PLAY ELEMENTS IN MODERN JAPANESE LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

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Abstract: Language data on modern spoken Japanese shown in this paper suggest that play can become an "excuse" to use language not conforming to overt and covert communication norms. For example, it can be shown that Japanese female high school students often make use of language usually associated with men. This is type of language use is broadly referred to as "play" in this paper, but the results from this study suggests that the effect of such usage is clearly not only, let's say, "comical" or "used for killing time", but it also makes up an entirely new paradigm of communication.

Non-standard language, or more precisely language not conforming to rules within the language community, can be used actively or positively in order to achieve various kinds of effects, for example humour, emphasizing intimacy, or simply "standing out". The data from this study show that such language usage is very common. It serves as a means of expression and a way to show one's personal identity, and it is an important tool for building the speaker's character, in Japanese simply known as "kyara". This is contrary to the popular belief that the Japanese are always occupied with preserving harmony.

Keywords: Language play, stigma, sociolinguistics, language change, language variation, character, kyara.

Introduction

The Japanese are a playful people. Proof of this can be seen in the huge success of firms such as Nintendo and Sony, and found in the fact that Japan is the world's top exporter of pop-culture. This paper investigates the way play elements affect the way Japanese speakers communicate and interact.

First I shall give a brief outline on Play theory. Then, through data from "wakamono-kotoba" (Japanese youth language), I will show how play elements in Japanese culture affects every day communication. Lastly, I shall discuss the implications these findings can have for research on language variation and language change.

Play

Obviously it's hard to make a scientifically valid claim that Japanese people are more playful than, let's say, some kind of European ethnic group. However, the way the Japanese perceive the concept of Play, or "asobi" as it's called in Japanese, is certainly different.

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In western European cultures, play is something that children do, whereas in Japan, adults play, and they admit to it. Just consider the Japanese word "sutoresu hassan" – stress relief. Japanese believe that play relives their day to day stress, and they list stress relief as one of their reasons for playing.

It is my working hypothesis for this study that play elements also affects the way Japanese speakers communicate. Furthermore, the Japanese language should make up for a good target language for research on language and play, because of all the social dimensions that are encoded in the Japanese language.

There are several approaches on play research. I have mentioned earlier "sutoresu hassan", or stress relief, basically meaning release of excess energy. This falls under what we call the biological approach. Different theories exists, but basically these view play as an act of instinct, and serving purposes such as being training for later in life.

However, what concerns us here in this paper is the cultural approach on play. There have been a few studies in anthropology and religious studies (Huizinga 1950), but little work has been done on play in everyday life, and especially within the field of linguistics.

We must recognize that there is an irrational side to play, that can't be grasped by the natural sciences. There are several reasons for this: People play because it is fun, that is to say, they play for the sake of play. Furthermore, there is a creative and an aesthetic dimension to play, that we need to take into consideration. Lastly, it is obvious that play can serve a variety of social functions. These will be discussed later in this paper.

Johan Huizinga has described some of the cultural features of play in his book Homo Ludens. First of all, play is a voluntary act. It is essentially superfluous, and you can quit whenever you want. Secondly, play is not real life. That is to say, it is divergent from what's ordinary. A basic form of this is children's games of make-believe, or what in Japanese is known as "gokko". However, as will be made clear later in this paper, also adults diverge from ordinary and conventional ways of speaking.

Thirdly, play is performed within a set time and space frame. There is usually a starting point, cut-off point and a ground. The fourth characteristic is quite similar; play is rule-bound. If the rules are not obeyed than any game can't really begin, and what's more, nobody likes a cheat.

Furthermore, play is non-profit. This might seem rather strange, but the point is that there is a material motif behind, then that something seizes to be play. Lastly, play has the ability to strengthen relationship and to create interest groups. This function is often called bonding or "doushiai in Japanese. Huizinga doesn't say it explicably, but play is interactive. And the interaction you have with your partner or opponent can be crucial.

Language play

Several kinds of language play can be found in Japanese. This paper will focus on language play as larger pragmatic units, and not just simple word play. They can broadly be sorted into four groups:

1. Word groups such as pronouns. Considering real Japanese spoken today, it is not uncommon to see that female use "boku" and "ore", pronouns

conventionally used by men, and reversely that, men sometimes make use of female speech as a form of language play

2. Particles and special grammar. Especially sentence final particles are very common in language play in Japanese. For example if you are acting cat like, or pretending to be a cat, you have the option of finishing your sentences not with the copula "da" or "desu", but the cat-like sound "da –nyan". In the Sunday anime "Chibi Marukochan" there's a character named "bu-tarou", and in his family, everyone finish their sentences with "bu". Furthermore, in the 2009 hit movie Our Mother "Kabe", the protagonist's family call each other "kabe" or "tobe" instead of "kaasan" and "toosan" (mother and father).

3. "Boke-tsukkomi", gags. The third type "boke-tsukkomi" and gags. Are important elements of Japanese humour, "Boke-tsukkomi", is a Kansai comedy routine that requires cooperation, and in which you can hear phrases such as "omae aho ka!", you fool!, that would normally be out of bounds in conversation. There is even a superb concept in Japanese called "oyaji-gyagu", which doesn't really mean a "gyagu" or gag made by an old man as the name would suggest, but rather a gag that misses its communicative target.

4. "Monomane", playing a character. "Monomane", imitations and impersonations, and the act of playing a character, or "kyara" are common in Japanese. Kinsui (2003) has named this role-language or "yakuwari-go". For example, when you are making a normal statement, you can borrow expressions or ways of saying things from a character, or from a real existing person. Sometimes this borrowing even develops in new directions away from the original. Recent characters that you'll find in Japanese television these days include the "burikko kyara", cutesy-character, "baka kyara", cumbhead character, and as being exemplified by a middle age male professor in education called "ogi-mama", and the onee-kyara, or the big sister character.

The next section will present data from the first group.
Personal Pronouns
The data for this paper is partly taken from Japanese television, and partly taken from a set of 500 blog entries written by Japanese native speakers. They were collected through inserting search terms such as "ichininsho", first person, in Google Blog Search[1]. The first example is from a blog entry from a female university student, writing about her sisters' language use[2].

1. My little sister has become an «oresama» person – a big sister's headache
My little sister has suddenly started calling herself by ore. I'm astonished!
Upon returning home,
suddenly she says things like:
–I (*ore*) couldn't care less.
Or:
-I (*ore*) have nothing to do with that!

So I asked her straight out.
Me: Why have you suddenly started using *ore*?
Her: Because I'm *ore-sama*.
Me: I like *boku* better.
Her: What?[3]

In this blog entry, as an example of language play, the blog writer's little sister seems to be using the pronoun "ore", usually reserved for men, instead of what would be a conventional choice for young females such as "atashi". There are also small traces of some sort of character that the younger sister tries to build; the "oresama kyara".

The next example is an excerpt from the talk show "Koi no Karasawagi", in which the MC Akashi Sanma talks to a group of young females about love and relationships in an informal setting. The language use of the females appearing in the show was followed through one season. The particular female in the following example, uses the first person pronoun "atashi" on every occation except here, because in this episode she wears a gorgeous dress and a tiara on her head.

2. Female, 22, Miyagi prefecture: Listen to me, this story is about a man I (*watakushi*) used to date before, he...

Sanma (MC): And to whose family, might you belong, young miss?[4]

The young female says: Listen to me, this story is about a man I ("watakushi") used to date before, using the first person pronoun "watakushi", which is far more polite than what the informal setting of the talk show calls for. In other words, we can say that she plays or acts some kind of role, both in the way she dresses and the way she speaks. In Japanese this would be traits of the so-called "ojousan-kyara". Hence, because of the unconventional way of speaking, the MC Akashi Sanma interrupts her with the following "tsukkomi": -And to whose family, might you belong, young miss?

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[3] From http://sayarine.blog80.fc2.com/blog-entry-314.html
The Japanese text reads as follow:
Imouto wa oresamashugi da yo. Oneichan no kunou.
Imouto no ichininsho ga totsuzen ore ni narimashita.
Bikkuri desu.
Kaette kite, hanashitetara kyuu ni
«Ore wa betsuni dou demo ii kedo ne.»
Toka,
"Ore wa kankei nai shi?"
Toka itterun desu yo.
Ikinari desu yo. Nannde ore?!!
Dakara itte yarimashita.
Watashi «Nande ikinari ichininsho ore ni natte no!!?»
Imouto «N? Oresama dakara»
Watashi «watashi wa boku no hou ga suki daa!!!»
Imoto «Ha? »
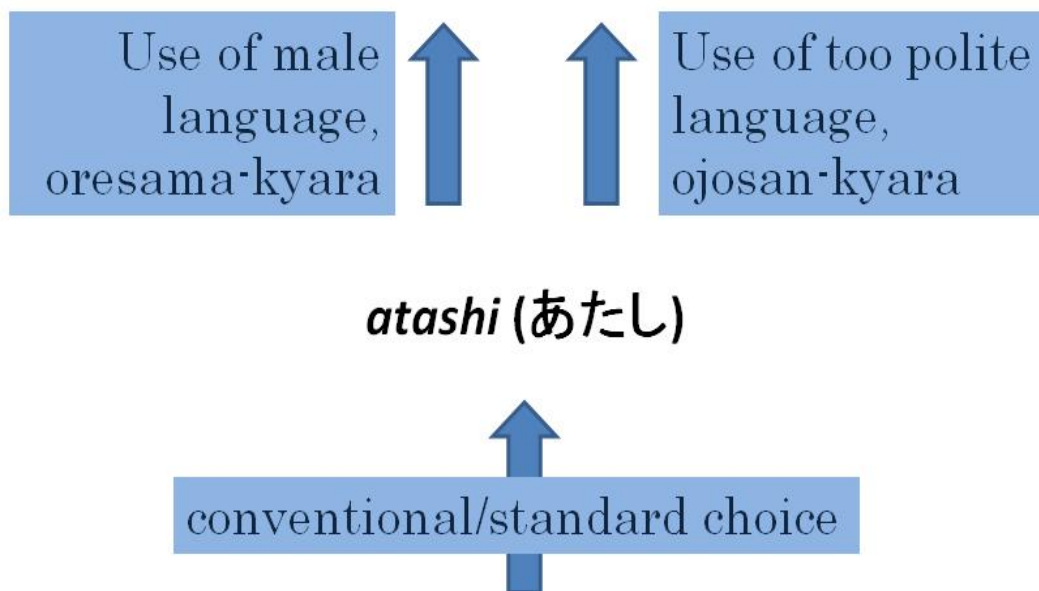[4] From Koi no Karasawagi, NTV, aired 2008.12.13
The Japanese text reads as follow:
Female, 22 Miyagi prefecture: Ano desu ne, <u>watakushi</u>, ano izen otsukiai shite ita dansei no hanashi nan desu kedo, kono kata ni wa-
Sanma (MC): Doko no ee toko no ie, omae wa!?

Framework

What is going on in the two examples above can be illustrated using the following illustration:

We have two similar situations in which young females are in an informal setting. The conventional choice of first person pronoun would be, let's say, "atashi". However, because language play kicks in – and in our first example the female uses language associated with men – the final selection of pronoun becomes "ore". In the second example, the female uses too polite language and plays a sort of "ojousan kyara", so the final selection of pronoun becomes "watakushi".

Conclusion

Language data on spoken Japanese used for this study, suggest that play can become an "excuse" to use language not conforming to overt and covert pragmatic norms. Alternatively, to put it simply: play invites to nonstandard language, and language deviating from communication norms.

For example, it was shown that Japanese female high school students sometimes make use of language usually associated with men. This is type of language use is broadly referred to as "play" in this paper, but the results from this study suggests that the effect of such usage is clearly not only let's say "comical" or "used to killing time", but it also make up an entirely new paradigm of communication.

Non-standard language, or more precisely language not conforming to rules within the language community, can be used actively or positively in order to achieve various kinds of effects, for example bonding, ice-breaking, accenting intimacy or simply just to "stand out."

Language that might be stigmatizing for one person can be perfectly normal and conventional for another. When stigma arises, to outcomes are possible: The person might change his language, called repair within stigma theory or, the society might adjust and accept the stigmatized language, called acceptance within stigma theory (Goffman 1963). That language will eventually lose its status as stigma. And this is basically what happens when language change occurs.

Expressions act as ways to show one's personal identity, and as a scale for which to place and evaluate social relationships. To put it differently: it is an important tool for building various social characters, in Japanese simply known as "kyara". This runs contrary to the popular belief that the Japanese are always occupied with preserving let's say harmony or unity. Some people even make a living out of their deviating "kyara".

Furthermore, it is likely that this type of play has wide implication for language change as well. Without creativity, no new forms would arise. Understanding how play and creativity work on language will provide us information on how Japanese language and culture are evolving.

REFERENCES

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