

A New Perspective on Women's Language in Japanese: An Interview with Sachiko Ide

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PROFILE

Sachiko Ide is currently a professor in linguistics at Japan Women's University in Tokyo. After she completed her B.A. in English at Japan Women's University, she pursued her M.A. in Education at International Christian University in Tokyo, during which time she also studied at University of Wisconsin, Madison. From the very early days of her studies, she had a strong interest in the relationship between language and culture/society, and she was one of the very few researchers of her time who recognized the significance of the socio-cultural aspect of language. Her major research on linguistic politeness, women's language and Japanese evidentials and epistemological stance, much of which was supported by major grants, has been very innovative, and her publications have made a significant impact on academic and non-academic audiences alike. Thanks to her keen intuition about the value of examining language in real context coupled with her powerful leadership abilities, she is now a leading scholar in the field of pragmatics and sociolinguistics. Her contribution to the field through other professional activities is also outstanding: She is the Editor for *Multilingua* (Journal of Cross-Cultural and Interlanguage Communication) and *Gengokenkyuu* (Journal of the Linguistic Society of Japan). She is a member of the organizing committee for major linguistic associations including the Linguistic Society of Japan and the English Linguistic Society of Japan. And most importantly, she has inspired a very large number of young researchers to follow her and to further explore this exciting field.

IAL is delighted that Sachiko Ide agreed to spend time with us for this Special Issue to answer some highly relevant questions regarding women's language in Japanese. The interviewer, motivated by an issue in her own teaching experience, was genuinely eager to discuss this topic with Professor Ide. The interview was conducted at Japan Women's University on July 15th, 1994.

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INTRODUCTION

Japanese language marks male/female differences at different levels of grammar: morphology (e.g., *bikago* or the beautifying prefix *o-* attached to certain types of nouns, adjectives, and adverbs used more frequently by women than by men), sentence ending particles (men and women use sentence final particles differently), and the lexicon (e.g., first person pronouns: *boku* is used only by men). These differences in men's and women's speech are particularly salient in informal contexts. Therefore, as teachers of Japanese, when we introduce the informal speech style, we must point out the stylistic differences between male and female speech. This may sometimes cause problems, particularly among people influenced by the feminist movement who feel that for women to use a distinctively 'female' speech style is somehow degrading or an indication of women's status as lower than that of their male counterparts in Japanese society. Thus teachers of Japanese must deal with the questions: Is the male/female distinction in speech style a direct reflection of any type of social hierarchy in which women are necessarily lower than men? Does women's language in Japanese actually mark the lower status of women? Using this opportunity given by *IAL*, I would like to discuss these issues with Professor Ide, who is one of the most well known figures in the field of women's language in Japanese. My questions will center around how Japanese women's language emerged, how it functions in today's society, and the appropriate ways of teaching both the concepts and uses of such stylistic differences between men's speech and women's speech to students whose native language does not mark such sociocultural distinctions.

THE INTERVIEW

Mishina: *What has been the traditional view of women's language in the literature?*

Ide: I think the study of women's language in Japan has been conducted using two entirely different frameworks. One is the framework used by the *Kokugogakusha* (traditional Japanese linguists), who focus on women's language and the women's world as I discussed in the paper I presented at Berkeley, about *nyoobo kotoba* (the language of court ladies) or *yuujo go* (the language of courtesans).¹ The common approach for these linguists is to describe the facts based on the literature, facts about women's language. The basic idea here is that women's language is *isoogo*,² similar to the specialized language of monks, or the language of *shokunin* (craftsman), and *toozoku* (robbers). Thus women's language as *isoogo* is one of the major topics among the *Kokugogaku*. It's a

kind of philological study—their goal is to examine Japanese literature and what types of vocabulary were used for what, and then to do a detailed description, with a little analysis, of it. The other framework emerged after the impact of the women's liberation movement in the 1970s, and was influenced by Robin Lakoff's thesis on women's language, which claimed that women's language is a reflection of women's lower status in the society—that the lower or marginal status of women in the society is reflected in language, and by using a particular type of language, we, as women, are reinforcing our position as lower or subservient. Using this hypothesis, that is, 'the feminism hypothesis,' we started to investigate certain relevant aspects of the Japanese language, such as the words which describe women, how women speak differently from men, and so on. These are the two different frameworks.

Mishina: So that means that Robin Lakoff introduced a kind of negative image of women's language?

Ide: Yes. The year of 1964, when the civil rights movement started, that was the beginning of feminism and the idea of sexism. The late 1960s and the early 1970s was the time of raised awareness, a time for reconsidering everything about women in every field: law, economics, physiology, literature, political science, as well as language. And as a linguist, Robin was the strongest, the most influential person to establish this hypothesis. Her book begins with the famous sentence: "Language uses us as much as we use language." We use language, but by using the language we are at the same time used by the language and become the subservient person, putting the male in the center of the society. Anyway, the work I did in the 1970s was influenced by this second framework.

Mishina: Now it seems that you have a different interpretation, a different theory of women's language. Could you explain that and what led you to this new perspective?

Ide: I did use Robin's idea and applied her feminist theory to the Japanese language. I wrote many articles and presented many papers trying to raise people's consciousness about how women are put in a subservient position by the way they use language. However, my students at Japan Women's University were not moved by my works. So I started to wonder, and wondered for several years why I had not been able to influence my students as much as I had expected, until I realized that what I was trying to convince the students of was not entirely correct due to the following fact: Japanese women do not regard themselves as miserable or lower in status to the same degree that Western women do. Maybe this is because, from the structural point of view of our society, everybody knows that the mother has the power in the family.

Mishina: *Right. That's what I always think about when people talk about women's lower status in the society. Actually women do have power.*

Ide: Yes, in most Japanese families the mother is the person who controls the money and the daily affairs of life. Also from an internal, psychological point of view, women are not willing to give up all the good things about women, like putting on lipstick and looking nice, wearing skirts instead of jeans and Japanese women, to me, appear to be much more modest than the Western women in applying the feminist ideology to their own lives. They do not seem to seek the same status and power as men, but different roles which are not less favored. I learned this from my students by looking at what they are doing.

Well, I did not work on women's language for quite a long time, until several years ago when I encountered Michael Silverstein's work. His article, "Shifters, linguistic categories, and cultural description," opened my mind up to a new perspective. I realized that what I had believed to be the way to approach language was actually looking at only a part of how language functions. According to Silverstein, the tradition of Western linguistics was to focus on the function of *reference*. When you use the word 'tape recorder,' you *refer* to this device right here (pointing to the walkman). The word is the arbitrary sign to refer to this. But, Silverstein says this is just a part of the function of language, and he also deals with the *non-referential* functions. I was particularly interested in the *indexing* function, among the many non-referential functions. Indexing is to index who you are. This notion of indexicality will explain why the use of women's language is useful for any woman of any social class or any position or professional domain.

Miyako Inoue, who is working on her dissertation in anthropology about women's language, has done extensive fieldwork in Japanese corporations where the executives are women. Inoue examined the language of these women as well as that of lower status office ladies and compared the two: She found that the female executives in the higher position used more polite language than those of lower status. Thus empirical studies, actually many empirical studies, have shown that even women of high status use women's language or more polite language. This is contradictory to the traditional view of honorifics. For example, according to Brown and Gilman's "The Pronouns of Power and Solidarity," the higher person has more power and the lower person has less power; people with less power use the V-form of the pronoun, which is actually the honorific form, while people with more power use the non-honorific form of pronouns, or the T-form. According to this principle, only if you are lower in status do you have to use a higher form, that is, a more polite form. Now if we apply this principle to the use of women's language, we would predict that since women are lower in status, they have to use the higher form for respect, to show the power difference. But in Japanese society, as we learned from Miyako Inoue's case study of the speech of high status working women, the higher status women use high forms. Since this is contradictory to Brown and Gilman, we

have to re-examine the situation, and in order to do so, we need a broader perspective for looking at language; we must look at language as having more than just a referential function; I mean specifically that we must look at the *indexing function* of language. Women's language should be interpreted from the standpoint of these multiple functions; for a woman to use politer language than a man means that she is indexing herself as belonging to the female gender, in the same way as wearing pearls and jewelry shows her identity as a female by which she manifests grace or dignity. Language can be a means to manipulate one's image as a good, well-educated and sophisticated person, in order to be regarded by others as a reliable person. The use of higher forms of honorifics is primarily regarded as showing respect for the addressee or the referent, but it is important to realize that it also manifests the dignity of the speaker. If you pay attention to the notion of indexing...indexing yourself...who you are and in what social class you place yourself and what gender you belong to...if you focus on that type of function of the language, then you can explain the phenomenon: You want to show that you are a woman, and in order to do so you have to use high forms—that's just like wearing jewelry.

Ide: It is very difficult for many Westerners, particularly for Americans, to understand the use of honorifics because they lack the same concept of social hierarchy and how it affects the use of language. Since their egalitarian idealism is so strong and everybody is supposed to be equal, the language is supposed to be the same for everybody. So from the Western perspective it may be hard to understand this social hierarchy. However, the basic premise behind language use in Japan is that, according to the Japanese indigenous philosophy of *wakimae*, everybody is supposed to be different.³ The society is supposed to be composed of different people, and different people are supposed to be doing things complementarily, and this is the basis for the Japanese family. The father's and mother's roles are supposed to be different. The mother's role and the grandmother's role are supposed to be different. And by everybody carrying out these roles and fulfilling their own realm of responsibility, the society works well. This is the basic idea. So we (women) do not aspire to become equal with or identical to men. We want to identify ourselves as female; we want to identify ourselves as higher status people, which does not mean having power, but rather that the higher person has his/her own identity and just as much responsibility and pain as the lower person. And everybody has to be complementary and care for each other. This is the basic idea. So, to be a woman is not considered to be negative as it may be in the United States.

Mishina: *I think your explanation really confirms my intuition about the language, and I assume that the majority of native speakers of Japanese would feel the same way. However, there could be some problems when you say "to play the woman's role" or "to index yourself as a woman", since some women do not want to do that; and they also have the freedom to choose not to pursue the*

social norm of 'women,' So one can say, "I don't wear jewelry, I don't like wearing skirts...just like I have the freedom to choose what to wear, I have the right to choose which speech style I want to use." Is this argument acceptable when that person is learning Japanese? How would you respond to such an opinion?

Ide: If she wants to interact with Japanese people using Japanese, she should follow what we actually do. That's how people communicate in the society. It's like the air; this is what makes us feel comfortable. This is our social norm.

Mishina: *So if that person wants to learn a different culture and a different language, they would have to switch their way of thinking.*

Ide: If this explanation does not satisfy some people, let's think of other ways. The Japanese language is so deeply embedded in and connected with the culture. By 'culture' I mean the Japanese people's world view—what is right and what is wrong to them, and what they think are the appropriate ways of doing things.

This is all reflected in the language: the compulsory use of honorifics, and especially the use of the *-desu/-masu* forms and sentence final particles; self identification markers, such as first person pronouns (*ore/boku/watashi/watakushi* for men and *atashi/watashi/watakushi* for women, each of which differs in degree of formality), and second person pronouns (*omae/kimi/anata*) are reserved for male speakers and *kimi/anata* for female speakers, each of which differs in degree of formality as well as the gender of the addressee) and so forth. Additionally, we also have many speech formulas that must be used in particular contexts.⁴ These formulaic expressions are much more abundant in our culture because we have the pattern of thinking which is what we call *kata-no-bunka* 'the culture of pattern.' Japanese people look at things in terms of patterns. That's our frame of mind. This is one of the characteristics of the Japanese culture which was formed during the Edo Period and is still somewhat prevalent in the contemporary Japanese society. So when foreigners learn Japanese, they must start looking at things the way Japanese people do. To learn a language is also to learn the different ways of looking at the world. If you say to the students "you have to deal with Japanese people in a Japanese way," the students will not be satisfied; but if you tell them that the Japanese language is tightly connected with the culture, and in order to master the language, they must also learn the culture or their language will sound awkward; then it will probably be more convincing.

Mishina: *In your Berkeley paper you mentioned that one of the possible origins of contemporary women's language—the language of the court ladies—was used "to signal their gentle appearance while holding virtual power"⁵ meaning that they camouflaged the power they had in the royal family by making their words softer or rather child-like so that they would sound innocent. Now some people might say that the fact that women had to disguise their virtual power (while men could openly show their power without such consideration) reflects male dominance and that female speech is, therefore, a product of women's lower status. How would you respond to such an argument?*

Ide: This is a very good question and actually I am struggling with this issue. Maybe dominance by men did exist if we look at the society from a certain point of view, but that does not necessarily mean that women occupied a *lower* status. It would be more accurate to say that women had a *different* status. As long as we take the position that men and women are different in quality--women are softer and have the advantage of being more permissive, while men have their own ways of doing things—but equal in dignity and equal in dominance, then the argument that female speech is an outcome of women's lower status will be irrelevant.

Mishina: *Have there been any recent changes in the different styles for male and female speech?*

Ide: Yes, in fact, there has been an extensive shift in speech styles. For example, boys these days use *kashira* (sentence final particle that used to be used by girls), girls use *daze* (sentence final emphatic particle, traditionally used by boys), and so forth. This is true, especially among young people before they graduate from high school or college, that is, before they go into the "real world." Their speech styles can be almost identical. It can also be true even at the workplace, particularly among women who work in a certain domain, for example, if they are working at a computer office and doing the same kinds of things as men, both men and women speak the same way.

Mishina: *What are the motivations for adopting each other's speech styles?*

Ide: I think some people may have less of a need to identify themselves as male or female because they have the same roles. I think with the changes in society and the changes of women's roles in society, language is obviously changing as well. For example, women of my generation call their husbands *shujin* 'master' and speak to them in honorifics. But the younger generation talk to their husbands entirely without honorifics, and one of my acquaintances calls her husband by his first name. But, the interesting thing is that in front of her mother-in-law, she switches, and uses honorifics.

Mishina: *I think that is really important. Although the younger generation, in schools and among friends, may not use distinct registers or speech styles, when they grow up and have more opportunities to meet different people, interact in different contexts, and develop multiple roles in society, at least they would have to know how to switch (and the majority of the Japanese people do acquire the sensitive register-switching ability as they get older). I think that is important in Japanese society.*

Ide: Yes, absolutely.

Mishina: *So when we teach the different speech styles in a Japanese language class, it would be wrong and misleading to tell the students that the choice of which style to use is a personal one. It's not—it's a social choice.*

Ide: Yes. That's the crucial point and these are the arguments I have been making in my papers. In fact, based on a study I conducted with my colleagues concerning a comparison of polite expressions by Japanese and Americans, we concluded that in contrast with the Japanese, Americans' use of language is *volitional*, meaning that the speaker has more of an active choice of appropriate linguistic form and/or behavior. On the other hand, Japanese people's use of language, especially polite language, is based on *wakimae*, which contrasts with the notion of *volition* in the sense that the speaker is passive in language choice since the particular situational factors are set and the appropriate linguistic form and/or behavior is automatically decided; hence the speaker has little choice. The term *wakimae* is now beginning to be introduced in Western linguistics, like the latest work by Wolfgang U. Dressler (1994), as a key term to interpret Japanese pragmatics. What you have to be aware of is the very basic difference between the Western use of language and the Japanese use of language. One common misconception is that universally people use language in the same way, but that is not the case. In some languages the norm of pragmatics is talk, but in others the norm might be silence. When we compare Americans and Japanese in this regard, Japanese talk predominantly according to the socially expected norms; and that is *wakimae*. What is more important for the Japanese is to fit into a particular context, rather than the content of what one says. This is the crucial point. In sharp contrast, Americans think that what is said should be addressed to the interlocutor in a clear and explicit way so that the idea is communicated. So for Americans the direction is from you to the other. But the Japanese people first observe the context and then select out of all possibilities the most appropriate language forms on all levels--phonology, morphology, syntax, and speech formulae—and then speak in the appropriate way. Then you will be thought of as a "right" person, and if you give the "right" feeling to the addressee, your intention will be accepted. This is what makes speaking Japanese in context somewhat different from speaking English in the context of the U.S. So in order

for any person to be accepted by the Japanese people while speaking in Japanese, you have to be able to sense the context and select the appropriate language forms. Of course, language is something you use as a tool to express your own ideas, but in Japanese there is also an emphasis on this process of fitting into the context. Then, from this perspective you can understand why women have to use the female markers—to identify ourselves as females when we are to play the role of a woman.

I am afraid that I have characterized Japanese pragmatics a bit too strongly in order to make a clear outline for the audience interested in Japanese. Of course, I admit that there are universal features in the language system and also in language use. However, the aspects of language which are embedded in cultural contexts cannot be overemphasized, especially when we think of cross-cultural communication.

Mishina: *Thank you so much for answering all my questions, and also for presenting us with your very interesting theory about women's language.*

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Prof. Ide's central claim here is that male/female speech style differences in Japanese have the function of *indexing* the social role of the speaker, and that identifying oneself as belonging to the male or female gender has no implication of a higher or lower status in society. She also pointed out that the use of female speech can be taken negatively in Western society, whereas this is clearly not the case in the Japanese language; and that this contrast can be explained by the different sociocultural values of the Japanese and the West. Western culture, particularly Americans, emphasizes the ideal of equality among all human beings, whereas Japanese culture is based on a vertical social hierarchy in which differences in social roles in such domains as class, profession, gender are natural and expected; with no difference in dignity among each domain. Another important claim was that the Japanese language is a highly contextualized language, where one has to have an acute sense of *wakimae*, in order for the language to fit appropriately into the context. Marking male/female differences is a significant factor in such a fine-tuned usage of the language. Regarding the teaching of the language, Prof. Ide suggested that teachers should emphasize the fact that the Japanese language is a direct reflection of the culture, and that to acquire the language one has to understand the culture behind it and take it as it is; or else his/her language will not sound appropriate to native speakers of Japanese. This implies that students need to be informed of the sociocultural values of the Japanese people that require the male/female distinction in the language, and this will help them adopt such distinction without any

misconception which may arise from the ignorance of the target language culture.

There are significant implications from this analysis. First, the importance of an *emic* approach—to interpret the phenomena in a social group using *their* principles—to the understanding of a different culture and its language. It was shown that an *etic* approach, which assumes that both languages function in the same way (i.e., borrowing the framework used in the analysis of Western languages) could not account for the linguistic phenomena in Japanese. This leads to the second implication: Teachers of Japanese need to have a profound understanding of the culture behind all the language phenomena in Japanese, not biased by the knowledge of Western culture. Only when teachers know the language and the culture behind it, can they teach the language without creating prejudice towards the language in the learners. The understanding of women's language and the premises behind its use is crucial to teachers of Japanese in order to avoid misleading skepticism towards the Japanese language, culture, and people.

NOTES

¹ The language of the court ladies originated in the 14th century, and the language of the courtesans in the 17th century. The language of the court ladies spread among women of various social classes, since the language used by women in prestigious positions was considered to be the model by the women of lower status. Refer to Ide (1994) for a summary of the description of these two types of women's languages, the historical background of their emergence, and how they influenced women's language in modern Japanese.

² *Isoo* refers to the variety of language that identifies one's occupational role. It is a linguistic/pragmatic category unique to the Japanese language, partly sharing features with terms such as 'register' or 'dialect.' This linguistic category reflects the observation that Japanese people speak in different styles according to the groups they belong to, which are defined by categories such as region, profession, class, and gender. See Ide (1994) for further explanation of the term.

³ The notion of *wakimae* (discernment) refers to the "social norms according to which people are expected to behave in order to be appropriate in the society they live in" (Ide, 1991, p. 298). This was introduced by Hill, Ide, Ikuta, and Ogino (1986) and Ide (1990) as a term to represent one aspect of linguistic politeness. The other type is called *volition* (Hill et al, 1986). This contrast is discussed in the latter part of this interview. For further explanation of the notion of *wakimae*, refer to Ide (1991).

⁴ For example, *ojamashimasu* (said when entering someone else's house or room) and *itadakimasu* (said when starting to eat). The use of these fixed expressions are, according to Ide (1991), highly restricted to a particular context, and are one kind of linguistic form chosen according to *wakimae*. Therefore, the use is "intrinsically obligatory and situation bound" (p. 299).

⁵ Ide (1994) refers to the crucial roles the court ladies played in the Imperial court: They were in charge of the bureaucratic tasks of controlling the accounting for the dynasty, overseeing the daily affairs, and so forth. They served as the transmitters of important

information from the Emperor to the public, and they were also entirely responsible for the education of the noble children.

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