Pedagogical Perspectives on Gendered Speech Styles in the Teaching and Learning of Japanese-as-a-Foreign-Language

Mariko Tajima Bohn
University of California Santa Cruz

1. Introduction

This study examines teacher and student perspectives on commonly described gender differences in Japanese speech—female speech style and male speech style, typically represented by the choice of sentence-final forms, such as wa commonly categorized as “feminine” forms and da, as “masculine” form, address terms, intonations, and honorifics. Contrary to a common belief that Japanese women and men speak differently with the use of distinctive language—“women’s language” and “men’s language,” over time, a disparity between normative women’s language and Japanese women’s actual use of language became prominent, realizing that women’s use of language is more diverse and neutralized with variation in within-gender in speech. As Japanese language and gender studies have increasingly focused on ideologies of Japanese women’s language, researchers have paid close attention to a critical discourse analysis of Japanese language textbooks, and to the critical pedagogy of Japanese-as-a-foreign-language (Matsumoto & Okamoto, 2003; Ohara, Saft & Crookes, 2001; Siegal & Okamoto, 2003). Examining the homogenous representation of Japanese language and culture in textbooks, researchers have expressed concern about the possible (re)production of ideological associations between linguistic norms and traditional gender norms, including conforming to traditional femininity and masculinity. While this thorough examination and analysis of Japanese language and culture as it is represented in textbooks will significantly affect the teaching and learning of Japanese, it raised the necessity for an examination of learners’ attitudes and perspectives toward gendered speech styles and their place in the study of Japanese-as-a-foreign-language. Knowing and understanding students’ views helps us understand their motivation for learning a second language.

2. Method

By a questionnaire survey, this study elicited and examined 238 questionnaire responses. The sample included 197 university students enrolled in Japanese language courses in four San Francisco Bay Area universities and 23 students from the Defense Language Institute (DLI). The participants consisted of 99 female and 121 male students, with 149 students enrolled at the intermediate level of instruction. The other two levels of instruction, beginning courses (52 students) and advanced courses (19 students), provided information as to whether students at the intermediate level gave notably different answers to the questions. A second sample consisted of nine collegiate faculty members teaching Japanese at collegiate institutions and nine faculty members from DLI.

The three major research questions are focused in this paper: first, whether learners are aware of different speech patterns, so called “female speech” or “male speech” and the main source of students’ exposure to gendered speech patterns outside the classroom; second, instructors’ methods for teaching these patterns in class; and third, both learners’ and teachers’ views toward these patterns.

3. Results and Discussion

Regarding the first major research question, are learners aware of gendered speech patterns outside the classroom, of 220 students, 194 (88%) perceived and 26 (12%) haven’t perceived gendered speech patterns. Of 194 students, 171 (88%) were exposed to these patterns by the media such as television, magazines, or cartoons. Media was the major source across all four categories of “institution, levels of instruction, gender and age.” This result raises some concerns. Although these media forms may show linguistic variation in women’s and men’s use of language, they should be examined by asking two questions: (a) how are gendered speech patterns presented? (b) who are the users of these patterns, including the users’ gender, social status, age and their non-linguistic behaviors, such as clothing and conduct? These questions help to become aware that media may emphasize stereotypical linguistic and social norms, portraying gender as a homogeneous entity.

The second major research question addressed instructors’ methods for teaching gendered speech patterns and asked whether students learned gendered speech patterns in class and how do they learn them. Of the 220 students, 154 (70%) answered “YES” and 65 (30%) answered “NO.” Those who responded “YES” learned these patterns equally from “textbooks,” “lectures,” and “discussions with their teachers.” The most emphasized method was “discussion with teachers” 55(34%) and “lecture” 43 (27%) was identified the second most, indicating learning gendered speech differences directly involved the teacher.
In addressing learners’ views of gendered speech styles in research question 3, whether female students should be taught that they must use female speech pattern, and male students should be taught that they must use male speech pattern, just over half the students agreed (113 students, 53%) and the others disagreed (100 students, 47%). Sixty-four students who answered, “YES,” stated that gendered speech styles are part of Japanese culture, characteristic of Japanese language, a socially appropriate and proper way to speak, the way native Japanese people speak, or the traditional Japanese way of speaking. There are similarities between these reasons and the responses of some instructors’ when they were asked whether they believed that learners should learn gendered speech patterns. The instructors responses included: gendered different speech styles are a distinctive characteristic of Japanese, and are the way Japanese people speak, Japanese language is inseparable from Japanese culture and history, and gendered speech styles are authentic Japanese usage. According to these responses, the use of gendered language – the use of “female” speech by women, and “male” speech by men – is somehow intrinsic, and perhaps also crucial, to Japanese culture. These beliefs and assumptions suggest that we should scrutinize the relationship between gendered language and the concept of Japanese culture, considering the connections between language, culture, and hegemonic ideologies. These assumptions and beliefs are represented as folklinguistics, “the collection of folk-beliefs about language which are perceived as “common sense” within society” (Cameron, 1985; Niedzielski & Preston, 2000). Folklinguistics is deeply related to the essential view that emphasizes normative speech and traditional femininity.

Sixty students who answered “NO” stated that no one should be forced to use gendered speech patterns and leave the choice to the students as to whether they use them or not; use of gendered-specific speech is antiquated, sexist or biased; or gendered speech is flexible and changing and Japanese speakers, often women, sometimes mix speech patterns, using both male and female speech styles. For developing capable language learners, findings of this study present two suggestions. First, based on various views and interpretations in teachers and students responses, it is important for both teachers and students to understand the “wide within-gender variability in speech styles” (Siegal & Okamoto, 2003, p. 52), including the use of “feminine” forms, “masculine” forms, non-stereotypical speech styles, “standard” Japanese and dialects. This would be helpful in educating students about linguistic variety, and helping them understand that stereotypical speech styles are not the only choice available to them. Second, it is important to develop the learners’ sociolinguistic and sociocultural competence, as well as “contextual competence” (Siegal, 2003, p. 647). As Matsumoto points out (1999), it would be beneficial for students to understand the link between linguistic forms and social meanings, that is, the speaker’s use of a particular linguistic form involves various factors, such as the speaker’s view and attitude toward this particular form, the individuals and societal interpretations toward the speaker’s use of this form, societal expectations, and the hearer’s social beliefs, way of thinking, and values. Besides linguistic ability, developing these competences would deepen the students’ understanding of linguistic and cultural diversity in various interactions and situations in the real world.

References

List of technical Terms
Contextual competence: According to Siegal (1994), “contextual competence” indicates learners’ ability to understand the new situation of their new world, including people’s attitudes, beliefs, social values and expectations.