

Despite styles of speech, Japanese is gender neutral

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In some languages, gender is important. Gender has even been invented for things—"table" is female in Spanish, while "weekend" is male in French. Last month, I discussed the number-neutral nature of Japanese, so it seems fitting to extend my discussion to gender neutrality this time.

Your first response to the idea that Japanese is gender-neutral might be to say that this can't be the case, because Japanese obviously distinguishes between male and female speech. There are certainly styles of speech that sound masculine and feminine, and you can choose, if you so wish, your style of speech according to gender, desired outcome, or, perhaps even sexual orientation—some gay Japanese choose to use feminine-style language.

But these are not the "gender differences" that I want to talk about here. Speech style does stem, in part, from gender, but grammatically speaking, Japanese lacks gender distinction. I will elaborate more on the differences between speech styles in my next article. The gender neutrality I discuss here is a completely different thing.

Gender differentiation is particularly obvious in European languages, and English retains aspects of this. In English, you have both "he" and "she" just for third person singular, while you do not distinguish gender for third person plural ("they").

Luckily for students of English, whether "he" or "she," the corresponding verbs and adjectives in an English sentence do not change form. In Latin-based languages, such as French and Spanish, every single noun is either feminine or masculine—as if the thing itself had a sex. Accordingly, these languages distinguish between male and female definite and indefinite articles; related adjectives and verbs must also change form depending on the noun's gender. This is all an unnecessary hassle. There is no logic to creating or requiring a gender for all nouns; most of those words are inanimate things or concepts anyway.

I was discussing neutrality in number and gender with a Spanish friend of mine, comparing Japanese with English, and she said that in Spanish, number and gender-neutral documents are an absolute nightmare. The linguistic gymnastics necessary are the height of complication. English is much better in this respect.

Nevertheless, English still requires differentiating male and female when discussing people. You need to choose "he/his/him" or "she/her" when referring to individuals. Coupled with the singular-plural issue, this gender-orientation results in considerable complexity from the point of view of

languages that do not distinguish gender and number. For instance, when attempting to write contemporary gender-neutral English, one sees things like: *"When (a) Member(s) of the Association decide(s) to oppose a resolution by the committee, he, she or they who has/have so decided, need(s) to submit his/her/their decision to the chairperson of the committee in writing."*

Likewise, if Lord Nelson were alive today, he might say, *"England expects everyone to do his or her duty."* I think you'll agree this lacks the "punch" of the original.

For historical and cultural reasons, apart from distinguishing between male and female, English tends to use the "male sense" to represent both sexes. "Man" for instance, means "male" in its narrow sense, but in its broader sense, it stands for both males and females. This is what probably lead to "mankind" being changed to "humankind."

Looked at this way, it appears to me that the women's liberation or feminist movement had to arise in European-language speaking countries, where the languages have been treating "female" as secondary to "male." Even the word "female" looks derived from "male." (Etymologically speaking, though, it is not: *masculus* and *femella* are the root Latin words).

In Japanese, we avoid all this complexity: there is no linguistic distinction between male or female, just like there is no distinction between singular or plural.

First, there is no gender for any Japanese nouns. Since there are no such things as "pronouns" in Japanese, "he" or "she" do not arise as a concern when referring to men or women. Those of you who have studied Japanese might say, about now, *"What about kare and kanojo?"* words usually taught to mean "he" and "she" respectively. In my opinion these words have been pressed into use, unnaturally, to create a correspondence with English, because of the absence of corresponding Japanese words.

If we look closely at the meanings, *kare* is used when the speaker refers to a man whom both the speaker and his/her counterpart know, so the real meaning is more like, "that guy we know," "the boyfriend," etc. *Kanojo* is the female version of this word, with the same implications. In most cases in Japanese, when we know whom we are talking about, we just don't specifically mention them directly as subject or object. Recall that the whole idea of "subject" or "object" in the English sense of the word does not exist in Japanese.

With a linguistic background like this, Japanese people have no mental mind-set to distinguish between whether the person in question is male or female. It is for this reason that they are prone to misuse of "he" or "she," "him" or "her," etc., when speaking English. That they make this mistake is part proof of the gender neutrality from which they naturally look at the world—the Japanese mind is unused to making gender distinctions when referring to another person.

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