

PEOPLE WATCH

This is a transcription of a conversation between Anne McLellan Howard, Debra Occhi, and Janet S. Shibamoto Smith, professor of sociocultural and linguistic anthropology at the University of California, Davis. Dr. Shibamoto Smith's research on Japanese women's language is well known. Just prior to our meeting, she presented in a seminar in honor of Akiko Jugaku, a kokugo (Japanese language) scholar and pioneer in Japanese language and gender studies. Recently Dr. Shibamoto Smith and Debra Occhi are researching language ideology and romantic heroines in popular Japanese television dramas.

Q: What are you working on now?

Janet Shibamoto Smith: The presentation that I just made isn't actually what I'm working on, so maybe I should stand back a little and give an overview. I work on language and gender in Japanese and have for a number of years. I have just had a co-edited book come out from Oxford, on Japanese language, gender and ideology and my own interest in recent years has moved away from syntactic variation between men and women which was the original impetus to my work on Japanese language and gender and more in the direction of cultural models.

Q: What was your first book?

JSS: It was really syntax. It had nothing to do with the sort of stereotypical feminine language forms of Japanese but rather it had to do with word ordering and with both case particle and noun phrase deletion, and what kind of things those variations that I found between male speakers and female speakers in all same-sex groups, so friends, might have to do with their larger understanding of what a friendly conversation was, if you want to take the sort of Two Cultures model approach, which I don't. Or, if you want to take a sort of more pragmatic position, what that means about assumptions that are built into same-sex

conversations about the sort of co-understanding of what's going on so you can delete things. And the word ordering had more to do with the placement of emphasis. That was my primary interest in the 1970s and 1980s and I had a book come out in 1985 from Academic Press on Japanese women's language. Then years went on and I pursued those kinds of interests for a long time. But more lately I've gotten interested in the cultural models of linguistic femininity and my research has gone in two directions: one has to do with the media messages about linguistic femininity, specifically with respect to romantic heroines in dramas and fictional representations of women. And the newest line that I'm interested in is more of an ethnographic project, having to do with how women in regional-dialect-speaking areas that are neither standard nor the sort of Kansai range of high-prestige dialects, nor the heavily stigmatized dialects, sort of wend their way through local alignments by the use of dialect versus sort of urban national alignment through the use of feminine forms that are drawn from standard Japanese. I'm just beginning that project.

Q: Could you tell us more specifically what you are doing?

JSS: I've been, maybe for the last, maybe six or eight years, working on a corpus of trash romance

fiction novel texts representations of women. And those are of course written in standard Japanese and with very very few exception the dialogue is in standard Japanese irrespective of where they are set, the exceptions being people like Tanabe Seiko, but even in her novels, my corpus goes back to the seventies in case you're wondering why I'm talking about somebody so old as she is, even in her novels, impressionistically, I haven't really worked on this yet, the female heroine, the female characters in general, but certainly the heroine, uses more standard Japanese forms in her dialogue than the hero, who is free to use Osaka dialect or Kobe dialect or something like that. So there is a kind of gendering of dialect accessibility as it were in that, but what Debra [Occhi] and I have been looking at are the *asadora*, the NHK *asadora* (morning drama serial) that are set in Kyushu. We started looking at *Tenka* a while back but I think we're probably going to abandon *Tenka* because that's in Sendai and focus, now that there are two in a row set in Kyushu, on the Kyushu dialects of Miyazaki and Oita.

Debra Occhi: And we just gave a talk about that in Montreal, and compared some of the female characters and the heroine

JSS: Who is supposed to be a very, you know

DO: Miyazaki girl, her mother's from Miyazaki, they return to Miyazaki after the Kobe earthquake and she went to high school and attended college there

JSS: In Miyazaki

DO: In Miyazaki and she somehow bizarrely

seems not to have acquired even a word of Miyazaki dialect. She's a Kobe girl through and through and that's really an interesting issue in terms of representation

JSS: So what we're looking at is developing kind of an understanding of, if you just turn on the TV, and you're kind of aimlessly listening to something, how do you know who the heroine is? Well, often the heroine is named in the title of the drama (laughs). But the argument that I started to develop from the text analyses that I've been doing and that I've pursued in the dramas and that Debra and I are pursuing here, is that you can actually hear the heroine. Because she will use more of those standard Japanese-derived sentence-final particles if you will or pronominal forms if you will or whatnot, she will use fewer of a very local dialect and then there's that whole sort of Kansai high-prestige set of dialects, so, with *Wakaba*, the drama that we're working on now, the Kobe forms kind of stand in for the *hyojungo* (standard Japanese) forms but those get thrown in too, a little bit, so, in ways that they don't in the dialogue of the characters who are more Miyazaki-aligned or who are older, and so can't be a romantic heroine because they're older. So that's what we're looking at, standard Japanese feminine language as a kind of indicator, or barometer if you will, of the centrality in a romance. Or romance-oriented drama or piece of fiction something like that. And the idea is that, you know, any one instance of that doesn't make any difference but if you pick up a book and you have the same kind of thing happening in a book, the heroine is marked by more of these feminine markers than the other girls, or she uses them--with keigo it's a little more complicated, I just gave a talk in Chicago about that but, I'm going to leave

that off the table for the moment, so you know, you see that and then you look at these dramas and in drama after drama after drama, even if you're not attending to the drama, or the content, you start to kind of feel that this is the way a romantic heroine might talk. Whether you draw on that or not would require more ethnographic work than we've been able to do

DO: Certainly in the sense of modeling

JSS: Yeah, but, but, the idea that there is all this sort of discourse around one that regiments one to think about these things in a particular way and not in some other particular way. These texts are, I think a very powerful source.

Q: How did you get into gender and language?

JSS: Well, actually I was in graduate school to do something else, and in 1975 Robin Lakoff's *Language and a Woman's Place* came out and that opened up a whole new kind of field for American researchers. This is a field, mind you, that had been well opened in Japan prior to that, and the talk I just gave in Tokyo on Jugaku Akiko was really along those lines, that she'd been publishing on language and gender in Japanese certainly since 1963 at the very latest. And her book came out a few years after Robin Lakoff's book and her book, it was 1979 *Nihongo to Onna*. But she had a much different angle of vision on that and unfortunately I was in America so I didn't know about it. But that [Robin's book] really sparked a lot of interest on the part of linguistic anthropologists and sociolinguists and so forth and feminist linguists in America. And so I began to think when I was coming to back to Japan to start my field work, that instead of doing what I

had originally intended to do which was a developmental psycholinguistics project on meta-linguistic awareness, that perhaps I would look into gender. Coincidentally at the same time, the mid-seventies in variationist sociolinguistics, there was a hypothesis that was being widely accepted that variability occurred in the phonology, variability occurred in the lexicon, but syntax was really what glued a speech community together and so you would not expect to find variability in the syntax. And, Inoue Kazuko, who was at International Christian University then had just taken a very handy course of work for me by taking Chomsky's 1964 *Aspects* [*Aspects of a Theory of Syntax*] book and looking at rules of English and then looking at syntactic rules of Japanese in that framework and so she had a two volume handy manual for me of all the syntactic rules I could look at (laughs) for Japanese and so that's what I did. I collected a lot of material of men and women talking in the area where I was living and looked at those rules and found indeed, some quite significant variability in rules that had to do with word-ordering and in word deletion. This is in the late seventies. At that time I was living in Mitaka. So that was the field site that I used, and that was how I got interested in that. But, later I could think about something else. I began to think, you know so what sort of import does that have? It doesn't have an import on grammaticality, obviously, but it surely has something to do with the way that men and women view their interlocutors and what their interlocutors might know, or how their interlocutors might follow a flow of information, or be interested in the flow of information and that sort of thing. And so I was never interested in things like back-channeling or interruptions or overlaps or the kinds of things that two-cultures

people worked on in language and gender in America, but I was interested in how men and women variously got their messages across. And to whom they were getting them across and what assumptions about the interlocutors might be built into the way they were getting them across, so at that time, all through the eighties I just really worked with same-sex groups. Because there's nothing much known about that. And then I went off into cultural models so what I need to do is, someday, in my other life go back and look at whether those sorts of things, rather than interruptions or overlaps or failure to support the speaker by backchanneling or any of those more classic sorts of interactional things, if these also cause some kinds of communication problems between men and women and if so, under what circumstances. I think that's probably what took me into cultural models because I wasn't interested in that, and that seemed to be the direction that my analyses were going. **[The rest of this interview will appear soon on the Prag SIG webpage: www.pragsig.org]**

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