



2015 HAWAII UNIVERSITY INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCES  
ARTS, HUMANITIES, SOCIAL SCIENCES & EDUCATION  
JANUARY 03 - 06, 2015  
ALA MOANA HOTEL, HONOLULU, HAWAII

# PROSPECTS FOR CHANGES IN GENDER BIAS IN THE JAPANESE LANGUAGE

TAKEMARU, NAKO  
UNIVERSITY OF NEVADA  
DEPARTMENT OF WORLD LANGUAGES AND CULTURES

Dr. Naoko Takemaru  
Department of World Languages and Cultures  
University of Nevada.

## **Prospects for Changes in Gender Bias in the Japanese Language**

### **Synopsis:**

Although gender bias remains prevalent and deeply rooted in the Japanese language, ongoing efforts to materialize the fairer representation of genders have had a significant impact on bringing about a change for the better. This paper discusses such existing instances of gender bias in the Japanese language by themes, along with any relevant changes and reforms that have taken place or are underway.

Prospects for Changes in Gender Bias in the Japanese Language

Naoko Takemaru, Ph.D.

Department of World Languages and Cultures  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

## Introduction

While gender bias remains prevalent and deeply rooted in the Japanese language, ongoing efforts to materialize the fairer representation of genders have had a significant impact on bringing about a change for the better. This paper discusses such existing instances of gender bias in the Japanese language by themes, along with any relevant changes and reforms that have taken place or are underway. In this paper, the Hepburn system is used for the romanization of the Japanese language. Except for proper nouns, long vowels are marked with additional vowels. Translations from Japanese are my own, unless noted otherwise.

## Male-Female Word Order

The male-female word order is the norm of the modern Japanese *kanji* (ideographic characters) compounds, in which the characters representing males precede those representing females. For instance, in regard to the two most commonly used compounds referring to married couples, *fuufu* (husband and wife) and *fusai* (husband and wife), the character which represents husband precedes the one that represents wife. Similarly, in such compounds as *danjo* (man and woman) and *fubo* (father and mother, parents), the characters representing man and father precede those representing woman and mother. This male-female word order can also be found in English; when putting the genders in order, males commonly precede females as in husband and wife, men and women, his and hers, and he or she (Simmonds, 1995).

It is fair to consider the male-female word order found in many Japanese *kanji* compounds to be one of the many instances of the residual effects of the notion, *danson johi* (men superior, women inferior). This notion to subjugate women to men prevailed in all social classes during the Meiji period (1868-1912), and became one of the fundamental elements to support the hierarchical structure of the pre-World War II patriarchal Japanese society (Kaneko, 1995).

While the male-female word order is customary in *kanji* compounds in modern Japanese, the reverse female-male word order did exist through the early Kamakura period (1185-1333) before the notion of *danson johi* had fully developed. It is not only thought-provoking but also inspiring to find this female-male word order in a number of well-known literary works of the late Nara period (710-794) through the early Kamakura period (1185-1333). For instance, a compound referring to parents is written in the order of “mother and father” in *Manyoshu* (*The Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves*), the oldest anthology of poetry in Japan, completed in the 8th century (Endo, 1995). Furthermore, in *Konjaku Monogatari* (*The Tales of the Present and the Past*), the oldest anthology of ancient tales in Japan, comprised in the early 12th century, a compound referring to a married couple, *meoto*, appears as “woman and husband” as well as “wife and husband.” In addition, another term for a married couple called *meotoko* is written as “woman and man” in *Ujishui Monogatari* (*The Supplementary to the Tales of Uji Dainagon*), a representative anthology of tales of the Kamakura period (1185-1333), which was completed in the early 13th century. Similarly, another term referring to a married couple, *meo* appears as “woman and man” as well as “wife and husband” in *Hosshinshu* (*The Collection of the Tales of Attaining Enlightenment*), an anthology of Buddhist tales also compiled in the early 13th century (Kojien, 2008).

There ought to be more flexibility on the part of language users to choose either the female-male word order found in many classical literary works, or the prevailing male-female word order in modern Japanese to suit our needs and personal preference, as well as particular context. Such an approach will not only add more variations in the word order of *kanji* compounds, but would also provide a major step forward to eliminate the legacies of *danson johi* and overall gender inequality that are embedded in the Japanese language.

### Invisibility of Women

Women are invisible in many *kanji* compounds that refer to both women and men. For instance, *kyoodai*, the compound meaning siblings, consists exclusively of characters that represent males – “elder brother” and “younger brother” – without any representation of female. The same can be said about the term, *fukei* meaning parents or guardians, which consists entirely of characters representing males – “father” and “elder brother.” As a result, PTA (Parent-Teacher Association) meetings used to be called *fukeikai* (fathers’ and elder brothers’ association meetings) despite the fact that the vast majority of its active members are mothers.

Invisibility of women is not particular to the Japanese language. For instance, in English it can be found in the use of “generic masculine” or “pseudo-generic,” that is, the use of the masculine to refer to human beings in general. Such usage can be found in expressions including mankind, man-made, man-hour, and manpower, to name but a few (Stanley, 1978). Particularly prevalent is the use of “he” as the generic-masculine; according to the estimate by some scholars, the average American is exposed to “he” used as the generic masculine a million times at the minimum in a lifetime (MacKay, 1983). Many grammarians and linguists argue that the use of “generic masculine” is one of the many instances of “marking” in the language which include women, and therefore, is not gender biased (Greenberg, 1966). However, a number of studies suggest that “he” and other masculine terms are rarely used generically, and in fact cause gender bias in people’s interpretation (Hamilton, 1988; Harrison, 1975; Henley, et al., 1985; MacKay, 1980a, b; Martyna, 1978).

Because of language reform in recent years, *fukeikai* (fathers’ and elder brothers’ association meetings) referring to PTA (Parent-Teacher Association) meetings has been mostly replaced by *fubokai* (fathers’ and mothers’ association meetings), the term that fairly represents the presence of women, as well as *hogoshakai* (guardians’ association meetings), the gender neutral term. However, it remains customary to use *fukei* (fathers and elder brothers), the term without any representation of female, to address parents and guardians of both genders in formal settings.

The presence of women is completely disregarded in many commonly used *kanji* compounds that consist entirely of characters representing men. Many feminist scholars point out that such prevalent male dominance in the Japanese language has resulted from the pre-World War II social system based on patriarchy, as well as the notion of *danson johi* (male superior, female inferior) that supported such a social system (Endo, 1995; Nakamura, 1990; Swanger, 1994).

It should be noted that young women and girls are also invisible in a number of expressions in the Japanese language, as in the case of the word, *shoonen* (boys), which not only refers to boys, but also to young children regardless of gender in Japanese legal terms. According to the Juvenile Law, literally called *Shoonen Ho* (the Boys' Law) in Japan, *shoonen* is defined as both girls and boys under 20 years of age. Although there is a unisex term, *jidoo* (young children), referring to young girls and boys, *shoonen* is often used in place of *jidoo*. For instance, according to *Jidoo Fukushi Ho* (the Child Welfare Law), the term *jidoo* is defined as children under 18 years of age. They are further divided into the following two categories; *yooji* (infants, small children) for those who are under 6 years of age, and *shoonen* for those who are under 18 years of age, regardless of gender. Similarly, the period of childhood in Japanese is called *shoonenki* (the period of boyhood) as well as *jidooki* (the period of childhood).

The same invisibility of young women can also be found in the term, *seinen* (young men), which is commonly used to refer to both young women and men. For example, in developmental psychology *seinen* are defined as those in their early-teens to their mid-20s regardless of gender. Likewise, adolescence is called *seinenki* (the period of young manhood), and *seinen jidai* (the days of young manhood) refers to one's youth for both women and men. Moreover, the Junior Chamber (JC) in Japan, which is the local chapter of the Junior Chamber International (JCI), is called the *Seinen Kaigisho* (the Chamber of Young Men), and its members are referred to as *seinen keizaijin* (young men in the business community). Although the membership of the Junior Chamber (JC) in Japan is open to both women and men, none of these terms represent the presence of its women members. In addition, the junior board system that was first adopted in the United States by McCormick and Company in 1932 translates as *seinen juuyakukai seido* (board system for young men) in Japanese. Furthermore, the Japanese volunteer organization similar to the Peace Corps in the United States is called the *Seinen Kaigai Kyoryoku Tai* (The Japan Overseas Cooperation Corps of Young Men) – without any reference to female members, who are as active and dedicated as their male counterparts.

Considering a large number of expressions in the Japanese language that reflect male dominance, it is certainly a welcome trend that one of the prototypical patriarchal terms, *fukeikai* (fathers' and elder brothers' association meetings), has been replaced by the gender inclusive term *fubokai* (fathers' and mothers' association meetings). While it does have the male-female word order, *fubokai* (fathers' and mothers' association meetings) accurately describes the presence of women. What is even more encouraging is the emergence of a gender neutral term called *hogoshakai* (guardians' association meetings), which is being used in place of *fukeikai* (fathers' and elder brothers' association meetings). A change such as this which increases the visibility of women in language may seem rather small; nevertheless, it does have a significant effect on the realization of fairer representation of genders in the Japanese language.

### Occupational and Positional Terms for Women

When women take up occupations and positions that have been traditionally held by men, various terms to denote females are customarily added as modifiers to these occupations and positions. The same practice used to be found in English, in which neutral occupational terms took on female modifiers as in “woman writer” and “woman doctor” (Minh-ha, 1989). The most commonly used

terms in the Japanese language have been *fujin*, *josei*, *joryuu*, and *onna / jo*, as in *fujin keikan* (woman police officer), *josei kisha* (woman reporter), *joryuu sakka* (woman writer), *onna shachoo* (woman CEO), and *joi* (woman doctor). Among these four terms, *josei* is the most neutral with the least gender bias, followed by *fujin*, the term commonly used for older married women. In contrast, both *joryuu*, which is predominantly used in the field of art, and *onna / jo*, connote strong gender bias, implying that women who are holding traditionally male dominant occupations and positions are not as competent and capable as their male counterparts.

It should be noted that unlike other terms denoting female, *onna* is not only used with occupational and positional terms, but also commonly used with the names of well-known male figures when describing the accomplishments of women in the relevant fields. For instance, when the Japanese women's softball team won the gold medal for the first time in history at the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, a member who was the driving force behind the accomplishment was referred to as *onna* (female, woman) *Ichiroo*, a well-known Japanese fielder of the Major Leagues.

In addition to *fujin*, *josei*, *joryuu*, and *onna / jo*, there are other various terms to denote females that are used as modifiers to describe activities, positions, and occupations held by women. For instance, *mama-san* (mother, mom) is routinely used with activities and positions held by married women with children. Some of the common expressions include *mama-san koorasu* (mothers' chorus groups), *mama-san baree* (mothers' volleyball teams), and *mama-san rannaa* (women runners who are married with children). The latest creation is *mama-san uchuuhikooshi* (mother astronaut), referring to Yamazaki Naoko, the second Japanese woman astronaut, who was on board Space Shuttle Atlantis in 2010. Yamazaki is referred to as such, since unlike her predecessor, she is the first woman astronaut who is married with a young daughter. As described earlier, a large number of Japanese words and phrases are characterized by gender asymmetry. Likewise, the term *mama-san* (mother, mom) does not have a reciprocal term like *papa-san* (father, dad), that can be used as a modifier to activities or positions held by married men with children. Although *mama-san* as a modifier is commonly considered a term of endearment, such usage does have an undertone of mockery and ridicule in regard to activities, occupations, and positions held by married women with children.

Another term, *shufu* (main woman, homemaker), is also used as a modifier for activities and positions held by homemakers as in *shufu sakka* (homemaker/author). Compared to *mama-san*, *shufu* is a much more formal term, and is not as frequently used; however, it conveys the similar negative and biased assumption that homemakers are secondary as well as mediocre in what they do besides household work.

Furthermore, the term *joshi* (girl), referring to a young woman, is widely used with occupational and positional terms. Expressions composed of *joshi* as a modifier include *joshi kousei* (female high school student), *joshi daisei* (female college student), *joshi shain* (young female office worker), and *joshi ana* (young female TV announcer), among others.

Incidentally, the usage of the term, *joshi* referring to an adult woman can be traced back to ancient China in the most important scriptures of Confucianism called *Lun-yu* (The Discourses of Confucius), which was canonized during the Han dynasty (206-220 B.C.). *Lun-yu* is the oldest collection of the teachings of Kong-zi (551-479 B.C.), the Chinese scholar and theorist who was

the founder of Confucianism. According to *Nihon Shoki (The Chronicles of Japan)*, the oldest historical record of Japan, completed in 720, *Lun-yu* was introduced to Japan in the 5th century. It won much popularity among the Japanese, and a number of its annotated editions were published throughout the Edo period (1603-1867) (Hane, 1991).

One of the well-known quotations from Kong-zi (551-479 B.C.) found in *Lun-yu* includes the term *joshi* referring to an adult woman. It reads in the Japanese translation, “*Joshi to shoojin towa yashinai gatashi* (Women as well as those who are narrow-minded and are lacking in virtue, are hard to deal with; if you keep them close to you, they become rude, while if you stay away from them, they become vengeful)” (*Kojien*, 2008). Such unfavorable views on women by Confucianism are reflected in many quotations from *Lun-yu* as well as in a number of Confucian maxims for women.

Among the four terms to denote females, *fujin*, *josei*, *joryuu*, and *onna / jo* that are mentioned earlier, both *joryuu* and *onna / jo* have been less frequently used in recent years because of their implication that women are secondary to men in male dominant occupations and positions. This change has taken place as a result of the nonsexist language reform led by women’s groups and feminist activists to promote gender free occupational and positional terms. Similarly, *fujin*, the term typically used for older married women, has been mostly replaced with *josei*, which refers to adult women in general, regardless of their age and marital status. For instance, in the spring of 1999, the Osaka Prefectural Police, the second largest police force next to the Tokyo Metropolitan Police, abolished the term, *fujin keikan* (woman police officer) altogether, and adopted *josei keikan* instead.

Nowadays, *josei* (woman, female) is the most frequent modifier used with occupational and positional terms traditionally held by men. The latest such creations include *josei kanbu* (woman executive), *josei jieikan* (female member of the Japanese Self-Defense Forces), *josei shichoo* (woman mayor), and *josei kenkyuusha* (woman researcher), among others. Compared to other terms, *josei* has the least sexist undertone; however, the prevailing practice of adding the terms to denote females as modifiers to male-dominated positions and occupations is a manifestation of gender bias and inequality in the Japanese language that treats women as being secondary to men. It should be noted that the results of the survey conducted in the early 1980s indicated that the general public had mixed feelings about this practice. Over 30 percent of women and men who took part in the survey responded that it was not necessary to use terms to denote females as modifiers to occupational and positional terms. The percentage was even higher among women of the younger generation: 45 percent of those in their 20s, and 41 percent of those in their 30s (Endo, 1995).

Gender-based differences concerning occupational and positional terms can be interpreted as yet another residual effect of the notion of *danson johi* (men superior, women inferior). When men take up occupations and positions traditionally held by women, new, mostly gender inclusive terms are routinely created. For instance, *hobo* (protective mother) used to be the term for female nursery school and kindergarten teachers. In the late 1970s when a small number of men of the younger generation began to take up the occupation for the first time, they were initially called *hofu* (protective fathers). Following the amendment of *Jidoo Fukushiho Shikorei* (the Enforcement Act of the Child Welfare Law) in 1998, *hofu* was replaced by the much more professional and formal term, *hoikushi* (licensed person for child care), which was created in 1999 to represent both female and male nursery school and kindergarten teachers.

A similar process took place in the creation of the unisex term for nurse, *kangoshi* (nursing specialist, nurse), despite the fact that men consist of less than 5 percent of the entire number of nurses in present-day Japan. In the past, the term, *kangofu* (nursing woman) was used for female nurses, while men who began to take up nursing as a profession were called *kangonin* (nursing person). In 1968, with the amendment of *Hokenfu, Josanpu, Kangofu Ho* (the Public Health Nurses, Midwives, and Nurses Law), the new term, *kangoshi* (nursing man) was created for male nurses. Subsequently, in 2002, the Japanese government approved the legislation under which both female and male nurses are designated by the new term, *kangoshi* (nursing specialist, nurse). As explained in the following section, *kangoshi* (nursing man) and *kangoshi* (nursing specialist, nurse) are homonyms consisting of different *kanji* (ideographic characters) of *shi*; therefore, the former, *kangoshi* (nursing man) is a term exclusive to men, while the latter, *kangoshi* (nursing specialist, nurse) is a gender inclusive term.

The coinage of these gender inclusive occupational terms is a welcome development; however, it takes place only when men take up traditionally female-dominated occupations, not vice versa. Moreover, some of the coined occupational terms consist of the *kanji* that are not gender inclusive. For instance, as mentioned in the previous section, there are two characters sharing the same sound, *shi*, that are commonly used in occupational terms. One character refers to master regardless of gender, and is etymologically gender inclusive. Occupational terms consisting of this character include *kangoshi* (nursing specialist, nurse), *biyooshi* (hairstylist, beautician), *rihatsushi* (barber), *yakuzaishi* (pharmacist), *choorishi* (chef), *kyooshi* (teacher), *bokushi* (priest), and *ishi* (medical doctor), among others. In contrast, another character refers to male as well as samurai, and is etymologically exclusive to men. Occupational terms such as *kangoshi* (nursing man, male nurse), *hoikushi* (nursery school teacher, kindergarten teacher), *eiyooshi* (dietician), *bengoshi* (lawyer), and *daigishi* (assembly member) are among those made up of this character. It is, therefore, crucial to look carefully into the etymological background of *kanji* so that appropriate terms are coined in order to fairly represent genders.

Since the 1980s, there have been a surge of occupations that are transcribed by *katakana*, the phonetic letters used to transcribe words of non-Japanese origin. Some of these occupations include *serapisuto* (therapist), *kaunseraa* (counselor), *sutairisto* (stylist), *purogramaa* (programmer), *directaa* (director), *purodyuusaa* (producer), *insutorakutaa* (instructor), *baiyaa* (buyer), *fotogurafaa* (photographer), *aatisuto* (artist), *myuujishan* (musician), *shefu* (chef), and *somurie* (sommelier). Occupations like these are literally called *katakana shokugyoo* (occupations), and are commonly found in the fashion and the high-tech industries as well as in show business. *Katakana shokugyoo* are particularly popular among the younger generation, who tend to consider such occupational terms of non-Japanese origin as being trendy and stylish. It is noteworthy that unlike traditionally male dominant occupational terms in the Japanese language, these new terms of non-Japanese origin are gender inclusive, and do not take various terms to denote female and woman as modifiers.

A significant increase in the usage of *katakana*, the phonetic letters to transcribe words of non-Japanese origin, as well as the popularity in *katakana shokugyoo* since the 1980s, is not favorably received, mainly by the older generation who consider such phenomena as the decay in the Japanese language. Nevertheless, the gender free notion that these occupational terms connote is a positive development not only for women in the work force, but also for overall nonsexist language reform.

In recent years, there has also been a welcome change in the use of titles. In the Japanese language, commonly used titles consist of three suffixes, *-shi*, *-sama*, and *-san* that are used after surnames to indicate levels of formality as well as respect: *-shi* and *-sama* are transcribed in *kanji* to convey a higher level of formality and greater degree of respect than *-san*, which is transcribed in *hiragana*, phonetic letters derived from *kanji*. Unlike their English counterparts, Japanese titles do not mark gender or marital status; however, there was gender-based asymmetry in their usage: *-shi* used to be frequently used with men's names, and *-san* with women's names (Endo, 1995; Takahashi, 1991). Because of the ongoing nonsexist language reform, this practice is not as prevalent. Nowadays, *-shi* and *-san* are used equally with both women and men depending upon the formality of the settings.

## References

- Endo, O. (1995). Aspects of sexism in language. In K. Fujimura-Fanselow & A. Kameda (Eds.), *Japanese women: New feminist perspectives on the past, present, and future* (pp. 29-42). New York: The Feminist Press.
- Fendos, P. G. Jr. (Ed.). (1991). *Cross-cultural communication: East and west*. Tainan, Taiwan: National Cheng-Kung University.
- Fujimura-Fanselow, K. & Kameda, A. (Eds.) (1995). *Japanese women: New feminist perspectives on the past, present, and future*. New York: The Feminist Press.
- Giles, H., Robinson, W. P. & Smith, P. M. (Eds.). (1980). *Language: Social psychological perspectives*. Oxford, UK: Pergamon Press.
- Greenberg, J. H. (1966). *Language universals*. The Hague, the Netherlands: Mouton.
- Hamilton, M. C. (1988). Using masculine generics: Does generic he increase male bias in the user's imagery? *Sex Roles, 19*, 785-799.
- Hane, M. (1991). *Premodern Japan: A historical survey*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Harrison, L. (1975). Cro-Magnon woman in eclipse. *Science Teacher, 42*, 9-11.
- Henley, N., Gruber, B., & Lerner, L. (1985). *Studies on the detrimental effects of 'generic' masculine usage*. Paper presented at the Eastern Psychological Association Congress in Boston, March 1985.
- Ide, S. & McGloin, N. H. (Eds.). (1990). *Aspects of Japanese women's language*. Tokyo: Kuroshio Publishers.
- Jarrett-Macaulay, D. (Ed.). (1995). *Reconstructing womanhood, reconstructing feminism*. London: Routledge.
- Kaneko, S. (1995). The struggle for legal rights and reforms: A historical view. In K. Fujimura-Fanselow & A. Kameda (Eds.), *Japanese women: New feminist perspectives on the past, present, and future* (pp. 3-14). New York: The Feminist Press.
- Kojien* (6th ed.). (2008). Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten.
- MacKay, D. G. (1980a). Language, thought and social attitudes. In H. Giles, W. P. Robinson & P. M. Smith (Eds.), *Language: Social psychological perspectives* (pp. 89-96). Oxford, UK: Pergamon Press.
- MacKay, D. G. (1980b). Psychology, prescriptive grammar and the pronoun problem. *American Psychologists, 35*, 444-449.
- MacKay, D. G. (1983). Prescriptive grammar and the pronoun problem. In B. Thorne, C. Karamarae, & N. Henley (Eds.), *Language, gender and society* (pp. 38-53). Rowley, MA: Newbury House Publishers.
- Martyna, W. (1978). What does 'he' mean? Use of the generic masculine. *Journal of Communication, 28* (1), 130-139.

- Minh-ha, T. T. (1989). *Women, native, other*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Nakamura, M. (1990). Women's sexuality in Japanese female terms. In S. Ide & N. H. McGloin (Eds.), *Aspects of Japanese women's language* (pp. 147-163). Tokyo: Kuroshio Publishers.
- Simmonds, F. N. (1995). Naming and identity. In D. Jarrett-Macaulay (Ed.), *Reconstructing womanhood, reconstructing feminism* (pp. 109-120). London: Routledge.
- Stanley, J. P. (1978). Sexist grammar. *College English*, 39, 800-811.
- Swanger, R. (1994). Letters/Sexism no surprise. *Japan Quarterly*, 41 (1), 4.
- Takahashi, M. (1991). Titles and terms for women in English and Japanese. In P. G. Fendos Jr. (Ed.), *Cross-cultural communication: East and west* (pp. 287-303). Tainan, Taiwan: National Cheng-Kung University.
- Thorne, B., Karamarae, C. & Henley, N. (Eds.). (1983). *Language, gender and society*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House Publishers.