

Changing perceptions of Japanese gendered language

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One of the most prominent characteristics associated with Japanese is its abundance of distinctive gendered language, which has been reflected in a rich body of literature (Hall et al., 2020). Yet, over the last half century both men's and women's language have reportedly become more neutral (Sturtz Sreetharan, 2004), and speech patterns seen as feminine have gone out of use amongst women (Okamoto, 1995). At the same time, so-called women's language—*joseigo* or *onna-kotoba*—is still widely used in fiction, where it plays a major role in characterization as a type of stereotyped role language (*yakuwari-go*) (Teshigawara & Kinsui, 2011). This gap in the status of gendered language—whereby women's language is both unused and yet highly present and ratified as an identifying characteristic of Japanese—presents a potential point of tension in people's perceptions. One must ask, how will this change people's evaluations of gendered language and how they feel about its importance for Japanese?

This paper begins to grapple with these questions through an exploratory metalinguistic analysis of posts from the anonymous advice board, Yahoo! Chiebukuro [Yahoo! Answers]. As a popular site for people seeking advice, Yahoo! Chiebukuro has been shown to be a productive resource for metalinguistic discussions (Unser-Schutz, 2020); with the changing role and status of gendered language, one can imagine people frequently have issues they may need help with, such as determining the appropriateness of their own speech or understanding why such gaps exist. To limit the sample to discussions which specifically dealt with gendered language, I used the keywords *joseigo* or *onna-kotoba* to extract 1,555 posts from April 2004 to March 2025.

Overall, few posts directly concerned the poster's own language use; instead, users were more concerned with people's opinions or examples of women's language. Many posts concerned language in popular media, with 36.79% under the category of entertainment and hobbies. Posts in this category often concerned requests for speech patterns for specific types of characters. When users did post about women's language in real life, they tended to be negative and see it as 'fake,' such as Chiebukuro User (2022), who claimed overuse of women's language was a tell-tale sign of trolls online. Other users reported feeling uncomfortable using women's language, even though they were women themselves (Anonymous, 2009). In comparison, 7.20% of posts included keywords related to homosexuality, such as *onee*, a slang term for effeminate gay men, likely reflecting the use of feminine speech patterns amongst *onee* celebrities in popular media (Maynard, 2016). Additionally, 11.83% of posts also mentioned foreign languages, often in the context of asking if those languages also had gendered language like Japanese.

From these results, it is clear that people remain aware of the terms *joseigo* and *onna-kotoba* and use them productively; the frequent comparisons with foreign languages and their (assumed non-)use of gendered language also indicates that people continue to have interest in the belief that gendered language is a characteristic of Japanese. On the other hand, the results also highlight how women's language is now more restricted in potential uses, both by area (works of fiction) and speakers (effeminate gay men). An interesting future question is how long stereotyped women's language will function as *yakuwari-go* without its positive attachment with authentic speech.

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