

Do Japanese women speak a separate language?



Do Japanese women speak a separate language?

Do men and women speak the same language? On the face of it, yes, they do. People use the language which is spoken on a given territory and gender hasn't got much to do with it. It turns out though that in Japan we have two different types of Japanese – for men and for women. And surprisingly, it's not about the grammatical aspect. There's more to it.

In some European languages your grammatical gender is determined by your cultural gender. Japanese isn't the same because grammatical gender doesn't really exist. Women and men are expected to use slightly different types of language according to the sex, which is called genderlect. Most of Japanese is neutral and can be used by everybody but we also have the language of women (onna kotoba, joseigo or fujingo) and of men. Masculine type is a question of choice. Young boys are taught not to speak it because it's a bit arrogant and abrupt. When it comes to girls, they have no other option but to learn their type. Parents and teachers try hard to make them abide by its rules. So women must be obedient or pay for their insubordination.

There is a couple of differences between these languages. Women use longer forms of words in order to obtain a more gentle and polite tone. For example hana ([translated](#) as “flower”) turns into ohana. Another difference appears in using personal pronouns. Both genders can speak about themselves by using watashi but a more feminine form is atashi and masculine is boku (especially used by young men or the ones who want to be seen as young). When it comes grammar, women for instance omit the verb “be” in a sentence like “This is a spider” and say “This a spider.” What is more, women express emotions by using different phrases. The most common example is wa used to show admiration or emotion. The probability of saying wa by a man is equal to zero. In terms of pronunciation there are also certain rules for women, namely they can't reduce a sequence of vowels like /ai/ to /ē/ because it would be considered as improper for a lady. As you may guess, men are free to do it.

The language of women has its roots in Heian times (794-1185). A woman had to avoid using Chinese borrowings because it would show that she is too smart for her gender. She was also discouraged to be eloquent and, consequently, she had to mutter under her nose without ending sentences. In the next four centuries in Kamakura (1185-1333) and Muromachi (1336-1573) this tendency developed. According to Confucian thought women had to speak as quiet as they could and only when it was a must. An interesting turn took place in the 14th century when nobly born women started to use among themselves a new type of language, full of neologisms. Later, it was acquired by the aristocracy. In Edo period (1603-1868) Japan was separated from the rest of the world. The rules were even stricter and women in addition were encouraged to be silent, use mollifications as o- and -moji, and avoid using words like shikato (with certainty) and ikiji (pride) as certainty and pride were viewed as unfeminine. At the end of the 19th century, there was introduced a quick modernisation and standardisation of language as well as equality. Gender segregation was less intense but still, in 1886 students used different coursebooks. It is a quote from one of them for girls: “Restrain yourself from talking. A decent speech of a woman should not irritate the ear, should be tender and charming. It is repugnant for a woman to speak wisely and with expertness.”

Today this division between the feminine and masculine language is no longer so strict. There is a great change in Japanese films, series and theatre when it comes to the language of actresses. It is more masculine now. Be that as it may, users of Japanese are still aware of genderlects because when you don't pay attention you can speak like a little girl even though it was not your point. It is also evident in [translation](#) as for example in an interview Angelina Jolie uses feminine language without knowing it. That is why it is so important for [translators](#) to know not only the language but also the cultural background. At least these sexist coursebooks disappeared but...is this really the case? When sociolinguist Momoko

Nakamura looked in the Internet bookshop for books with words “woman” and “the way of speaking”, she found 73 results. She analysed first seven and found out that all of them emphasised that a woman can appear more attractive when she changes the way of talking by using the language of women and consequently will be considered as elegant, wise, beautiful, happy and loved. Such books and their success prove that the language of women in Japan is still alive.

(A.O)