (8%)

Table 6: Appropriateness of female use of *ze* and *zo*

In the 2013 group, none of the participants indicated in the questionnaire that they use *ze* or *zo*, and all but one suggested that it is not very good for women to employ them. In contrast, in 2019, three students admitted to sometimes using *ze*, while one wrote that she sometimes uses *zo*. Moreover, six indicated that women's use of *ze* is sometimes acceptable, and five participants wrote that women's use of *zo* is sometimes acceptable.

More liberal attitudes towards the use of these particles by women also emerged in the group discussions. In one of the 2019 focus groups, one young woman admitted to sometimes employing *zo* jokingly. When asked about other people using masculine sentence-ending particles, one student reported that she often heard female friends saying *iku zo* (I'm going) and *yaru zo* (I'm going to do it.). Another mentioned that she heard females

using *ze* with a rising intonation and a stretched-out pronunciation, as in *Tabeyo ze* (Let's eat!). Another agreed that this sentence sounded feminine if *ze* was stretched out, and noted that she rarely uses either of these particles, but that she might when she has doubts about the content of her suggestion. Yet another participant indicated that she sometimes uses *ze* when attempting to urge a large group of people to move, that is, by saying, "*Atchi ikou ze*" (Let's go over there!).

When I discussed Matsumoto's (2004) finding that some middle-aged housewives use *ze* and *zo* when talking among themselves, all of the participants in the two 2019 focus groups agreed that it sounded cool (*kakkoī*), and one even posited that it would lend an air of agency (*shutaisei*) to their speech. These results suggest an increasing acceptance of female use of these 'assertive sounding' particles.

The participants also indicated that young women are making incursions into male territory in their dropping of *bikago* (beautifying honorifics). The participants discussed the use of both the plain forms and *bikago* for lunch box (*bento*), money (*kane*), and chopsticks (*hashi*), as Table 7 presents.

	<i>bento</i>		<i>obento</i>		<i>kane</i>		<i>okane</i>	
	2013	2019	2013	2019	2013	2019	2013	2019
Never	0 (0%)	1 (8%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (40%)	1 (8%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Seldom	1 (20%)	1 (8%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (20%)	5 (42%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Sometimes	2 (40%)	4 (34%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (20%)	3 (25%)	0 (0%)	2 (17%)
Often	2 (40%)	6 (50%)	5 (100%)	12 (100%)	1 (20%)	3 (25%)	5 (100%)	10 (83%)

	<i>hashi</i>		<i>ohashi</i>	
	2013	2019	2013	2019
Never	0 (0%)	1 (8%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Seldom	1 (20%)	1 (8%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Sometimes	1 (20%)	4 (34%)	0 (1%)	2 (17%)
Often	3 (60%)	6 (50%)	5 (100%)	10 (83%)

Table 7: Participants' reported use of plain forms and *bikago*

As seen in Table 7 above, a majority of the students in both the 2013 and 2019 groups wrote that they sometimes or often employ all three of the masculine items cited in the questionnaire, the plain forms *bento*, *kane*, and *hashi*. In particular, the participants opined

that it is more acceptable for females to use the words associated with food—*bento* and *hashi*—without the honorific prefix *o*, while a small number admitted to using *kane*. Even so, half of the participants in the 2019 study admitted to often or sometimes also employing the latter masculine form, too.

More tolerant attitudes towards females who employ the masculine kinship terms *oyaji* (father), *ofukuro* (mother) and *aniki* (older brother) also appeared in the questionnaire responses in both years. *Oyaji*, however was the only word that more than one student claimed to use herself; three participants in the 2019 groups indicated in the questionnaire that they sometimes do so.

However, the group discussions revealed a greater use of these words. In the 2013 interactions, four of the participants claimed that they never use any of these terms, but had heard female friends use them. Nonetheless, they all construed the female use of *oyaji* as improper. One discussant suggested that she sometimes uses *oyaji* when referring to an older man who is not her father. Another noted that she sometimes hears females use the word when they argue or become irritated, but not to their parents. Rather, they employ the term to refer to their parents when speaking with a third party, and hence not in the presence of their parents. Another student admitted that she sometimes addresses a male friend as *aniki*, but would not use it when directly addressing an older brother. The others all noted that they would never use the term *aniki*.

In the 2019 groups, the majority of the students (four out of six in one group and five out of six in the other) reported never using any of these words. However, one student admitted that while she would never address her parents with the terms *oyaji* or *ofukuro*, she would address a slightly older neighborhood boy with *aniki*. Another young woman noted that she would reciprocate the use of all three when talking to a friend who also uses them. For example, if the friend referred to her father as *oyaji*, she would call him *oyaji-san*. She would also reflect this language attitude were the friend to refer to her older brother as *aniki*. In fact, she reported that one of her friends often employs these terms and that she then follows this wording. The group discussions evidence the gradual decline in taboos in gendered language, particularly in the use of *oyaji* to refer to an older man who is not the speaker's father.

The questionnaire responses and group discussions on eating lexical items evidenced more female incursions into male language, as Table 8 shows (below). Among the masculine terms related to eating, *umai* (delicious) becomes salient in that it seems to have become quite acceptable for females to use: Even on TV gourmet programs, women are often shown saying *umai* as they eat. This trend was confirmed by the questionnaire responses. In the 2019 focus groups, all 12 participants admitted to using it, and almost all admitted to not seeing a problem in its use by women; this contrasts with the much lower proportion of students in the 2013 groups who saw no problem in using the word.

	<i>umai</i>		<i>hara</i>		<i>ku</i>		<i>meshi</i>	
	2013	2019	2013	2019	2013	2019	2013	2019
Absolutely never	1 (20%)	0 (0%)	1 (20%)	2 (17%)	1 (20%)	1 (8%)	2 (40%)	3 (25%)
Seldom	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (20%)	2 (17%)	1 (20%)	6 (50%)	1 (20%)	5 (42%)
Sometimes	3 (60%)	7 (58%)	1 (20%)	6 (50%)	3 (60%)	4 (34%)	1 (20%)	3 (25%)
Often	1 (20%)	5 (42%)	2 (40%)	2 (17%)	0 (0%)	1 (8%)	1 (20%)	1 (8%)

Table 8: Participants' reported use of masculine terms related to eating

The term *hara* (literally 'stomach,' but most often used in the phrase *hara hetta* (I'm hungry)) also seems to have increased usage, and appears to have become more acceptable for female usage than six years ago, as Table 8 indicates. In contrast, attitudes towards *ku* (eat) and *meshi* (food) remain approximately the same. In the 2013 group, one student admitted that she used *ku* at home, but that her mother reprimanded her for it.

In the 2019 groups, several students admitted to using these words with family and/or friends. One participant informed the group that she would use *ku* when excited, even with her family, and that it does not anger her mother. Another admitted to using *hara*, *meshi*, and *ku* occasionally with certain *sabasaba-kei* (open-minded) female friends, but not at home. Three more participants admitted that they employ all three of these terms, but in different settings; one with family and friends, one with her family, and the third with her father and with male friends. These results suggest that the use of these masculine terms has become increasingly acceptable when the social distance is small.

The final area I explore is the use of expletives. Aligning with Lakoff's (1975) description of women's language in English, Japanese women traditionally avoid swearing. It should be noted, however, that expletives are much less common for both males and females in Japan than in English-speaking countries, and characters in Japanese movies or television dramas swear far less often than do characters in Hollywood movies.

In this study, I mentioned the word *kuso*, which is an equivalent to 'shit.' I present the questionnaire responses in Table 9. As Table 9 presents, the questionnaire results for these questions were similar in 2013 and 2019, as they were in the group discussions. In the 2013 focus group, one young woman admitted to using *kuso*, irrespective of the presence of men. The other participants all admit to using it, with one admitting to using it often.

In contrast, in both of the 2019 focus groups, some participants reported that they never use *kuso*, with one suggesting that she never uses any expletives and neither do her friends. Other participants described the fact that they may use alternatives to expletives when angry or frustrated; here, they use English expletives (one case), or use items such as *baka* (stupid), *uza* (that bugs me), or *mukatsuku* (that makes me sick), instead of *kuso*.

Appropriate for female use	2013	2019	Participants' use	2013	2019
Absolutely never	1 (20%)	1 (8%)	Absolutely never	0 (0%)	1 (8%)
Not very good	2 (40%)	3 (25%)	Seldom	1 (20%)	3 (25%)
OK in some cases	0 (0%)	5 (42%)	Sometimes	2 (40%)	6 (50%)
No problem	2 (40%)	3 (25%)	Often	2 (40%)	2 (17%)

Table 9: Questionnaire results concerning expletive *kuso*

However, several participants described situations in which they might use this word. One mentioned that she occasionally uses *kuso* if only one or two close friends can hear it. Another mentioned that she might use it when she is alone, as when playing a (video) game. Another claimed that she does not often swear, but admitted that sometimes if she is extremely upset, she may say *kuso* just to herself. Another admitted to the fact that if she is extremely frustrated, she may pronounce the word as *kusoo*, but mentioned that she is more likely to say *baka*, noting that both her male and female friends use *baka* in these instances. Two participants explained that they might use the expletive when with close friends and family members. Overall, it appears as though young women may use this expletive, but generally only when they are alone or with people they are close to.

In summary, responses to the questionnaire and focus group discussions suggest that young Japanese women are starting to reject traditional female gender-exclusive language features and have gradually adapted many conventionally masculine linguistic markers.

Conclusion

The data in this study suggests that these young women do not use many of the features highlighted in descriptions of *onna kotoba*—Japanese women's language—much or at all. However, many of the speech features previously reserved for men's use only are now being adopted by young women. The second-person pronouns *omae* and *kimi*, lexical items tied to eating, including *umai*, *hara*, and *ku*, and nouns to which honorific prefixes are not added to create *bikago* become particularly pronounced with reference to the proportions of the participants who use them. While none of the participants admitted to using the masculine first-person pronouns *boku* and *ore*, students in 2019 displayed less of a negative attitude towards females who do employ these terms than the participants in the 2013 focus group, suggesting a gradual relaxation of attitudes towards such transgressive behavior.

Although the data suggests such shifts in attitudes towards and usage of the gender-exclusive elements of the Japanese language, there are several limitations to this study. The number of participants was small, and as such the findings are not generalizable. All participants were college students, and all from the Kansai area of central Japan, which has

its own dialect. Some mentioned that they regard *onna kotoba* as part of standard Japanese, which they see as different from the regional variety of Japanese that they speak. Thus, their usage may differ markedly from that of young women in other regions of Japan. In addition, I selected the students in the 2013 study because they had expressed an interest in women's issues, and as such, they may have had a greater bias against traditional gender norms than other young women their age. Finally, the findings are predicated on self-reported usage, which may be unreliable. As pointed out in the discussion of the results, most of the participants in the 2013 focus group changed their reporting on the use of *omae* after one person admitted to using it.

The study suggests that Japanese women are slowly contributing to the change in the gendered nature of Japanese, by employing very few of the traditional elements of Japanese women's language, and by gradually yet increasingly adopting a number of traditionally masculine features which were until recently considered taboo for females to use. Although the new norms are not yet evident in most public contexts, the reported language use and the views of the participants in this study suggest that the shift is steady, and begins from intimate contexts, and then moves to more public contexts, such as television, as in the case of *umai* by women on gourmet TV programs.

Notes

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