

The role of voice quality in Japanese stylized femininities

Japanese femininity has been a popular area of study in the field of language and gender (Okamoto & Shibamoto Smith 2004, Inoue 1996). Much has been made of Japanese Women's Language (JWL), the grammar and expressions associated with female speech (Takahara 1991). Japanese 'cuteness' (*kawaii*) has also been subject to academic scrutiny (Kinsella 1995, Miller 2004b). However, we have found most accounts of Japanese female voices to be unsatisfactory. The common claim that the ideal female voice in Japan is high-pitched and cute (Kristof 1995) does not capture the range of styles available to Japanese women. Moving beyond high pitch, it is apparent that there is more than one way of performing femininity in Japanese. Our work follows recent critiques of the discourse surrounding JWL (Matsumoto 1996, Miller 2004a) in presenting alternate ways of being feminine in Japan. In this analysis, we focus on voice quality features of one extreme, prototypical style of speech, as it is represented in the media.

Rather than all conforming to one standard ideal, Japanese female stylized voice types employ a variety of possible pitch ranges, phonation types, and other voice quality features. Some styles are indeed high-pitched and cute, while others use features such as low pitch, nasality, and creaky phonation, subverting traditional notions of Japanese femininity. Here we focus on one non-cute stylized voice type which we dub 'sweet voice.' Sweet voice is prevalent in Japanese animation (anime) and in 'voiceover' contexts such as public announcements, commercials, etc. In anime, this voice type is associated with attractive older women, and mature *oneesan* ('older sister') types. In our analysis, we describe the distinctive acoustic characteristics of sweet voice, and address how the interaction of sweet voice and features of JWL reflect ideologies of style and meaning.

Employing quantitative measures of acoustic properties, such as spectral tilt, as well as perceptual analyses, we examine data from 10 distinct producers of sweet voices found in anime and other media contexts, and conduct a comparative analysis of the sweet and non-sweet voices produced by a single voice actress, Naomi Shindou. We propose that sweet voice is characterized by a non-modal phonation type, extensive use of breathy voice, and low pitch relative to other common stylized voice types and to the average pitch range of Japanese women (Ohara 1997, Teshigawara 2003).

We find that several features of JWL, including sentence-final *wa*, commonly co-occur with sweet voice. Analysis of the relationship between linguistic features and voice quality reveals that this sweet voice quality is crucial to a positive evaluation of characters who employ these feminine linguistic features; characters who use features of JWL without the sweet voice quality are rich spoiled brats with violent tendencies, the *ojousama* ('princess') type. The role of voice quality in character formation suggests a system of meaning in which voice quality is taken to be emergent from an individual's true internal nature, while other linguistic features, such as lexical choice, may be a deliberate projection of 'false' femininity.

References:

- Inoue, Miyako. 1996. The political economy of gender and language in Japan. Ph.D. dissertation. St. Louis: Washington University.
- Kinsella, Sharon. 1995. Cuties in Japan. In *Women Media and Consumption in Japan*, eds. Lise Skov and Brian Moeran. URL: <http://basic1.easily.co.uk/04F022/036051/Cuties.html>
- Kristof, Nicholas. 1995. Japan's feminine falsetto falls right out of favor. *New York Times*, Dec. 13.
- Matsumoto, Yoshiko. 1996. Does less feminine speech in Japanese mean less femininity? In *Gender and Belief Systems: Proceedings of the Fourth Berkeley Women and Language Conference*, ed. Natasha Warner, Jocelyn Ahlers, Leela Bilmes, Monica Oliver, Suzanne Wertheim, and Melinda Chen. Berkeley: Berkeley Women and Language Group. 455–67.
- Miller, Laura. 2004a. Those naughty teenage girls: Japanese kogals, slang, and media assessments. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, 14. 225-247.
- Miller, Laura. 2004b. You are doing burikko! Censoring/scrutinising artificers of cute femininity in Japanese. In *Japanese language, gender, and ideology: cultural models and real people*, eds. Shikego Okamoto and Janet Shibamoto Smith. New York: Oxford University Press. 148-165.
- Ohara, Yumiko. 1997. Japanese speakers' pitch levels from the perspective of sociolinguistics. In *The world of women's language*, ed. S. Ide. Tokyo: Meiji Shoin. 42-58.
- Okamoto, Shikego and Shibamoto Smith, Janet. 2004. *Japanese language, gender, and ideology: cultural models and real people*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Takahara, Kumiko. 1991. Female speech patterns in Japanese. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 92. 61-85.
- Teshigawara, Mihoko. 2003. Voices in Japanese animation: a phonetic study of vocal stereotypes of heroes and villains in Japanese culture. Ph.D. dissertation. University of Victoria. URL: http://web.uvic.ca/ling/assets/documents/Dissertation_Teshigawara.pdf