

“The Daily Use of Japanese Women’s Language is on the Decline” Revisited

KUMAGAI Shigeko

This paper demonstrates that there is a strong gender ideology held even among the sociolinguists who critically analyze Japanese women’s language, which they claim to be one of the linguistic discriminations. Basically they take it for granted that the Japanese language has a gender difference, i.e. women’s language and men’s language and, nowadays women’s language is on the decline thanks to women’s emancipation movement, coeducation and a gender equal social structure after WWII. These well-known, seemingly self-evident discourses have much influence on the understanding of women’s language and foster the erroneous perception that Japan is enjoying a gender equal society.

First, their claims that focus on daily use of women’s language are based on the 1990s (not before), and only in the Tokyo area. It follows that a long term research—for example, the Meiji era and after—has not been conducted on the daily use of women’s language in Japan. Their data only reveal that women in the workplace in Tokyo or its suburbs use few female sentence final particles, part of women’s language. Thus, they do not prove that women used them daily in the past. Therefore, no persuasive diachronic data except those taken from conversations in fiction have been presented to claim that Japanese women in general have used women’s language daily.

Second, their research lacks sufficient evidence to conclude that women’s language is on the decline because they compared the result of daily use of women’s language in 1990s with that of written conversation in fiction such as novels from the Meiji era on. It is indisputable among sociolinguists that there is a certain crucial difference in spoken language between actual daily use and fictional conversation.

Third, the discourses present an overly optimistic impression of Japanese society since gender equality has not been promoted much in Japan. According to World Economic Forum in 2015, Japan is ranked 101 among 145 countries in their Global Gender Gap Index. The decline of women’s language and the realization of a gender equal society cannot be correlated.