Language Variation

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Although some theoretical linguistics may prefer to think about language as being an abstract entity, the structure of which is shared by all the speakers of that language and has an independent existence divorced from actual language use or users, the reality, as many of us know, is that language, and its very reason for existence is defined in terms of use. In other words, we cannot talk about language without inspecting its use. Not doing so would risk the danger of looking at just one aspect of language. If one starts examining how language is used in society, one quickly realizes how daunting a task it is to describe it. Language use may vary according to users' gender, socioeconomic class, formality (working or playing?), profession (do fishermen talk differently from farmers?), region, age, just to name a few of the possible parameters. And finer differentiation is possible for each category. Take regional variation. Speech patterns in the eastern part of Japan are very different from those in Kyūshū, or, even when we examine only one city, we may find that residents in one area speak differently from those in another part. In fact this process of making finer and finer differentiation is endless. One realizes ultimately that one person's speech is different from another's in some discernible way.

Here we will look at some salient and major variations in language use in Japan. In the limited space given to this essay, then, we can characterize, in certain broad strokes, only some of the factors that figure into variation in language use, that is, the variation due to region, gender, modality (spoken and written language), and age. We will have more to say about an important aspect of language variation—language of honorification—in a separate essay.

Dialects

A dialect area is defined as a geographical area into which language variations systematically converge. Even within a dialect area, there are a number of discernibly different dialects. Depending on how finely one make a distinction between one dialect and another, one can say we have tens or as many as hundreds of dialects. Many factors have contributed to the rise of a plethora of dialects, a phenomenon comparable to the situation in the British isles. In Japan, dialectal variation is due to high mountains and wide rivers that constituted a natural barrier to communication, a relative immobility of people's lifestyle until recently, a long history of habitation, a lack of means of mass communication until recently, among others.

If we remove Okinawa (where a separate language is spoken) from our present discussion, there are three major dialect areas in Japan—the southern island of Kyūshū, eastern Japan (roughly east of Nagoya), and western Japan (roughly between Kyūshū and Nagoya)—with the dividing line (in linguistics, called an 'isogloss') between east and west in the middle of the Japanese main island of Honshū, demarcated by a range of mountains.

To illustrate the dialectal difference, let us contrast Tokyo-area Japanese and the variety spoken in the Osaka area. Keep mind that there are many dialects within the Eastern variety (Tokyo, Nagano, Chiba, etc.) and Kansai variety (Kobe, Osaka, Sakai, etc.), a fact sanctioned by the very dynamic definition of dialect indicated above, but we can nonetheless identify certain consistent differences between these two dialect groups:

East - West - Meaning

imperative form: *yome - yomii* - 'read'

past tense: *katta - kōta* - 'bought'

adverbial form: *ōkiku naru - ōkyūnaru* - 'become larger'

negative: *sinai - sen* - 'don't do'

copula: *da ja, - ya* - 'be'

In addition to these conjugation differences, there are also some lexical differences as well. Suteru 'throw out' (Eastern) is hokasu (Kansai); gyōsan 'a lot' (Kansai) is takusan (Eastern); ōki ni 'thank you' (Kansai) is equivalent to arigatō (Eastern). The verb of existence in the Kansai dialect is oru, not the iru of Eastern variety--Ganbattoru nā 'you're working hard!' (Kansai) is Ganbatte imasu ne (Eastern), Wakattoru n kai na? 'Does she understand this? (Kansai) is Wakatte iru n desu ka? (Eastern). In the Kansai dialect certain vowels are elongated: chi 'blood' (Eastern) is chī (Kansai), me 'eye' (Eastern) is mē 'eye'. Some words ending in -su is dropped in Kansai, causing other phonological change. Examples include Ikimakka? 'Are you going?' (Kansai) is equivalent to Ikimasu ka? (Eastern), Yoroshū oma 'That's OK' (Kansai) is equivalent to Yoroshi desu yo or Ii desu yo (Eastern). Some sentence final particles that are somewhat different from the Eastern variety are: wa as in Hona wai ga ikimasu wa 'Well, in that case, I will go' (Kansai) (cf. Jaa watashi ga ikimasu yo (Eastern); wa is not gender-differentiated as is the case in the Eastern dialect area); ya, as in Kanben-shite ya 'Forgive me' (Kansai) (cf. Yappari suki ya nen 'I like her after all' (Kansai) (cf. Yappari suki na n da (Eastern)), de as in Hona iku de 'Well, I am going' (Kansai) (cf. Jaa iku yo (Eastern)), just to name a few examples. Although the difference may appear

unfathomably large, speakers from dialect areas do not generally have trouble in communicating with each other.

Policy for a National Language

One of the characteristics of the Eastern dialect (to which the Tokyo dialect nominally belongs) is the use of -bē ending to signal intention (e.g., iku bē 'I will go'). Others include words like hittakuru 'snatch away', hippagasu 'peel off', nanno kanno 'various', chanto 'properly', yatara 'randomly', choito 'a little', dokkoi 'wait a moment', etc. These characteristics were perhaps deemed unworthy of the dialect spoken at the seat of government and a new variety called the standard language took form beginning in earnest around 1900. The -bē form was replaced in favor of the Kyoto form of -ō (e.g., ikō 'I will go'). Eastern hayaku 'early' when it changes form for added politeness was also replaced by Kyoto hayō, as one sees in contemporary O-hayō (gozaimasu) 'Good morning'. Other polite adjectival forms still used by some in the Tokyo dialect, such as yoroshū gozaimasu 'acceptable', omoshirō gozaimasu 'interesting', akarū gozaimasu 'bright', all reflect the Kyoto variety.

Words for one's parents are a case in point. In the Tokyo area, such as ottosan 'father' (also ottō, otottsan) and okkasan 'mother' (also okkaa) were the normal address forms toward the end of the Edo period (1603-1868). In Meiji 3 (1870), the government approved textbook tells us to call one's father ototo-sama and mother okaka-sama. In Meiji 20 (1887), this changed to chichi-sama and haha-sama, and finally in Meiji 36 (1903), the address forms change once again to otō-san and okā-san. All these are linguistic forms that have not been attested in the area as indigenous forms. As alluded to earlier, the situations involving the so-called standard Japanese is that it is in many ways a constructed, idealized language.

From the beginning of the Meiji period (1868-1912) and continuing through the first half of the 20th century, the government went to a great length to promote a cleaned-up version of the Tokyo dialect as the national language, eradicate dialects from other areas, and force compulsory education to be conducted in the standard language, reprimanding school children who spoke their regional parlance in school. This effort was motivated by the belief that a lack of a standard mode of communication in the areas of military, science, and humanistic learning will hinder Japan from developing into a modern nation. This effort has been partially successful-today everyone, even those in Okinawa, will understand Tokyo variety of Japanese and many can switch between his own regional dialect to the Tokyo dialect in a hurry. This trend is aided, of course, by widely available newspapers, magazines, and TV, where the Tokyo dialect has a near monopoly both written and spoken form of the language. This does not mean that dialects are dead; in fact, one may say some are regaining their strength.

People, especially in areas with a strong dialect identity (Osaka, Hiroshima, etc.) have become increasing vocal about the pride they feel when speaking in their dialects. In these areas some TV and radio programs and publications are produced using their own dialect.

A Digression—a Case of Arinsu Kotoba

Related to the standard language discussion is a phenomenon of so-called arinsu kotoba, used by the courtesans of Edo Japan, which serves as an example of how a language policy of sorts change the speech of a small group of women. Women in this profession, who came from all dialect areas of Japan, felt pressed to hide their dialects and learn the language suitable for the occasion. Noticing that dialectal differences appeared most frequently at the end of a sentence, courtesan houses developed new inflectional endings to camouflage the women's dialects. Called arinsu kotoba, it is characterized buy the use of arinsu, as in Okoma de arinsu 'I am Okoma'. Other examples specific to this subculture during the Bunka Bunsei period (1804-1830), differing from house to house, included the use of nanshi for request as in oide nanshi 'please come', use of zansu as in kanzashi zansu 'it's a hairpin', use of gozansu (probably from gozaru 'be' and a variation of contemporary gozaimasu 'be') for desu as in samū gozansu 'it is cold', use of politer adjectival form yoroshū as in yoroshū osu 'it's fine'. It is worth noting that this arinsu kotoba was a constructed language, too, for a specific purpose. As a footnote, the word gozansu became widespread among housewives in the Tokyo's well-heeled residential Yamanote district in its permutated form, giving the so-called zāmasu kotoba 'zāmasu language', often made into caricature for its self-important, arrogant way of speaking (e.g., sō zāmasu ka? 'Is that so?').

Gender

Certain stereotyped generalizations are associated with man's speech--that it is rough, ungrammatical, and short. Women's speech, in contrast, is said to be more accurate, soft, and trivial. With these generalizations notwithstanding, one can tease apart certain linguistic elements that are marked for one gender or the other in Japanese. One of the earliest records of gender-differentiated (perhaps more accurately profession-differentiated) language in Japanese comes from 11th century, when women kitchen workers in the imperial court began using euphemistic, code-like words to refer to cooking utensils and ingredients as well as some court-related events.

Examples from this era include shamoji 'soup ladle' (lit. 'the thing whose name begins with the kanji character shaku 杓'. Cf. neutral and more common shakushi), gugo 'cooked rice' (cf. masculine meshi), o-futa 'lidded cooking pans' (cf. masculine futamono), o-miya 'gift' (cf. masculine miyage), and so forth. These words, called nyōbō

kotoba, eventually found their way to samurai households, then, toward the end of the Edo period, to the merchant class. Beginning in Meiji, these words continued to be used by the general public. For examples, of these words, shamoji has lost its gender marked quality and is in common use today, gugo is no longer used, but meshi is still masculine marked word for cooked rice or meal.

Apart from vocabulary, there are several places we can look for evidence of gender-differentiated language. The end of a sentence is a place where gender differentiation is found in the choice of sentence particles--small words that give the sentence a variety of 'flavors'. Look at the following pair, both of which mean 'I am going'. The sentence particle wa is a feminine ending while ze is masculine.

Iku wa.

Iku ze.

The use of this particle wa is now limited to those above, perhaps, 50 years of age. (We note parenthetically that this use of wa was first used in Futabatei Shimei's novel Aibiki ('Rendezvous'), published in Meiji 21, 1888. We may say this final particle has had a lifespan of about a century.) The masculine particle ze is limited to mostly young males (sometimes females) in informal situations. Factors determining who uses which one when are complicated by factors such as formal/informal, young/old. And importantly, the use is not a function of gender alone. Nonetheless one can easily see that Japanese can distinguish masculine and feminine speech. Also gender-differentiate language use may show up in word choice, often in "polite" words having the -o prefix. (Note that not all -o prefixed words are gender-marked or particularly polite; e.g., okane 'money', oshime 'diapers', onigiri 'rice balls' (interestingly nigiri refers to nigirizushi, a type of sushi), otsumu 'head', oden 'a type of stew', etc.)

Female - Male Meaning

o-shōyu - shōyu 'soy sauce'

o-sake - sake 'sake'

o-jōzu - jōzu 'be skillful'

Other words are marked too for a gender. For instance, meshi 'cooked rice, meal' is masculine (see above in our discussion of nyōbō kotoba), gohan 'cooked rice, meal' is either gender. Umai 'delicious' is more masculine; in contrast, oishii 'delicious' is more feminine than neutral.

Many travelers to Japanese department stores observed that the female elevator operators, now almost completely gone, guided customers to appropriate floors in a distinctive very high pitched voice. The women were trained to speak in "the voice", but why in such a high pitch? In Japanese (and possibly in English too), a high pitched voice is associated with formality, attentiveness, and courtesy. Even today, many Japanese, both men and women (and women are perhaps more conspicuous when they use a high voice), used a higher register in their voice range to speak to superiors and store customers.

When answering telephone calls too, people tend to raise their speech pitch register. A recent survey shows, however, that the pitch of "the voice" has come down quite a bit and that differences in pitch register have been leveling out.

As a speaker of Japanese one has a choice of speaking more like a man or a woman; the choice is the speaker's. Depending on what choices are made, the speaker can actively assert certain images of himself or herself, accept the speaker's masculinity or femininity, or question gender-typing that comes from using gender-differentiated language.

Coarse language or "talking tough"

Another dimension of language use that is probably highly correlated to masculine and feminine language is the continuum of coarse and refined. A skillful speaker of language can choose to be more coarse or more refined depending on what situation he/she is placed in. Again the speaker has a choice to make and this choice can contribute to the color of linguistic act. The above mentioned meshi 'cooked rice, meal' belongs to coarse, as does kū 'eat', temē 'you', etc.

Coarse language is not limited to just vocabulary selection. Other features include louder delivery, shorter language forms (ike! vs. itte kudasai 'go!'), certain unsavory or slangy vocabulary items and phrases (suke 'girlfriend', yasa 'residence'), word formation involving clipping (musho/keimusho 'jail', yaku)

Modality--Spoken and Written Japanese

Written and spoken are two modes of language use. Spoken language is time-bound and transient. Speaking is more spontaneous and is directed to a particular audience. Written language is bound to space (e.g., paper) and is more permanent. Writing is also more reflective in that it lends itself to analysis and revision. Writing may be done for an audience, it may be read by unintended group of people. Due to these inherent differences between the two modes of language use, attendant characteristics emerge. Since spoken language is time-bound, it embodies mechanisms to correct it (e.g., no,

what I meant to say was . . .). Spoken language is often used face to face, so that the speaker can use gesture or facial expressions, phonological features (louder voice or onomatopoeia) to add graphicness, and deictic expressions (here, this, over there). Because writing is a more reflective endeavor, it tends to be formal and employ tight grammar and considered lexical choice.

One notices substantial differences between these two modes in Japanese. Such differences exist in English but to a lesser extent. For instance, in English it is rare to hear someone say hereinafter or long disease or chemical names (pneumoultramicroscopicsilicovolcanoconiosis or acetylsalicylic acid). In Japanese grammar and lexical choices are far more formal for written language than those for the spoken language. Words like shikaru ni 'therefore', sunawachi, yotte 'consequently', shikaraba 'then', shikashi nagara 'however' are a few of the many words that are not normally used in spoken language in Japanese.

Age

The speaker's age another parameter that causes systematic language variation. Generally speaking, older speakers tend to use more variety in vocabulary, less likely to use new borrowed vocabulary, more likely to use kango and words that are considered for use in the written language, retain more older linguistic and sociolinguistic forms.

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Suggested Reading

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