ISSN 2959-6122

Language and Gender: Insights from Japanese Feminists in the 1980s

Zhimei Wang

Faculty of Commerce and Management, Hitotsubashi University, 2-1 Naka, Kunitachi, Tokyo 186-8601, Japan
wangzhimei26773651@gmail.com

Abstract:

This essay examines how language contributed to the feminist movement's decline in Japan in the 1980s, a period that witnessed major legal reforms and socioeconomic shifts. While earlier studies have linked the sluggish progress of feminism in Japan to legal deficiencies and the shortcomings of capitalist regime, this paper clarifies that few achievement in feminist campaign during this period can be mostly ascribed to the linguistic distinctions between men and women. By analyzing the works of prominent feminists Aoki Yayoi and Ide Sachiko, the essay illustrates how gendered linguistic conventions perpetuated the marginalization of women and brought the destruction of feminist progress in the 1980s. The research underscores the importance of recognizing language's role as an obstacle in the development of feminism and proposes that changing linguistic conventions could support feminist movements in Japan and elsewhere.

Keywords: Japan, Language, Feminism, 1980s

1. Introduction

It is widely recognized that the evolution of Japan's feminist movement was delayed and turbulent when compared to movements elsewhere in the world, like the United States or France. In Japan, the last few decades since the 1980s have seen glacial progress toward a less gender-biased society in spite of several feminist practices [1]. Many scholars believe that the legal difficulties and poor implementation rates of the 1985 EEOL (Equal Employment Opportunity Law) and Japan's harsh patriarchal and capitalist structures can account for the standstill of feminist advancements during this period. From my perspective, the impact of language on gender politics cannot be overlooked when explaining the stagnation of Japanese feminism in the 1980s. Therefore, this paper argues that the different manipulations of language by women and men in Japan have contributed to the inferior status of Japanese women during the 1980s.

In contrast to the global feminist movements that often directly confronted social conventions, Japan's feminist movement progressed more slowly and subtly during the Meiji era (1868-1912), owing to its unique cultural and historical background. Before World War II, the entrenched gender roles, which expectedwomen to be ''good wives and wise mothers'' (ryosai kenbo), and the legal obstacles—The Meiji Civil Code in 1898, reinforced women's subordinate status [2].

In the post-World War II era, Japan witnessed significant socioeconomic changes, including legal reforms that intended to promote gender equality. Feminist movements also grew in strength during this period to improve gender disparity. Especially in the 1970s-1980s, there was a vibrant wave of feminist scholarship and activism in Japan. During this period, Japanese feminism mainly underwent three significant stages. The first stage, called the Era of Liberation, lasted from 1970 and 1977 and was marked by grassroots activism from organizations like the Group of Fighting Women with little media exposure and legislative involvement; the second, known as the Emergence of Women's Studies, from 1978 to 1982, was influenced by the International Year of the Woman, which helped women's studies as an academic discipline. The third stage, starting from 1983 onward, was the Era of Celebrated Feminists and Debate. During this phase, prominent feminists like Ueno Chizuko emerged, impacting public conversation via media and academia. This period witnessed theoretical discussions about women's professional integration, ecological feminism, and labor vs quality of life. These discussions helped institutionalize feminism [3].

Despite multiple feminist attempts during the 1980s, progress in women's rights in Japan during this period was markedly sluggish. This particularly slow pace of feminism's development has drawn the attention of feminist scholars. Not only within Japan, but also internationally, researchers have begun to study the factors that impeded the advancement of feminism in Japan during this era.

2. Secondary Source Analyses

Below are two valuable secondary sources written by Western scholars in the 1990s. These sources review the history of the evolution of feminism in Japan during the 1980s and provide analyses on the factors that impeded its progress during that time from different angles.

To start with, an American scholar, Linda N. Edwards tries to attribute the negligible improvement in the status of Japanese women during the 1980s to the deficiencies of the Equal Employment Opportunity Law (EEOL) introduced in 1985 in Japan [4]. The EEOL was initially designed to eliminate gender discrimination and encourage employers to provide equal opportunities in recruitment, job assignments, and promotion. Edwards noted that the EEOL had restricted effectiveness in advancing gender equality due to its several limitations. Edwards primarily criticizes the ambiguity and poor implementation of this law. Recommendations for equitable practices in hiring and promotion in the EEOL are suggestive and non-mandatory, such as the expression ''endeavor'' mentioned in the law, resulting in limited responses from companies. After the adoption of the EEOL in 1985, many companies were still dividing employment tracks based on gender as they used to, hinderingwomen's further advancement in the workplace [4]. Hence, this material indicates that the most significant event of the 1980s— the implementation of the EEOL law— did not result in the anticipated advancement of women's status.

Regarding the impediments to feminist achievements in the 1980s, another researcher Diana Khor sheds light on the capitalist regime, which could commodify almost anything and do harm to feminist accomplishments. To further elaborate on this point, Khor provides an example of sexual harassment. When feminists tackled the issue of sexual harassment, the sex industry adapted by offering role-playing services, which would further exacerbate the phenomenon of ''sexual harassment'' for male clients and slow the pace of women's empowerment [5]. This example clearly demonstrates how the development of feminism in the 1980s may be subverted into the patriarchal structure through the capitalistic and commercial mechanisms in Japan.

Although Edwards and Khor have both produced significant research on Japanese feminism, with Edwards discussing the legal shortcomings and Khor emphasizing the obstacles posed by the capitalist nature of Japanese society, they have overlooked one of the most fascinating and important subjects of feminist scholarship in Japan during the 1980s. As we shall see, several prominent feminists focused on the problem of language, its linguistic composition, and its usage, which contributed to the subjugation of women.

3. Primary Source Analyses

To delve deeper into this topic, this paper will analyze Sandra Buckley's book*Broken Silence: Voices of Japanese Feminism*, which provides a thorough understanding and comprehensive firsthand resources of Japan's diverse feminist efforts in the 1980s. Buckley compiled and translated the perspectives and voices of ten leading feminists on the state of feminism in Japan between 1988 and 1991.

Notably, two feminists in the book, Aoki Yayoi and Ide Sachiko highlighted how linguistic differences between men and women in the Japanese language contribute to the subordinate status of women. I will examine interviews and published scholarship from these two influential feminists of the 1980s as compelling primary sources to demonstrate this point.

First of all, in an interview conducted somewhere between 1988 and 1991, with Aoki Yayoi, who was a prominent Japanese feminist in the 1980s with a tremendous contribution to the interdisciplinary research of language and gender, she stressed that women's roles are often confined to reproduction in contemporary society in the 1980s, which is undervalued compared to other forms of labor. In an attempt to elevate their status and gain recognition, women use language to accentuate the differences between men and women, associating greater femininity with skilled feminine speech. Nevertheless, this strategy stems from and perpetuates existing discrimination, further exacerbating women's lower status. Aoki illustrated this by giving examples such as ''okusan'' and ''kanai'', both of which are Japanese terms for wife and imply that a woman's place is at home [6]. This instance demonstratesunequivocally how linguistic distinctions between genders can be used as a means of oppression.

Echoed Aoki Yayoi, a published work *Women's Language, Men's Language* by another distinguished feminist and linguist scholar from the Linguistics Association of Japan, Ide Sachiko, further extends and substantiates Yayoi's viewpoints. In this book, she provides a more systematic compilation of how linguistic differences among genders deepen women discrimination in Japan. Sachiko conducted extensive research on language and gender politics during the 1980s. She made the argument that because of the high level of gender coding pervasive in Japanese, gender politics in Japan are more heavily impacted by language than in the United States.

Firstly, Ide explored the different conventional terms of address used by men and women, observing men's informal language patterns and women's more formal linguistic habits. For instance, Aoki Yayoi notes in her in-

terview that male speakers are allowed to use more casual first-person pronouns like ‘‘*boku*’’(I) or ‘‘*ore*’’(I), whereas female speakers are only permitted to use more official and courteous terms like ‘‘*watashi*’’(I) or ‘‘*watakushi*’’(I) [6]. The reason for this inconsistent linguistic habit is that women's language in Japan has to represent this inferiority by using formal expressions, as women's status is axiomatically lower than men's. Ide also highlighted the variations in how married couples address one another in Japanese.When a husband calls his wife, he can directly use her personal name without any honorific suffix, a practice typically reserved for superiors addressing inferiors orindividuals in extremely close relationships [6]. This usage, however, best represents the previous situation, as demonstrated by the fact that a wife would never refer to her husband by his first name but rather use a suffix [6].

Besides, Ide highlighted the differences in the usage of final particles among men and women, which can reflect the speaker's mood and feelings. Men tend to use ‘‘*zo*’’ and ‘‘*ze*’’ to show their condescending tone while women usually adhere to more soft and less assertive expressions such as ‘‘*wa*’’ and ‘‘*no*’’ [6]. This point indicates that men have more freedom and confidence to choose strong expressions. On the other hand, women must use softened tones to appear polite, non-assertive and non-imposing even under similar situations. This shows a significant gender inequality in linguistic freedom, with a clear sense of male dominance over female expression.

Apart from that, Ide also elucidates a phenomenon that women use modifiers and qualitative adverbs, adjectives more frequently than men. Males have a tendency to use positive conjunctions like ‘‘*dakara*’’ (so), ‘‘*soshite*’’(and), while females prefer negative conjuctions such as ‘‘*demo*’’(however) [6]. The frequent use of adjectives, adverbs, and negative conjunctions by women suggests a lack of confidence in expressing their opinions compared to men. Particularly, the common use of negative conjunctions implies that women are expected to be attentive listeners in conversations with men, absorbing their viewpoints rather than presenting their ownideas assertively and decisively.

From the interviews with these scholars and the published book content, it is evident that Japanese feminists started focusing on how men and women used language differently in the 1980s and how these distinctions are used as a tool to oppress women's rights. The primary source, an interview with Aoki Yayoi, briefly touches on the differences in language use through a case introduction, while the second primary source, a book by Ide Sachiko, offers a more systematic and comprehensive analysis of the variations in word choice freedom and tone between men and women under similar contexts. These two primary sources complement each other. The linguistic differences revealed in these sources can also account for why Japan's feminist movement was weaker during this era compared to those in other nations.

4.Discussion and Conclusion

In conclusion, unlike other scholars who have approached the stagnation of Japan's feminism in the 1980s through legal and economic lenses, this paper has demonstrated how linguistic distinctions played a role in the slow pace of feminist advancements in that era and why feminists of that time need to emphasize the impact of language on gender politics. Through a detailed analysis of Aoki Yayoi's interview and Ide Sachiko's professional writings, it is distinct that gender-specific language habits served to reinforce women's subordinate status; the continued use of formal, softened language for women, as opposed to informal, assertive, and decisive language for men, highlighted significant gender inequality. This research underscores the importance of understanding language as a tool of oppression, reminding researchers to pay close attention to entrenched linguistic norms in feminist studies. Besides, this more comprehensive understanding specifically in the context of Japan and Japanese languages, sheds light on how to advance feminist movement in modern Japan further: that to change how people think, we need to change how we speak. Furthermore, the findings of this paper extend beyond Japan and emphasize the necessity of considering the role of language while assessing the evolution of feminist movements in other countries.

References

[1] Anderson, M. S. (2024). Women in modern Japanese history. Japan Society. https://aboutjapan.japansociety.org/women-in-modern-japanese-history#sthash.07eGW9Gy.dpbs

[2] Keeni, M. (2024). From silence to resilience: The evolving narrative of feminism in Japan. 9Dashline.https://www.9dashline.com/article/from-silence-to-resilience-the-evolving-narrative-of-feminism-in-japan

[3] Ehara, Y., Yanagida, E., & Long, P. (1993). Japanese feminism in the 1970s and 1980s. U.S.-Japan Women's Journal, (4), 49-69.

[4] Edwards, L. N. (1994). The status of women in Japan: Has the equal employment opportunity law made a difference? Journal of Asian Economics, 5(2), 217-240.

[5] Khor, D. (1999). Organizing for change: Women's grassroots activism in Japan. Feminist Studies, 25(3), 655.

[6] Buckley, S. (1997). Broken silence: Voices of Japanese feminism. Berkeley: University of California Press. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb04075.0001.001. PDF.