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# Vicarious Language



GENDER AND LINGUISTIC MODERNITY IN JAPAN

**Miyako Inoue**

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Modernity in Japan

Miyako Inoue

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This book is dedicated to

Kuniharu Inoue

Kazumi Inoue

This is my *shinsboarikomachi!*

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## Note on Japanese Names and the Romanization of Japanese Language

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In this book, Japanese proper names are denoted with the family (“last”) name preceding the given (“first”) name. The modified Hepburn system (Hebon-shiki) is used to romanize the Japanese language. Accordingly, long vowels are marked with macrons (ā, ē, ī, ō, ū), with the exception of the transcription and quotation of actual speech, in which the lengthening of vowels is marked with additional vowels (e.g., “aa” instead of “ā”).

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INTRODUCTION

## Women's Language and Capitalist Modernity in Japan

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*There's a sign on the wall but she wants to be sure*

*'Cause you know sometimes words have two meanings.*

Jimmy Page and Robert Plant, "Stairway to Heaven"

"Japanese women's language" (*onna kotoba* or *joseigo*) is a socially powerful truth.<sup>1</sup> By this, I do not mean that the phrase refers to the empirical speech patterns of women but that Japanese women's language is an obligatory cultural category and an unavoidable part of practical social knowledge—for both women and men, urban and rural—in contemporary Japan. By using the phrase *women's language*, I refer to a space of discourse—understood as a complex ensemble of practices, institutions, representations, and power—in which the Japanese woman is objectified, evaluated, studied, staged, and normalized through her imputed language use and is thus rendered a knowable and unified subject both to herself and to others. Doxic statements, such as "Women and men speak differently," "Women speak more politely than men," or "Women are not capable of speaking logically," are commonly heard in daily conversation. Scholars, too, have perennially produced a highly reflexive and abstract—and therefore privileged—knowledge of how women speak differently

1. The indigenous terms are *onna kotoba* (*onna* = women, *kotoba* = speech/language) or *joseigo* (*josei* = women, *go* = language). Although neither of the Japanese phrases includes a term specifically referring to "Japan" or "Japanese," I affix the term *Japanese* in my English translation because of its specific connection with the development of the Japanese nation-state since the late nineteenth century.

from men. Using both empirical and anecdotal evidence, they have systematically located male–female differentiation at all levels of language—phonology, semantics, morphology, syntax, speech acts, and discourse (in the technical linguistic sense), as well as extralinguistic features, such as pitch, and have accounted for how female-specific values, attributes, and social roles are registered in speech forms and in the management of conversation.<sup>2</sup> Particularly notable are certain parts of speech, such as pronouns and final particles, that are said to function as mutually exclusive gender markers indexing femininity and masculinity. Women’s language is thus understood as a set of linguistic forms and functions of language exclusively or statistically used by women and very often associated with certain feminine demeanors, roles, and attributes, such as being soft-spoken, polite, hesitant, empathetic, gentle, and nonassertive. In addition, women’s language is often represented as having a higher pitch.

Women’s language also is a national issue, a self-conscious parameter of civil order and social change. Nationwide opinion polls are regularly conducted on whether women’s language is becoming “corrupted” and, if so, how. Public sentiments regarding the perceived disappearance of women’s language are thereby crystallized and circulated in the form of numbers and statistics.<sup>3</sup> This linguistic consciousness of how women speak is closely connected with notions of culture and tradition in the assumption that women’s language is uniquely Japanese, with unbroken historical roots in an archetypical, imaginary Japanese past, and inescapably linked to an equally traditional and archetypical imaginary Japanese womanhood. Kindaichi Kyosuke, one of the founders of modern Japanese linguistics, noted in his discussion of women’s language: “Japanese womanhood is now being recognized as beautiful and excellent beyond comparison with the other womanhoods of the world. Likewise, Japanese women’s language is so fine that it seems to me that it is, along with Japanese womanhood, unique in the world” (1942:293). Kikuzawa Sueo, one of the first modern linguists to bring attention to women’s language, observed: “Women’s speech is characterized by elegance, that is, gentleness and beauty. Moreover, such characteristics correspond with our unique national language” (1929:75).

2. See Ide 1982 and Shibamoto 1985 for classic sociolinguistic studies of Japanese women’s language.

3. NHK (Japan Broadcasting Corporation) and the Agency for Cultural Affairs (Bunkachō) in the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology, for example, regularly conduct surveys on language awareness, including items regarding women’s language.

Women's language is thus viewed as an emblem of nation and tradition—as against the West and even modernity itself—whose most authentic form has been feared to be lost.<sup>4</sup> As Mashimo Saburo, another scholar of Japanese women's language, puts it, “We cannot hope for contemporary Japanese women to be as witty and tactful as were those in the past, but, at least, I would like them to have a sincere and humble attitude and to preserve the cultural heritage passed down from the ancestors without destroying it” (1969:81). Such an image of the loss of women's language is widely shared by the public. Talk of women's language implicates the perceived continuing contradiction between Japanese tradition and modernity.

Japanese women's language also is a transnational social fact. An article appeared in 1995 in the *New York Times* titled “Japan's Feminine Falsetto Falls Right out of Favor.” The subtitle reads: “Traditionally, women have spoken in a falsetto pitch, but now they're beginning to find their own deeper sounds.” In this article, Japanese women's voices are described as being “as sweet as syrup, and as high as a dog whistle. Any higher, and it would shatter the crystal on the seventh floor,” and “they are not speaking, but squeaking” (Kristof 1995:A1). The article compares the pitch of Japanese women's voices and that of American women's voices and reports that Japanese women's voices have significantly dropped these days because of the change in women's status in Japan. Japanese women's speech—as if merely one other disassembled and fetishized part of a woman's body—now draws intensive international attention as indexical of how far Japan has progressed or caught up with America in terms of “equality” and “modernity.”

But here is a little public secret: the very simple, yet obstinately disregarded, fact is that most women in Japan do not have access to—did not systematically learn and cannot skillfully produce—the speech forms identified as women's language in their habitual speech repertoire; particularly people in the cultural, class, and regional peripheries would tell us that statements such as “men and women speak differently” do not apply to *their* everyday linguistic experience. Why, then, does it *make sense* to talk about how men and women speak differently? Why is women's language use a national obsession? What kind of social, historical, and political conditions are necessary to make possible the normalization of

4. See Ivy's (1995) important analysis of the reflexive projection of an unsullied Japanese essence into the past, in which “longing” for something brings it into cultural existence even if it did not actually exist. Likewise, any statement about perceived “corruption” functions to affirm the ontology of the essence by logically implying that there was once a pure women's language.

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