

Don't mock native speakers of dialects!  
—Letters to the editor and female writers—

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This paper overviews “letters to the editor” in the column of the newspapers printed from 1955 to 1994 to show that female writers have been interested in dialects and have used dialects in the letters more than male ones. In other words, at the time of spreading of standard Japanese and declining of dialects, women, esp. native speakers of stigmatized dialects, have shown sympathy with dialects by taking up the issues of dialects and using their own dialects.

Meiji era, promoting modernization, established standard Japanese, which was spoken in Tokyo, with a separate women's language, and accordingly, other local languages were degraded as dialects and substandard, and were in need of reform or abolishment. One of the stigmatized dialects was Tohoku one (spoken in the northern part of Japan). It has been considered vulgar and unfeminine since it is a gender-free language. After WWII, rapid economic growth made Japan change drastically, i.e. centralization of governmental and economic systems. Many people from agricultural areas rushed into Tokyo for work. Native speakers of Tohoku dialects had difficulty in making themselves understood because of their strong accent, so that they had inferiority complex about their dialects. Moreover, female native speakers of dialects have been mocked at more because their dialects were considered unfeminine.

The result of my research reveals the following two points. First, quantitatively speaking, female writers took up the issues of dialects (45 female writers vs. 27 male ones) and used dialects in the letters (37 female writers vs. 3 male ones). Moreover, there are many letters dealing with Tohoku ones in 1960s and 1970s, i.e. the period of rapid economic growth. Second, qualitatively speaking, the letters support the idea that women have been interested in dialects, esp. stigmatized ones, showing their sympathy with the marginalized dialects. Moreover, female writers used dialects or

cited expressions in dialects. They positively expressed their honest feelings in dialects. They find that femininity in language use is unreal and artificial and their dialects are essential to their lives.

In conclusion, women including Tohoku native speakers have objected against too much spreading of gendered standard Japanese and stigmatization of dialects, in a sense negotiating the language norm through their dialects.

Key words: letters to the editor, standard Japanese, dialects, femininity in language use