

The construction of Standard Japanese women's language from 1920's to 1945

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1. Introduction

In this paper, I examine the construction of institutional discourses about norms of women's language in Standard Japanese, which is based on the Tokyo dialect. From the end of the 19th century establishing a standard language, with which people living in Japan could understand each other, was one of the significant political tasks the Japanese government had in constructing the system of the nation-state. I investigate the relationships between discourses and nondiscursive domains such as institutions, political events and social movements. The period that I look at is from the 1920's to 1945 with war having a strong influence on the outcome.

What I would like to focus on here is how "women's language" was regarded in the study of the national language. The research was used to set the nation's language policy. And I will show how "women's language" was politically used in the nation's language policy during wartime. First, I will explain people's thoughts on the language which they believed women should use.

2. *Nyoo boo kotoba* 'pre-modern court women's language' as the ideal language for women

In Japan, at the beginning of the 20th century, the Ministry of Education, launched a series of surveys for the establishment of a standardized national language. However, no single public institution dedicated itself to the task of establishing and propagating norms of "standardized national women's language."

From the 1920's to 1945, the issue of what form of speech women should adopt came up repeatedly in debates among linguists, scholars and commentators in public discourse. Their discourses had a strong effect on the consensus on "standardized national women's language." Kikuzawa (1929) was the first to consider "women's language" an object of national language research. Kikuzawa regarded *nyoo boo kotoba* which is 'pre-modern court women's language' as the ideal, describing it as courteous and feminine.¹ After Kikuzawa, Yoshida (1935) and Hoshina (1936) also concluded that *nyoo boo kotoba* symbolized the upper class and femininity. They praised it as the ideal and recommended women to speak in that manner.

I have written that Kikuzawa (1929) was the first to take up "women's language" as the subject of a linguistic inquiry; however there is a thesis on *nyoo boo kotoba* before Kikuzawa. Ando (1913), referred to it, though, only as the equivalent of tabooed words used by daughters of the Emperor serving the shrine. Ando regarded *nyoo boo kotoba* as jargon; a form of speech used to maintain human relationships among a closed group, and related it neither to femininity nor to differences in gender. What seemed to be epoch-making was that in Kikuzawa's study he took up "women's language" as the main theme and, furthermore, regarded it as a form of speech based on gender differences.

Why did the linguists come to regard the *nyoo boo kotoba* as the ideal? The word *nyoo boo* of *nyoo boo*

kotoba originally meant “rooms for women.” But its meaning has changed and in modern Japanese it means “wife.” The duties of court women included looking after the Emperor and sometimes doing clerical work for court events. Some women even gave birth to ensure an heir for the Emperor. They became the role model for women that the state wanted to project under the educational policy of *Ryoosai kembo shugi* which is 'the ideology of a good wife and wise mother.' This is one of the reasons that led the linguists to regard *nyooboo kotoba* as the ideal. Furthermore, in Japan's Emperor system, a discourse that held ‘pre-modern court women’s language’ to be the origin of “women’s language” had the potential to serve as a tool in integrating women into the national culture, and thus make them more likely to submit to the ultra-nationalistic program during wartime.

3. The propaganda of women’s speech in standard Japanese

Secondly, I show that attempts were made to propagate women’s speech in standard Japanese to the public through education and the media. In 1941 the Ministry of Education released the textbook *Reehoo yookoo* for secondary schools. It translates as the ‘Essentials of etiquette.’ It clearly described gendered forms of standardized speech. The following quotation is an example.

2. For the first person, *watakushi* 'I' should normally be used. In addressing a superior one may on occasion use one's surname or given name. Men may use *boku* 'I' when addressing a social equal, but not when addressing a superior. (Ministry of Education 1941a:6)

This quotation shows that women must not use *boku* for 'I'. In other words, when addressing someone, speakers must choose the proper words depending on their sex.

The *Reehoo yookoo* was also written for the education of the nation. Propaganda for it was widely spread. During a single year--1941--six publishers produced the textbook as well as thirteen types of explanatory commentaries. Women's magazines gave extra space to special feature articles on this manual and interpretive articles appeared serially in the newspapers.

In 1941, this way of speech was introduced into elementary schools as part of the national language curriculum. In the same year, the first publication of the teacher’s manual for speaking came out. It said that teachers must instruct pupils that men and women should speak differently (Ministry of Education 1941b: 98). Moreover, in the reading text, some words of *nyooboo kotoba* were shown as traditionally womanly ones (Ministry of Education 1942: 637).

The concept of the *Reehoo yookoo* was embodied when a proposal for the spread of etiquette was made in the Education Council by a member of the House of Peers. The Education Council was formed in 1937 by the Prime Minister for the purpose of reorganizing educational policy. He was trying to establish a general national mobilization in order to win the war. The members considered etiquette to be an expression of the national spirit, so they made it their goal to have the nation behave as instructed. They further proposed

control over the Japanese nation by establishing a comprehensive social hierarchy and clear sex role distinctions. The Ministry of Education carried out this plan. The state was not attempting merely to control language usage. It is clear that the government's aim was to reinforce hierarchical social relations and gender roles by regulating language.

4. The women leaders' role

Thirdly, I examine how women leaders played an important role in constructing the norms of women's language.

For instance, all girls' high school teachers made up half of the committee for the Essentials of Etiquette in the Ministry of Education.² Half of those teachers were women. This was unusual because at that time, women had no political rights and few women joined government committees.

Another example, some women leaders joined the 'National Language Association'. This *Kokugo Kyookai*, or the NLA, was one of the language planning organizations supported by the government. It was founded in 1930 and its members also included linguists, such as Yoshida, and Hoshina who were mentioned previously. The NLA's objective was to "strive for the rationalization and improvement of the national language and lovingly preserve it" (*Kokugo Kyookai 1937:back cover*). In 1939, the NLA commenced preparations for establishing a women's wing. The launch of this wing by the NLA suggests that the association had fallen into step with other ministries such as Finance and Welfare, which were increasingly encouraging women to participate in public policy as the nation mobilized for war. The NLA specifically recruited female educators and authors, because they could teach and serve as models for other women. But female campaigners for the rights of working women did not join the organization, because it was not primarily concerned about language use by working-class women; rather it sought to drive home language policy among middle- and upper-class women who were dedicated to becoming mothers.

Initially the NLA was not overly enthusiastic about the question of language for women, nevertheless it increased its exposure in the mass media after establishing the women's wing. The linguists and some female members propagated through the media that women should speak politely and femininely in the same manner as *nyooboo kotoba*.

Why was the State policy on "women's language" accepted by these women leaders? It is because they believed that the authorities had acknowledged the value of "women's language" and, thus, the value of women themselves as Japanese subjects. They thought that women's language in standard Japanese didn't represent lower status, rather, higher status because linguists asserted that its origin came from *nyooboo kotoba* and that using polite words elevated the speaker's status. This sounds reasonable, but in reality women were made to use humble words to men.

5. Young women's view on "women's language"

Lastly I show the opinion of the young women exposed to this propaganda, and I report on the varieties of Japanese used in the magazine *Shoojo no tomo* which means ‘The friend of girls.’ It was one of the most popular magazines for young women from the 1920’s to 1945. Readers were middle-class, aged from about 7 to 15 years old, and they lived mainly in big cities such as Tokyo, Yokohama and Osaka (Jitsugyoo no Nihon-sha 1908:108-110).³ I observed their essays and letters written to editors and articles of round table talk as well as the conversations in the stories of this magazine.

The result of my observation indicates that there were roughly four varieties that women used in the magazine. The first was a dialect that had characteristics of feminine language based on the Tokyo dialect, if we classify it based on the norm by linguists (Mio 1942, Fujiwara 1944) at that time.⁴ In the stories, young educated, middle-class women characters spoke this way. The second was a regional dialect in the style that was spoken by young housekeepers and poor young farmers. It could also be observed in essays written by the readers. The third was a dialect that had characteristics of “impolite standard men’s language” (if we classify it based on the norm by linguists at that time). Worker’s wives in the stories spoke this way. In articles of round table talk, young factory workers said that they also used the same style. Fourthly, a few readers wrote letters to editors in their own regional dialects as the first language.

The discourses in this magazine show that young women, who were both regional and Tokyo dialect speakers, thought that regional dialects were bad languages and Tokyo dialect was good. Furthermore young women regarded low-class speech, that is, the speech of young factory workers as bad for women, because it was similar to men’s speech.

This is an analysis from just one magazine, but it can be assumed that the norm of standard women’s language had already been formed in the minds of middle-class young women; spread through education and the media. My analysis also indicates that “feminine language based on the Tokyo dialect” which was the base of women’s language in standard Japanese, was regarded as an index of not only femininity but also high status and authority, compared with other varieties.

6. Conclusions

In this paper, I have examined the construction of the norms of women’s language in standard Japanese from the 1920’s to 1945. We have seen that the linguists studied *nyooboo kotoba* and concluded that it symbolized upper class and femininity. Next, I showed that attempts were even made to propagate women’s speech in standard Japanese to the public through education and the media. And my analysis also indicates that “feminine language based on the Tokyo dialect” was the preferred variety for middle class young women. Moreover, elite women themselves even took part in constructing the norms of women’s language.

In this way, women’s language as a standard language gained legitimacy when it was endorsed by academic authority and appeared in the language policy of a nation as representing esteemed values, such as femininity or refinement. It was the war that promoted it, under the national mobilization system, where every citizen, including women and children, was obliged to be involved. Standard Japanese was regarded

as a means of unifying the nation (Ueda 1968), and so was standard women's language. It contributed to the political intention to culturally integrate women as part of the nation in the first half of the 20th century. Standard women's language in Japanese did not rise naturally in common use, but rather was purposefully promoted by the government using a combination of academic endorsement, education, and popular culture.

Notes

1. *Nyoo boo kotoba* was used not only by court-women but also by the nobility, including men. *Nyoo boo kotoba* is also known as *Kuge kotoba* 'the nobility's language.' It seems reasonable to suppose that the name *Kuge kotoba* represents the actual status of the jargon more properly than the name *Nyoo boo kotoba*.

2. Secondary educational institutions for girls were girls' high schools and technical schools, etc. In 1941, 5,119,638 girls and 5,248,241 boys attended elementary school, representing an enrollment rate of 99.73% and 99.70% respectively (Nihon Tookee Kyookai 1988:213). In the same year, 454,423 girls were enrolled at girls' high schools and 364,486 boys were enrolled in middle school (Nihon Tookee Kyookai 1988:243).

3. Both the denotation and connotation of the term "middle-class" before World War II are different from those at present in Japan. Before the War, people termed middle-class were not a majority of the population, as they are today, but were rather considered by the Japanese government to be leaders of society; therefore, before World War II, the term "middle-class" referred to wealthy upper-class people below the nobility and imperial families.

4. Mio (1995[=1942]) can be said to be the one that most comprehensively arranged women's spoken language in standard Japanese from the view point of linguistic forms before the World War II. Mio shared one chapter for "women's language" and enumerated its features, quoting some parts of the dialogues from dramas and novels. He, however, prefaced it with the following statement.

Women's language here does not mean all the languages used by all women, otherwise men's language would be included too. Women's language here means womanly language.

(Mio 1995:403)

It follows from this preface that he did not observe all the languages all women were using, but it was a study along with the nation's language policy of the time that was to establish the purified standard language. As a matter of fact, he did not quote the lines of female construction laborers, which, according to his criterion, were not a womanly language.

Here are the main features of women's language he enumerated.

General stylistic features:

Women's speech is more polite than men's speech.

Specific linguistic forms:

Lexical:

First-person pronoun *boku* is not used since it is for men.

Morphological:

Of sentence final particles, *wa*, *no*, *koto*, *mono* are for women.

Sentence final particles *yo*, *ne* are for women when used with *masu*-form.

They are for men when used with plain-form.

Te-form is used at the end of question forms.

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