

## Study on Pragmatic Functions of Gender Terms in Japanese Conversation

### ETUDE SUR LES FONCTIONS PRAGMATIQUES DES TERMES DE GENRE DANS LES CONVERSATIONS EN JAPONAIS

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**Abstract:** In order to clarify the pragmatic functions of the phenomenon “Sexual Inversion” in the use of gender terms in Japanese conversation, this paper analyses respectively the pragmatic functions of the male using female terms and the female using male terms through conversational examples, presenting the point that there is compatibility between male and female terms, the use of which is not confined to gender identity of the speaker, and the flexible use of which can better express the speaker’s identity and viewpoint, moderate the talking atmosphere and coordinate relationship between the two talking sides. It is an intentional pragmatic strategy.

**Key words:** male terms; female terms; pragmatic functions

**Résumé:** Afin de clarifier les fonctions pragmatiques du phénomène de *l'inversion sexuelle* dans l'utilisation des termes de genre dans la conversation en japonais, ce document analyse respectivement les fonctions pragmatiques des termes féminins utilisés par les hommes et des termes masculins utilisés par les femmes en nous donnant des exemples de conversation, et en présentant le point de vue qu'il y a une compatibilité entre les termes masculins et les termes féminins, dont l'utilisation ne se limite pas à l'identité sexuelle de l'orateur, et qu'une utilisation souple peut mieux exprimer l'identité et le point de vue du locuteur, modérer l'atmosphère de conversation et coordonner les relations entre les deux locuteurs. Il s'agit d'une stratégie pragmatique intentionnelle.

**Mots-Clés:** termes masculins; termes féminins; fonctions pragmatiques

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As to gender differences embodied in language, linguists have given different explanations. Lakoff (1973) put forward the theory of “deficit approach” at the earliest (Lakoff, R., 1973), thinking that female language is imperfect and with disfigurement compared to male language. Following him, Fishman (1998) created the theory of “dominance approach” (Fishman, P., 1998), pointing out that characteristics of male language reflect the dominating position of the male in society, and female language the feeling of insecurity and dependence in them. Maltz & Broker (1998), Tannen (1990) etc. then brought up the theory of “difference approach” (Maltz, D. & Broker, R., 1998), with the opinion that we should understand language difference of male and female from the angle of cultural difference. In other words, because the male and female belong to different sub-culture groups, they show discrepancy in language style. Based on this theory, many linguists point out that the male show “competitiveness” in single-sex dialogue, while female show “co-operativeness” in single-sex dialogues. (Crawford, M., 1995)

The common ground of the theories above is that they emphasize the differences in the use of language by the males and females, but ignoring their compatibility. Cameron (1998), Uchida (1998) and Crawford (2003) etc. brought up “social constructionist approach” according to their researching achievement respectively, which bears the opinion that different from the physiological gender, the social gender of male and female is an identity continually being constructed, is the effect of taking series of social activities relating to gender identities. (Crawford, 1995; Butler, 1999; Goddard & Patterson, 2000). “Male” and “female” are changeable and flexible. People can change their gender identity as a player, thus in different contexts, performing male or female characteristics in different contexts. (Coates, 1996)

On the surface, Japanese is recognized as a language with distinct gender differences. Japanese males are holding dominating position either in social life or in family life. Japanese females instead regard tender, obedient and considerate as good virtues. Embodied in the language, there appeared male and female terms with distinct differences. 杉本つとむ (1975) made a detailed study on the history of female language. 鈴木健二 (1969) and 佐佐木瑞枝 (1999) analyze the use of female terms, and discussed its difference in using from male terms. 掘井令以知 (1990) points out that “From the perspective of linguistics, female terms have the significant effect on the heritage of language.” (掘井令以知, 1990) 佐佐木瑞枝 (1999) further emphasizes that if Japanese learners can not master well the different usage of male and female terms in Japanese, or use them inappropriately, disagreeable situation may occur. (掘井令以知, 1990)

However, we find that in daily conversations, the phenomenon of “Sexual Inversion” is common: males using female terms and females using male terms. This paper tends to analyze and discuss the speaker intention and pragmatic function of this phenomenon in Japanese conversation, through examination of male and female conversational examples, by virtue of related theories pragmatics.

## 1. MALE TERMS IN FEMALE DICTION

In the light of Grice’s conversational cooperative principle, conversational participants often choose terms according with their gender identity, which is the most universal pragmatic strategy in daily life. But the addresser may adopt unusual expressional ways to display his or her intentions by adjusting the pragmatic strategy, according to different contexts and intentions. For example, females sometimes might use terms often used by males on purpose for better transmitting her addressing intentions to the other side. Let’s see the two dialogues below:

Example 1. 夏子：それでいきなり消防士かい。やるな、あんたも。

(ellipsis)

夏子：さ、窓閉めて、寝よ一ぜ。あたしらの消す火はまだまだ先にあんだからさ

Example 2. 課長：あれ、ますみくんだけ？ほかの人たちは？

ますみ：もうとつに次の店に行っちゃいましたつ。おいつ、トド課長！心配して待って  
たんだぞォー。

課長：え？(門橋靖人, 2002)

Example one is a conversation between a young lady “夏子” and her classmate “山田” who is older than her. According to conversational cooperative principles and social norms, “夏子” as a female, should employ female terms. But「かい」,「な」 most often used by males appear in her speech. As a general rule, we do not think this unusual expressional method conform with 夏子’s identity. Nevertheless, when “山田” pours out why he divorced and became a firemen, the talking atmosphere is oppressive and awkward. “夏子” deliberately employs the tone of a naughty boy and male terms, with the pragmatic effect to relax the atmosphere. It is a pragmatic strategy to disobey cooperative principle so as to obtain some certain intentions.

Example 2 is a conversation between 「ますみ」 and her loved “課長”. In reply to “課長”’s question, 「ますみ」 wants to express the intention that “the other people have already left, she herself is waiting for him”. A female expression like 「課長、心配してお待ちしておりますよ」 is enough, but to “課長” this way of expression can only be understood as general concern from a subordinate to the superior, unable to exhibit the implied meaning. So when 「ますみ」 answers the question 「心配して待ってたんだぞォー」, she deliberately chooses the male term 「ぞォー」 inconsistent with her female identity. As thus, in the social cultural background with strict hierarchies and advocating man is superior to woman, male listener “課長” must be surprised that 「ぞォー」, a male term, should be uttered by a female subordinate, and at the same time, he will speculate the implied meaning in this sentence, besides accepting the ordinary meaning of “Because I am worried, I waited for you.” 「ますみ」’s pragmatic strategy of using male term 「ぞォー」 thus obtains its pragmatic function: express subtly and successfully a female’s feeling of affection, arousing the listener’s attention to her.

It can be seen from this that although females using male terms may leave the impression of rough, not tender and feminine on others, if they put aside elegance and restrain deliberately, and use some selective male words not according with their own identity intentionally, sometimes they can better cover up their embarrass or dissatisfaction and express feelings subtly, transmitting addressing intention more easily. It can be regarded as a pragmatic strategy in female conversation. However, we can not exclude the possibility that some females innately like using and always use male terms or some males like using female terms, without any particular pragmatic intentions. We will not discuss this phenomenon here.

Let us further study the two dialogues below:

Example 3: 男の客：いや、いな。あんなキレーな人と働いて。いや、マジ俺タダでい  
いから、雇ってくんないかな。な？オイシーだろ？

奥さん：てめーは子供の前で何言つてんだよ、コラあ！(池谷理香子, 1998)

Example 4: 三浦：お前の注射には心がないんだ!!

ユキエ：心がないって。心つて何さ。精神論はやめてよね。文句あるなら具体的に言いなよ。(佐々木倫子, 1995)

From the two examples above, we can see 「奥さん」 and 「ユキエ」 uttered out words like 「てめー」、「何さ」、「なよ」 out of fury, extremely rough with male style. However literally, if a female uses this kind of rough male terms, her female image will be destroyed completely; According to

Leech's Politeness Principle and Grice's conversational Cooperative Principle, female using male terms may result in disruption of the conversation for it acts against the Polite Principle, which may make the partner have the feeling of losing face. But from the aspect of conversational content, we can see obviously that it is a pragmatic strategy employed by the addresser, intentionally using terms contrary to her own identity to achieve the pragmatic function of informing the opposite side that his words are unsatisfactory to her, and enforcing him to change mind. If she uses normal female words, not only her discontent emotion can not be expressed out, the listener also can not realize the hurt caused by his words to her. It is thus evident that, female use male terms in certain situations to vent strong dissatisfaction as a pragmatic method.

## 2. MALES USING FEMALE TERMS

To some extent, Japanese society is male-centralized. So compared to the phenomenon of females using male terms intentionally, examples of males using female terms are seldom. But in certain context, males also use female terms. For instance:

Example 5: 実果：生霊とかね。

晶彦：やめてよ、おれ、そういうの、本当こわい。

晶彦：実果ちゃん、クラブとか嫌いって言ってたじゃん。

実果：うん。

晶彦：なんで一人で来るの。俺と来ればいいじゃない。

実果：だってあたしとこない時の晶彦が見たかったんだもん。

晶彦：うはは、変なのー、で、どうだった？アタシ。

実果：モテてた。(池谷理香子, 1999)

Example 5 is a dialogue between 「晶彦」 and his girlfriend 「実果」 when she met him in the club. In this dialogue, when 「晶彦」 answers 「実果」's question 「生霊とかね」, he uses an auxiliary word 「の」 often used by females; as to personal pronouns, he employs the word 「俺」 fitting his male identity at first, but as the conversation going on, when 「晶彦」 asks 「実果」's evaluation on him, he employs the word 「アタシ」 commonly used by females to mitigate embarrassment, creating distance between them. In this context, 「晶彦」 using these female terms give people the feeling of naughty, instead of sissy. It seems like that it's not himself who is talking. It's another 「晶彦」 having conversation with 「実果」. It is a pragmatic strategy adopted by 「晶彦」 in accordance with the talking content and the context at the site.

According to Grice's conversational Cooperative Principle, females using male terms or males using female terms shown above disobey the "Principle of Quality (Not Tell Lies)" on the surface, but from the perspective of talking content and addressing intention, they obey the principle of "Intentional intercommunication, either oral or not, is an exhibition of cooperation". (1975: 41-58), whose purpose is to ensure the conversation to proceed successfully, employ gender terms of distinctive style skillfully, and better express the addresser's implications. But the addresser will not only use one style of gender consistently in the conversation. For some certain reason, he or she may change the style of gender in the procedure. Let us analyze example 6: a conversation between a male university student 「タロ」 who rents a room in an inn and the landlady 「明子」 who is now at the age of 45. 「明子」 has to stay in the hospital for a month for injuries sustained by falling. So she wants to

consign the inn temporarily to her daughter 「郷子」 to manage, who is now studying in university.

Example 6: タロ：どんくせいな。明子さん。

明子：つたく、やんあつちゃうよ。

タロ：どーすんの、店。それじゃ休むしかないか。

明子：冗談でしょ。治るのに一ヶ月かかるのに、そんなに長く店閉めたら大変よお。

タロ：んじゃ、雇われママでも探すの？

(中略)

明子：あの子の性格、問題ありだと思わない？

タロ：そおねえ。

明子：すつごく外面いいし、人目を気にしすぎるし、ヘンにブライド高くてすましているし。大体さー、あたしのお金で育つたくせに、どっか見下した態度なのよね。大学は言ってから特にむかつくわー。少しはあたしの苦勞、思い知れっていうの。

タロ：結局、そこなのね。(池谷理香子, 1998)

When 「タロ」 and 「明子」 start the conversation, 「タロ」 uses the expression 「どんくせいな」 with typical male style. But as 「明子」 exposes his heart to 「タロ」 to pour out his troubles, his way of expression is gradually changing. Words with female style as 「の」、「そおねえ」、「そこなのね」 appear in his talking, giving people the feeling of gentleness and friendliness, so as to indicate to 「明子」 that he accepts her trust and stands with her, which contributes to deepen his talking with 「明子」. It can be understood as a polite talking strategy of showing intimacy used by 「タロ」 to correspond with 「明子」, with the result of brightening the talking atmosphere. Although on the surface, it disobeys the conversational cooperative principle, and employs female terms seemed not appropriate for males, actually it modulate the conversational atmosphere, based on Leech's Politeness Principle and Grice's Cooperative Principle, to help the conversation proceed smoothly. Let's compare it with example 7.

Example 7: タロ：ま、まだ手際が悪いから大変だろうけど、明子さんなんか一人でやってんだぜ。

郷子：妖怪だわ。

タロ：でも、みんな悪い人じゃねーだろ? モタモタしてても笑ってくれたしさ。

郷子：まあね。(池谷理香子, 1998)

Example 7 is a conversation between 「タロ」 and 「郷子」 who is compelled to accept to run the business of the inn, feeling terrified and discomfort, with noting to do. If 「タロ」 uses female terms at this time, it will only bring more fear and agitation to 「郷子」 who has nobody to turn to. Hence, 「タロ」 uses male Syuujiyosi 「ぜ」 and 「さ」, transmitting the tone of firmness and staunchness. When 「郷子」, meek and mild, feels the care and concern from 「タロ」 like a big brother through 「ぜ」 and 「さ」, she becomes brave and confident. It is thus evident that the same addresser will adopt terms with different styles in different contexts or to different talking partner, resulting in different pragmatic functions. In other words, the addresser can intentionally select male or female terms, which are more

effective in pragmatic function than normal gender terms. We can understand it as a pragmatic strategy of using gender terms flexibly based on the variation of talking partners and contextual requirements.

### 3. CONCLUSION

Through analysis of conversational examples above, we can see that it is not reasonable to label “competitiveness” or “co-operativeness” on male and female terms. Traditional theories only attach great significance to difference of language application between male and female terms, neglecting the possibility and necessity of the two to transform and integrate with one another.

When people make verbal communication with each other, “males” and “females” are changeable and flexible. In different circumstances, different styles of gender terms can exhibit distinct male or female characteristics. And the pragmatic strategy of disobeying the convention deliberately to play the role of others, employing the style form and tone not according with his or her gender identity, can mitigate the atmosphere and avoid embarrassment during the conversation. This kind of strategy, named 「他人格モード」(因京子, 2004), can better break away from the normal expression method intentionally, displaying the true intention of the speaker, thus engendering multiple pragmatic effects. Gender terms can be transferred from one to the other in the procedure of the conversation. Their variation or transformation during the conversation is a talking strategy of 「他人格モード」 on purpose to better present the speakers’ identity and viewpoints, or to mitigate talking atmosphere, thus to coordinate the relationship of the two sides.

In Japanese conversations, the phenomenon of speakers using expression manners not according with their own age and identity, etc also exists. For example, young people imitate the talking style of children and old people, university professors speak in the tone of the students, etc. These are new researching subjects of discourse analysis and intention studies in Pragmatics.

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