

I speak, therefore I am gendered

By Shigekatsu Yamauchi

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The Japanese language, unlike, say, German, has no gender in its nouns; hence, no behavioral differences in accordance with the noun's gender. How is it, then, that we can tell the gender of a Japanese speaker from reading something as short as the title of an article or book?

A frequently heard style of Japanese speech, with verbs ending in *desu* and *masu* sounds, conveys no information about the speaker's gender. *Desu/masu* allows a certain comfortable psychological distance between speaker and listener (called "distal style" by some linguists). Removing the *desu/masu* endings brings the speaker psychologically closer to the counterpart—and in the process, the gender of the speaker is generally revealed.

In a much earlier column in this series, I showed that theoretically there are more than 2,000 ways to say, "I am a cat" in Japanese. Among them, you may recall, was "*Boku neko yo*," which makes Japanese natives think this male cat is quite effeminate. Why is it that just three words can give such an impression?

Boku is typically used by young males to indicate the self. *Neko* has no social connotations and simply means "cat." *Yo* is a sentence-particle used when the speaker thinks she or he is giving new information, comparable to how "I tell you," "you see" or "you know" are used at the end of sentences in spoken English.

Certainly no particular word here suggests the cat's sexual orientation. We need to delve deeper into grammar to see how stylistic variations that translate simply as "I am a cat" can indicate so much more than the direct English "translation."

As my readers know, Japanese is very clear and rigid in distinguishing between three sentence types: verb, adjective and noun sentences. "*Boku neko yo*" is a noun sentence.

There are many ways to say "(something/someone) is a cat" in Japanese, depending on desired politeness, but "*neko da*" is the most basic statement.

For some reason, however, Japanese people do not like to finish their sentences with *da*. (My personal belief is that the "d" sound appeals to human sentiments in a derogatory or negative way. You may recall my old column "D for derogation" in which I discussed a long list of unpleasant words starting with "d," from both English and Japanese: damn, devil, death, dirt, dun, *dasai*, *deku*, *doku*, *doro*, etc., etc.)

The easiest way to avoid the bluntness, to Japanese ears, of ending sentences with *da*, is to drop the *da*. Instead of saying "*neko da*," the speaker goes with "*neko*" to mean "is/am a cat," and adds *boku* to indicate himself. "*Boku neko*" translates as "I'm a cat." In this case, we can tell that the cat is most likely a relatively young male because of the use of *boku* to indicate the subject.

Keeping in mind that this is a noun sentence, let's see how the other two types (adjective and verb sentences) behave. Let's take *kowai* (afraid), for an adjective example. Just to say "*Kowai*" would be a valid adjective sentence meaning "(I am) afraid." This is the direct style of speech and is gender-neutral. Adding *yo* to the end ("*Kowai yo*") makes Japanese natives think the speaker is a male person. In contrast, females (in the Kanto style of speech) generally say "*Kowai wa*," using the sentence-particle *wa*, which functions similarly to *yo* but adds femininity at the same time.

Now, let's look at a verb sentence example. "*Wakaru*" is the Japanese verb that is typically translated as "understand." Unlike the English translation, "*Wakaru*" constitutes a valid and complete sentence on its own. So, "*Wakaru*" translates as, "Understanding occurs" or "I understand," and this sentence is gender-neutral. Just like the adjective sentence above, adding the sentence-particle *yo* at the end makes for male speech while *wa* is female speech. So, "*Wakaru yo*" is used by males while "*Wakaru wa*" is used by females.

Now, let's return to the noun sentence in question. If you add *yo* to "*Neko da*" and say, "*Neko da yo*," then you have used male style, while saying "*Neko da wa*" creates female speech. However, if you adopt the *da*-free version of the noun sentence (which sounds softer to Japanese ears) and add *yo* ("*Neko yo*"), you have used female style. (Note that, at first glance, this appears to be opposite from the rules for adjective and verb sentences!)

Now we can see what is happening in "*Boku neko yo*." *Boku* indicates that the subject (I) is a young male; somewhat unexpectedly, perhaps, the sentence then ends with feminine speech style. This combination makes the listener wonder about the cat's sexual orientation.

Having said that, however, as time passes, people's ways of thinking and behaving change. These days more and more young girls tend to intentionally use traditionally male styles of speech. We hear less and less use of the feminine sentence-ending particle *wa*, particularly among the young. It appears to me that this is a global trend. Several generations ago I don't believe that women ever used four-letter words in daily English conversation. These days, however, we hear those words quite commonly used by girls. Globalization seems to be happening in the linguistic world, too.

Yamauchi is president of the International Communication Institute and a Cornell University-trained Japanese-language teacher.