

Changes in Use of “Women’s Language” and “Men’s Language” in Japanese Film Subtitles

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Abstract

While feminine markers in everyday conversations of real-life Japanese women have become less common in recent decades, language in the media, and especially in translated Japanese, has long been considered to be misrepresentative of the language spoken in everyday life. This study aims to determine recent trends in the use of women’s and men’s language in Japanese subtitles of English films. To test the hypothesis that it has become less frequent, sentence final forms used in subtitles of three films from the 1990’s and three films from the 2010’s were categorised into five groups, according to the associated gender. The results showed that the number of feminine forms in female character’s subtitles decreased, while male forms in male character’s subtitles increased. These results suggest that sentence final forms serve a function in clarifying and differentiating the speaker, and are an essential tool employed by subtitle translators.

Keywords: Translation, Film subtitles, Gender and language, Japanese women’s language, Japanese men’s language

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

Japanese language seen in literature, on TV, in films, and in other forms of media have frequently been the topic of discussion for sociolinguists concerned with language and gender. More specifically, the gap between female language used in these texts and the female language of Japanese women in everyday life has been pointed out by many (Mizumoto, 2006; Okamoto, 1995).

Furthermore, not only texts originally written in Japanese, but also foreign texts translated into Japanese have been studied through the same viewpoint, with researchers arguing that women’s language is even more prominent in translations (Inoue, 2003).

1.2 Previous Studies

What is thought of as “women’s language” and “men’s language” differ depending on what language is being discussed. In the English language, Lakoff (1973) described the term “women’s language” as being apparent in the use of certain lexical items such as colour names and expletives, or syntactic rules such as the use of tag-questions, as well as in intonational differences. Research on language and gender have initially largely focused on speech styles of women, since it was women’s language that was thought to be different as opposed to men’s language that was accepted as the norm. However, there have since been studies on men’s language, particularly on “men’s talk” regarding how men interact with each other in all-male conversations (Coates, 1997; Cameron, 1997).

In the Japanese language, women’s language and men’s language are often considered to be a part of what is called “role language”, frequently seen being used in

Japanese media to characterise people as well as fictitious characters through speech style. Kinsui (2003) defines role language as a certain speech style that indexes a certain character, defined by traits such as age, gender, and social class. Women’s and men’s language in Japanese is most often characterised by first person pronouns and sentence final forms (Shibamoto, 1985; Mizutani & Mizutani, 1987; Okamoto & Sato, 1992). In this study, I will be looking at sentence final forms in particular, in order to analyse the change in women’s and men’s language used in Japanese film subtitles.

Texts that have been studied in the context of linguistic gendering in Japanese translations range from fictional texts such as films and novels (Furukawa, 2009; Thomas, 2017) to non-fictional texts such as subtitles of TV interviews (Ōta, 2009).

1.3 Objective

The objective of this study is to clarify the current state of women’s and men’s language in subtitles by comparing subtitles of films that were released a couple of decades apart. By doing so, I aim to find out why language used in film translation varies from language used in everyday language, and how it may change in the future.

1.4 Hypothesis

I hypothesise that over the years the boundary between women’s language and men’s language has become less distinct and expect that ‘neutral’ expressions that are not strongly gendered have become favoured to a certain extent. However, I also expect that there will be a limit to how much gendered sentence final forms can be reduced in the particular context of film subtitles, in order to

efficiently convey the story in a short frame of time.

2 Method

2.1 Material

Three films released in the 1990's and three films released in the 2010's were selected based on the following criteria.

- A romantic-comedy/drama in which everyday conversations take up most of the dialogue
- There is a female and a male leading pair, as opposed to anthology films, in which lines are dispersed more evenly among all characters
- Those characters are in their late 20's to early 30's, as a starker contrast with real-life language can be expected than with older age-groups

The six films selected are: Reality Bites (1994), Before Sunrise (1995), My Best Friend's Wedding (1997), Love Rosie (2014), Me Before You (2016), La La Land (2016). The film titles will hereinafter be referred to in this paper as RB, BS, MBFW, LR, MBY, and LLL respectively.

Note that the release years shown hereinafter are the years in which the films premiered in Japan, and may differ from the films' initial release years.

2.2 Categorisation

The categorisation used in this paper is based on the list provided by Okamoto & Sato (1992), in which sentence final forms are divided into five categories: strongly feminine (hereinafter abbreviated to SF), moderately feminine (MF), neutral (N), moderately masculine (MM), and strongly masculine (SM). For additional sentence final forms not included in Okamoto & Sato's list, I referred in part to Ariizumi's (2013) categorisation. Below are the definitions of each of the five categories.

Table 1: Definition of Categories

Strongly Feminine (SF)	Forms traditionally considered to be used exclusively by women
Moderately Feminine (MF)	Forms traditionally considered to be used mostly by women
Neutral (N)	Forms traditionally considered to be used by both women and men
Moderately Masculine (MM)	Forms traditionally considered to be used mostly by men
Strongly Masculine (SM)	Forms traditionally considered to be used exclusively by men

2.3 Analysis Method

The subtitles for lines spoken by one female and one male character per film were examined and categorised. In Japanese subtitles, a continuous sentence is often divided across two or three cards due to the character limit. For this investigation, subtitle cards were divided or joined together into units of single complete sentences. Furthermore, subtitles that fell under the following categories were excluded from analysis: incomplete lines ending in ellipses, quotations or lines spoken with a different persona, incomplete subtitles ending with particles such as *wo* or *ga* with the verb cut off, a name

of a character said to address him/her, conventional greetings or interjections not used with sentence final forms, song lyrics, repetition of another character's lines spoken to seek clarification or elaboration, subtitles ending in politeness markers such as *desu* or *masu*.

3 Results

The percentage of feminine sentence final forms used decreased overall from the 1990's to the 2010's. While no MM or SM forms were seen in the three films from the 1990's, a total of five were found in two out of the three films from the 2010's.

The percentage of masculine sentence final forms used increased overall from the 1990's to the 2010's. However, the percentage of SM forms used remained mostly unchanged.

Table 2: Use of Gendered Sentence Final Forms Among Female and Male Characters

	Female Characters					
	SF	MF	N	MM	SM	Total
LLL ('17)	111	16	89	0	0	216
MBY ('16)	92	33	203	2	0	330
LR ('14)	96	41	190	1	2	330
MBFW ('97)	138	42	114	0	0	294
BS ('95)	188	48	157	0	0	393
RB ('94)	95	32	104	0	0	231

	Male Characters					
	SF	MF	N	MM	SM	Total
LLL ('17)	0	0	118	90	39	247
MBY ('16)	0	2	145	72	38	257
LR ('14)	0	2	100	59	35	196
MBFW ('97)	0	0	122	39	24	185
BS ('95)	0	6	277	120	47	450
RB ('94)	0	0	81	32	39	152

Some changes in the use of the feminine forms *kashira*, *desumono*, and *mono*, and of the masculine forms *zo*, *ze*, *sa*, *dai*, *kai*, *ka?*, *ka* (with a falling intonation), *na* (eliciting agreement), and *daro* were observed.

Although *desumono* includes the polite form *desu* it was not excluded in this analysis, since it was used in a casual context between two characters of similar social status or age, with the rest of the conversation translated in the casual form. Sentence final forms such as *kashira* are rarely used in everyday conversations by young females nowadays as well as in the 1990's (Okamoto & Sato, 1992). Yet, these forms appeared multiple times in the films from the 1990's. On the other hand, uses of both of these forms have declined in the 2010's. In the three films from the 1990's, *desumono* was more frequently used, while in the three from the 2010's, it was not used a single time, *mono* (which serves the same function but in casual form) being used in its place.

The sentence final forms *dai* and *kai* are used as question markers at the end of a sentence and are both categorised as SM. Both of these forms were used multiple times in the films from the 1990's, but not at all in those from the 2010's. Forms such as *zo* and *ze* were

also not seen very frequently in the 2010's, but other forms such as *ka?* and *na* (eliciting agreement) were used more often in the 2010's than in the 1990's.

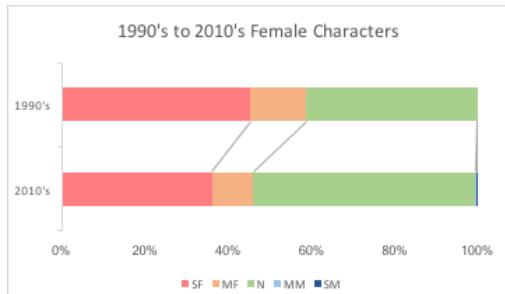


Fig. 1: Comparison of Gendered Sentence Final Forms Among Female Characters

The average percentage of sentence final forms used in each category for subtitles of female characters in each decade.

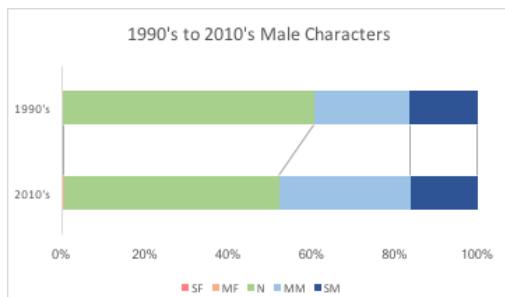


Fig. 2: Comparison of Gendered Sentence Final Forms Among Male Characters

The average percentage of sentence final forms used in each category for subtitles of male characters in each decade.

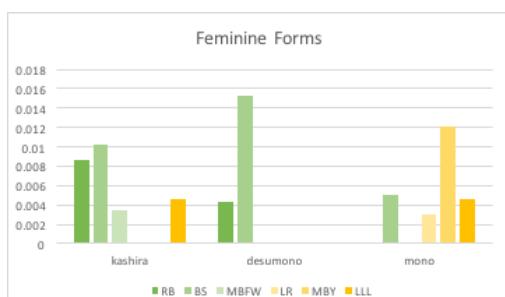


Fig. 3: Comparison of Feminine Sentence Final Forms Among Female Characters

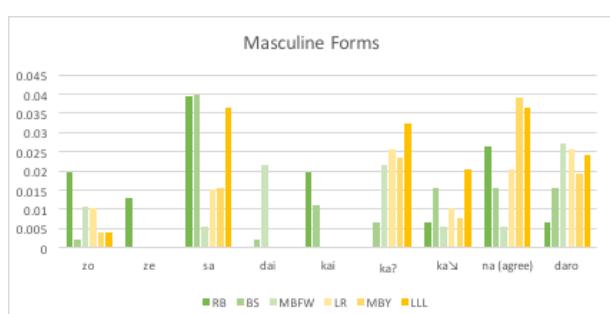


Fig. 4: Comparison of Masculine Sentence Final Forms Among Male Characters

4 Discussion

When comparing the trend for male characters with

that for female characters, it is possible that since the language used for female characters has become more neutral, in order to maintain a clear difference of speech styles between male and female characters, language used for male characters has become more masculine. An important point to note however, is that language used in subtitles for male characters has not become more masculine across the board. The use of SM sentence final forms used in the 1990's such as *zo*, *ze*, *sa*, *dai?*, *kai?* has not increased. Rather, forms such as *ka?*, *ka* (with a falling intonation), *na* (eliciting agreement), and *daro* were used more frequently in the 2010's than in the 1990's. The SM sentence final forms that did decrease are what are thought to be 'traditional masculine language', or language that is only found in translations for lines spoken by foreign (especially younger) men (Nakamura, 2013). Therefore, although the frequency of masculine sentence final forms as a whole has increased, it can be said that the frequency of sentence final forms rarely found in everyday language use has decreased, for subtitles of both female and male characters.

While LLL was released most recently out of the six films, it had the highest percentage of SF sentence final forms used for the female character. This may be explained by the translator for LLL having worked longer as a film translator compared to that of LR and MBY. Assuming that the time period in which translators began working as film translators, correlates with their age, this suggests that the age of the translator significantly affects how gendered the language in subtitles are.

4.1 Limitations

There was variety in the distribution of sentence final forms categorised into SF, MF, N, MM, or SM in each of the films within the same era. Therefore, it is difficult to reach a reliable conclusion by investigating just six films.

Additionally, there are several factors that may influence the degree in which subtitles are gendered, such as the individual personality traits displayed by the characters in the film, the preferences of the translator and/or distributor of the film, and the age and gender of the translator. All six films selected in this paper were translated by female translators. Since female Japanese native speakers are the most familiar with Japanese spoken by women in everyday life, this may have caused a bias in how they gendered female characters versus how they gendered male characters.

There was also difficulty in selecting films that were able to be compared against each other, in which the characteristics, statuses, and relationships between the characters, as well as the tone or theme of the films match each other. For example, in films in which a heated argument between characters does not occur, such as in BS, versus in those that do, such as in RB or LLL, the frequency of gendered sentence final forms likely differ.

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, in the six films that were investigated in this paper, from the 1990's to the 2010's, the use of feminine sentence final forms decreased, while the use of

masculine sentence final forms increased. However, for both feminine and masculine sentence final forms, certain forms that are rarely used in everyday conversations were less frequently used in the films from the 2010's than in the films from the 1990's.

The results show that translators use sentence final forms to effectively convey the story of the film, resulting in language that would seem unnatural when used in everyday conversations in real life. From this study, I expect that as film translators and others involved in producing Japanese subtitled versions of English films become younger, more instances of traditionally masculine sentence final forms used for lines spoken by female characters will be seen in the future. However, the results also show that it is unlikely that in the near future, male and female characters' sentence final forms become more neutral and indistinguishable.

5.1 Future Directions

To reach a more reliable conclusion, more films need to be analysed, including films translated by men, since the gender of the translator may cause a bias in the language used in subtitles. In addition, due to the possibility of the age of translators being a significant factor in the language use of subtitles, a more apparent trend in the change of women's and men's language used in subtitles may be observed by comparing films grouped by the age of the translator, rather than by the release year.

Finally, although I excluded films originally produced on streaming platforms such as Netflix and Amazon for the purposes of this paper, it would be interesting to see whether this new form of film consumption has had any effect on the language used in Japanese subtitles.

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