Speaking out about the passive voice

A scholar trained in the United States applies her knowledge of gender discrimination in language to “male” and “female” talk in Japanese.

By KAZUE SUZUKI
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A quiet noisy student, I first say. "Hanashi o yamete kudasai" (Please stop talking). The polite request form expected of a university professor, especially a woman professor. Students continue to talk as if they had not heard a thing. So I try the male talk, "Hanashi o yamero" (Shut up). Then there occurs a sudden hush like a miracle," said Katue Akiba Reynolds, referring to "otoko kotoba" (male talk) and "onna kotoba" (female talk) in Japanese.

In contrast to a male teacher, "A female teacher is first perceived according to her gender, but the use of male expressions contributes to neutralizing her sex, although it may devalue her identity as a woman," Reynolds explained.

A professor of Japanese linguistics at the University of Hawaii, Reynolds at present is researching at Josai International University in Togane, Chiba Prefecture. Born and raised in Japan, she is married to an American.

The term of "otoko kotoba," an effective way for persuasion, she said, as there are no imperative forms in Japanese "onna kotoba.

Curious about how Japanese women managers talk to their subordinates, Reynolds had visited, with a tape recorder in her bag, school principals, police officers and other women who obtained managerial posts.

She is enthusiastic about applying her expertise in sociolinguistics to issues of women's empowerment, and as a Japanese based in Honolulu, she says she hopes to use what she learned in the United States to analyze the Japanese language from a gender perspective.

Reynolds felt the urge to study gender differences in Japanese while she was a postgraduate student at the University of California in Los Angeles. She obtained her doctorate in 1978. Her thesis title was "A Historical Study of Old Japanese Syntax," in which she applied Noam Chomsky's theory of syntax.

As a visiting scholar at Stanford University she became involved in the second wave of the women's liberation movement, in which language issues played a key role.

"The second surge of the women's movement in the 1960s and the 1970s saw an enormous development in the study of language and gender," Reynolds said. Transforming English into a gender-free language was one of the major goals of the feminist movement. Feminists insisted that they deserved to be fairly portrayed, not as an inferior and weaker sex.

"First I wondered why American women were so enthusiastic about changing their language in which gender difference seemed much less conspicuous than in Japanese," Reynolds recalled. But as she studied with women scholars in the Bay Area (the group excluded men who they thought would dominate discussion), a question occurred to her: "Why are Japanese women so timid and reluctant about eliminating sex discrimination in their language when discrimination is so obvious?"

Stark contrast to U.S. military

In the United States, it was remarkable how the feminist issue of changing the "male-defined English language" was a topic for conversation from all walks of life, Reynolds said.

Such pressure led to the widespread adoption of such gender-neutral terms as "member of Congress" instead of "Congressman," "police officer" instead of "policeman," "chair" or "chairperson" instead of "chairman" and "firefighter" instead of "fireman."

She wondered if the U.S. federal government had started to examine sexism terminology in the early 1970s, Reynolds said. The Labor Department was studying the question in preparation for its "Dictionary of Job Titles": The National Institute of Education had prepared "Guidelines for Assessment of Sex Bias in Schooling and Sex Fairness in Career Interest Inventories."

Reynolds says she was struck by the lack of any similar drive to question sexual inequality in the Japanese language when she returned here in the early 1980s.

"I had expected Japanese women to be angry about the discriminatory nature of the Japanese language, but on the contrary, many people—even feminists—thought it for granted that there are sex differences in the Japanese language," Reynolds recalled. "A teacher of Japanese who is a woman told me, 'Out of pride, I don't feel like using otoko kotoba.'"

She heard male college students say, "Since Japanese has otoko kotoba and onna kotoba, women should speak onna kotoba," and a female school principal told her that "onna kotoba is our tradition."

After reading media reports that schoolgirls in Tokyo have been using "boku" among close friends and only for a short time before switching to the "otoko" talk, Reynolds conducted a survey on female students between 1975 and 1978. Reynolds found that most women use "boku" only among close friends and only for a short time before switching to the "otoko" talk, but as she studied with women scholars in the Bay Area, she found that women started to use "boku" because friends were using it instead of "otoko" talk, and "onna kotoba" were sticking to trivia or that they overestimated the government had started to examine expressions in the "Dictionary of Job Titles." The majority said they started to use "onna kotoba" instead of "bokutachi."

Another discovery was that women students do not necessarily use "boku" talk out of a desire to be equal with boys. The majority said they started to use "boku" because friends were using it or because it was a fashion. Reynolds says she was struck by the lack of any similar drive to question sexual inequality in the Japanese language when she returned here in the early 1980s.

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After reading media reports that schoolgirls in Tokyo have been using "boku" and "bokutachi" among friends, Reynolds conducted a survey on female use of these first-person singular and plural pronouns which are traditionally used only by males. A total of 676 student (226 female students and 452 male students) responded to a survey.

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