THE EFFECT OF AGE ON THE STYLE OF DISCOURSE AMONG JAPANESE WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

This study looks at language differences found in the conversations of two groups of Japanese women differentiated by their age. In particular it investigates differences in the strategic use of such aspects of speech as personal pronouns, adverbs, sentence-final particles, and fillers and words of habit. The use of repetition and the lengthening and shortening of sounds are also taken into account. It is found that the younger Japanese women tend to use various techniques in conversation to express their loyalty and support to other members of their group, whereas older women are more likely to adopt strategies which appear to aid them in seeking support and holding the floor during the conversation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past three decades, attention from a variety of disciplines has increasingly focused on the area of gender research, largely as a response to the activities of the feminist movement. Linguists have been no exception to this trend, showing an increase in interest in the influence of gender on language use.

As the number of studies in the area grew, inconsistency arose over the use of the terms 'gender' and 'sex', with both being used by linguists to refer to the biological categories 'male' and 'female'. Recently, however, the general opinion appears to be that 'gender' should refer to the culturally designated characteristics corresponding to the concepts of 'masculinity' and 'femininity', while 'sex' should refer to the biological distinctions of 'male' and 'female'. This is in recognition of the fact that masculine and feminine characteristics do not necessarily correspond to a person's biological sex. While 'male' and 'female' are regarded as being two fairly distinct categories within any population, 'masculinity' and 'femininity' are not so easily divided. It is possible for a single individual, regardless of their physical features, to show a mixture of both traits. Being characteristics that are culturally defined, the meanings of 'masculine' and 'feminine' can vary widely between different societies.

To date, most studies in the area language and gender research have been concerned with contrasting language use based on the biological divisions of the two sexes, whether they purport to be looking at *gender* and differences in language use or *sex* and differences in language use. It is my belief that the focus of attention will move away from this dichotomic treatment of language, and shift towards a multifaceted approach. Two paths I think likely to be taken are investigations into: 1) the relations between gender characteristics displayed by the speaker (regardless of their biological sex) and language use; and 2) the interaction of gender/sex with other social factors such as age and socio-economic class. This presentation is a step in the direction of the latter. It investigates the differences in style within the bounds of the speech of Japanese women, with particular emphasis on the effect of age on women's speech patterns.

2. LITERATURE

With the coming of age of the movement towards the 'equality' of women in society, and the corresponding interest in the area of women's studies, there has been a notable increase in the number of resources available on topics to do with women. This can also be said of resource material in the area of women and language. Much has been written on the topics of 'differences' in male and female speech ([1], [2], [3]), and in particular the oppression of women through the use of sexist language ([4], [5], [6]). Surprisingly little, however, has been written on the topic of variations *within* the language usage of women. [7] offers us a study on the language use of women in an all-Black speech community in coastal South Carolina, and compares it with that of women of largely North European descent, living in urban communities in North America and Europe. [8] conducted a more specific study into the differences in colour vocabulary of men and women and compare the results for different age groups, commenting on variation that occurs within each sex. [9] gives an in-depth look at the Scottish English of Morningside, and looks into age variation according to sex. In his conclusion, he states that "the patterns of sex variation are less important in Morningside than those by age variation, and seem to depend more on the progress of ongoing linguistic change than anything else".

[10] considers the patterns of age differentiation when a variable is not in the process of change. He refers to a recurring pattern in which "scores of younger speakers are closer to the vernacular, and away from overt prestige norms". This, he says is due to peer groups of young people exerting great normative pressure on each other, and correspondingly, they are less susceptible to society-wide norms conveyed to them by the institutions of the adult and outside world. He goes on to say that "it is those in the middle age groups, those who are working and who are contacting other groups and other society-wide values, whose social identity must deal with pressure from 'outside'".

It is this area of study concerned with patterns of age differentiation that was of particular interest to me. It involves a stable age-grading, rather than a reflection of language change occurring.

Within the literature concerned specifically with the Japanese language, there has been a large amount written on the topic of the speech of women. Again, however, as is the case with the literature on women's speech in general, the emphasis is on comparison of the way women and men speak ([11], [12], [13], [14]). [15] makes a brief mention of age in terms of the factors that operate to influence a speaker's choice of reference and address forms in Japanese. He does not cover though, the influence of the speaker's own age in the choice of style.

We begin to see some interesting trends in [16], who found that the use of the stereotypical sentence-final particle *wa* was positively valued when used by young women when attempting to convey a specific impression of femininity – 'coquettishness'. However, when used by other speakers or under conditions where the conveyance of a feminine impression was inappropriate, it was found not to be positively valued. [17] goes further by offering more information in her study of various features of female speech. She makes use of recordings of natural conversations among same-sex friendship groups of standard-Japanese-speaking women, and videotapes of Japanese television dramas. She deals with the data she collects on the language of women, by breaking them into two age groups: 20-35 years of age, and 35-50 years of age. I have used similar age groups in the collection of my data, although I kept a gap of fifteen years between the two groups to get a clearer picture of usage from each group and to prevent any overlap from occurring.

Apart from the above sparsely scattered resources, there appears to be very little that has been written on the topic of Japanese women's language and the effect of age. It was my aim, therefore, to attempt to help fill this gap through the present investigation.

3. METHOD

The primary aim of this project was to make a comparative analysis of Japanese women's discourse on the basis of age. Some initial ideas on possible differences in language use according to age included the following areas:

1. Preferences in usage of certain sentence-final particles over others according to age. For example, it is often reported that there is a tendency for younger women to use more masculine forms than older women. If this is so, it could be possible that the sentence-final particle *kana(:)* ("I wonder") which is traditionally thought to be in the domain of men's speech [18], may be used more by younger women than older women. In the same fashion, the female speech marker *wa* (an emphatic particle) may well be used more frequently by older women than younger.

2. A correspondence with age and lengthening and/or shortening of sounds.

3. Variations in sentence structure which may include areas such as ellipses of particles, topic and/or other parts of the sentence.

4. Various degrees of employment of repetition techniques (repeating what has just been said either by another person, or by oneself). Based on my own observations, I proposed that younger women may be more inclined to use this technique as a group solidarity and supportive device.

5. Differences in preference for certain lexical items according to age.

With regard to the collection of the data, approximately 30 minute samples of speech were recorded from two age groups; the first being women between the ages of 19 and 30; the second being women between 45 and 60 years old.

By restricting the younger group of informants to those over 18 and under 30, high school students, whose speech tends to be more susceptible to pressures resulting from their relatively isolated position (linguistically) within society, were able to be excluded. According to [19], "most social dialectologists have found that adolescents use the highest frequencies of vernacular forms, especially if they are forms which people clearly recognise or identify as non-standard". Any possible influence of marriage and motherhood could also be reduced, as the average age for a Japanese woman to marry is in her late twenties ([20] put the average age at 27 for 1992, and climbing).

The parameters of the older age group were chosen on the grounds that by the age of 45, many women find the time demanded of them by their families begins to decrease once their children are older and of high school and/or university age. However, for the same reasons financial demands rise. Many return to the workforce in a part-time capacity to supplement the family income and help pay for tuition fees. As a consequence, their social activities outside of the home increase, and the base of their social networks broadens. It can be assumed these circumstances will generally remain constant throughout middle-age, and up until retirement.

The collection of data was effected using the social-networks approach: taping naturally occurring conversation between members of pre-existing social groups. These groups were limited to those whose members are of around the same age. Slightly different techniques were employed in the taping of the data in an attempt to avoid the pitfalls of the observer's paradox.

The older age group consisted of seven members. They were all staff members of a small manufacturing company I had worked for previously for a year and a half while living in Tokyo. At the time of taping I was back at the company in the role of a part-time worker, and this re-enforced the co-worker relationship I had had with them before. The informants were all 'part-time' workers. That is, they worked from 9 a.m. until 5 p.m., but did not have the same contractual obligations and/or rights as 'full-time' employees. The majority of their work involved the assembly, packaging, and labelling of products, and was carried out while seated around a large communal table. This arrangement allowed me to tape conversation throughout the day by positioning the tape recorder near the centre of the worktable. Due to the size of the table, and the fact that there were always various items dispersed over the working surface, the tape recorder was reasonably inconspicuous.

Before taping was commenced, permission was asked for and received from the supervisor of the work-pod

to tape. An explanation was given that a research project was being undertaken, and I was interested in looking at features of speech such as intonation and length of vowel sounds, rather than at the actual content of the conversation. Assurance was also given that the names of the informants would not be used in any of the results. As can be expected, due to the nature of the location and accompanying conversation, there was little concern that any damaging or sensitive material would be forthcoming.

To reduce the possible effects knowledge of the tape recorder may have had on the language, permission from each individual informant was sought after the taping had been completed. If people became aware of the recorder during taping and inquired about it, a brief explanation was given and permission was asked for then. There were no indications that the presence of the recorder had any major affect on the conversation, and all were happy for the tapes to be used once their purpose had been explained.

I was unable to gain natural access into a social group for the younger age group of my study in Japan, so this raised the problem of how to gather data on this group. By trying to enter a group with which I had no previous contact and to attempt taping would not have achieved the desired results of a natural conversation taking place. Not only are Japanese characteristically shy with strangers, being a member of the opposite sex and a 'foreign' one at that, would create too many obstacles for the attempt to be worthwhile. To overcome this problem, it was arranged through a Japanese co-worker of mine for a group of students studying English at a language school in New Zealand, to get together and tape their conversation. They were left to arrange who was going to be in the group, and the result was a group of classmates who were friends, but who had not known each other for a particularly long period of time.

My co-worker and I explained to the eight people in the group, the requirement for free conversation. Some influence on their language from the unnatural setting was expected, however, it was hoped that once the conversation got under way, people would begin to feel more at ease and their language would become more natural. To get things started, a topic concerning the news of a possible break up of a very popular Japanese pop group of singers was offered. It was news to most members, and there ensued a lively discussion on the truth of this statement. At this point, we left the room to avoid any further influence from our presence.

Listening to the recordings afterwards revealed that after a few minor hesitations near the beginning, which were excluded from the data, the conversation flowed naturally onto a variety of topics including such personal ones as boyfriends, living arrangements, and experiences during their stay in New Zealand. The atmosphere in the group was generally animated and lively which suggested a reasonable level of naturalness was achieved in their conversation.

Once the data had been collected, the process of transcription began. This did not go as smoothly as had been anticipated, as at first I transcribed everything into romanised letters, only to find that when I asked a native speaker to check my transcriptions, they found it too difficult to read. I therefore had to do another version of each recording in the Japanese script. The data for my study came from these transcripts.

To ensure the transcripts from the two groups were of approximately the same length, a character count check was run on them to make sure they had a similar number of characters. The number of pages for the younger group were reduced slightly, as they were talking practically the whole time they were being taped, whereas the older group had some periods of silence as they concentrated on the work they were involved in.

4. RESULTS

In the following section the results taken from the data collected are presented. In addition to the original ideas I had on possible areas of language difference between the two groups, a guideline of categories covered by [11] in her study of Japanese women's language were used. As mentioned previously, her work is a comparison of the language of women and men rather than an investigation into any differences found within the language of women themselves. Some of the categories therefore proved to be less relevant to the present study than others, so only those considered to be appropriate were used and adapted. Other categories were developed later as patterns and trends began to emerge from the data.

4.1 Pronouns

There are a variety of first- and second-person pronominal forms that are employed in Japanese, some of which are used exclusively by either male or female speakers, while others are used by both. As a rule, Japanese tend to avoid using pronouns with any great frequency and instead, prefer to replace them with titles, names and kin terms or avoid them using other techniques. When they are employed however, the main ones used by women are *watashi/atashi* which refer to the first-person, and *anata/anta* that refer to the second. *Watashi* is used by both sexes to refer to themselves, although men tend to use it in more formal settings, and prefer to use other forms among family and friends. *Atashi* is used exclusively by women. When referring to the second-person, both forms *anata/anta* can be used by both sexes. Again, however, men tend to use the latter, if they have to at all, or other less polite forms [21]. I was interested in seeing if there was any preference for a particular form of a pronoun according to the age of a woman, as there are definite differences in preferences between the sexes.

As figure 1 indicates, although the younger group made more use of both forms of the first-person pronoun over-all, the preference for *atashi* over *watashi* was remarkably similar between the two groups, with the older group preferring to use it 76% of the time, and the younger group 72% of the time. There was very little usage of the second-person by either group, with the younger group not using it at all. The lack of usage by the younger group may be due to the fact that they had not known each other for very long and therefore did not feel relaxed enough with each other to be able to use the second-person without the fear of offence. It
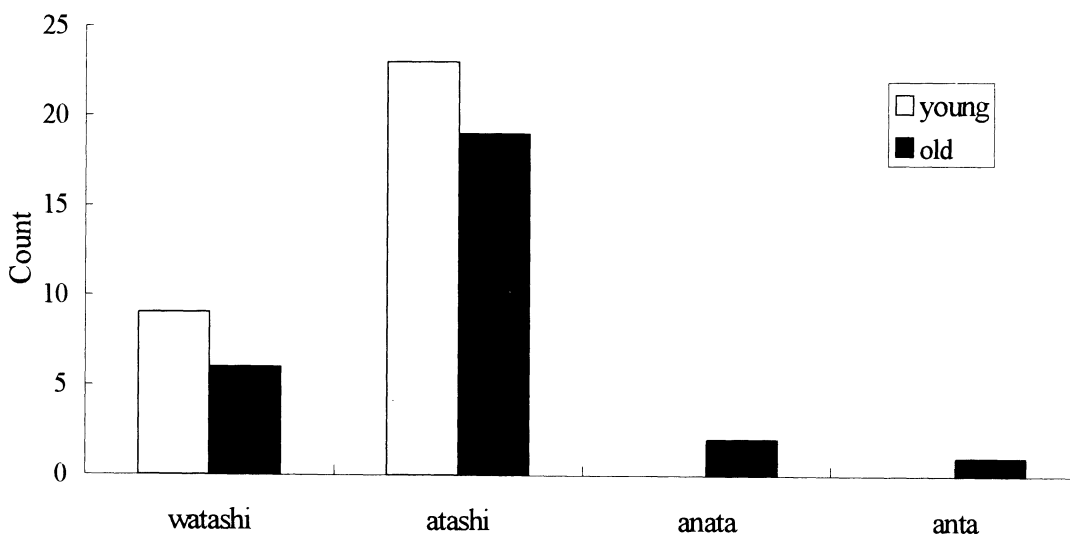

Figure 1:Usage of First and Second Person Pronouns

does not appear from the data collected therefore, that age has an effect on pronominal usage within women's language.

4.2 Sound Lengthening and Shortening

It has been suggested as evidence that women's speech is more emotional than men's, that the lengthening of both vowels and consonants may be more common in female than male speech [22]. I therefore proposed that there may be a similar variation occurring within women's language itself. If length does equal emotion, it may be more acceptable for younger women to be emotional.

From the data, two sentence-final particles *ne* (usually used when the speaker is looking for confirmation from the listener) and *sa* (a filler) which both tend to regularly have their final vowel sound lengthened were selected. At the other end of the scale, *soo* (that's right), and *nn* (yes) which are shortened to *so* and *n*

respectively were chosen.

As can be seen in figure 2, there appears to be no pattern forming that gives an indication of a particular age group showing preference to use non-standard forms with regard to vowel length (the more common forms are shown in capital letters). It therefore seems that sociolinguistic factors other than age are involved in the decision of the speaker to lengthen or shorten a sound.
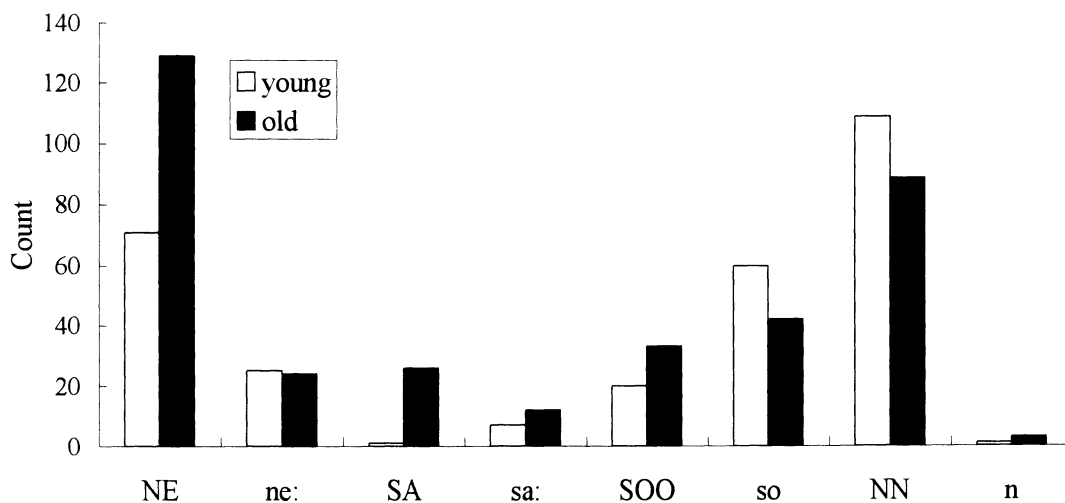
Figure 2: Lengthening/Shortening of Sounds

4.3 Adverbs

One phenomenon that became apparent during the processing of the data, was the frequency and variety of usage of adverbs by the younger group. There were a total of 65 instances of usage by them compared to 36 instances by the older group. In addition to using adverbs more often, the younger group also used a wider variety, 20 different words in fact. This contrasts with the 14 different words used by the older group. The adverbs used were:

amari (not very)
bakkari (only)
betchari (very)
chotto (a little)
ippai (a lot)
kanarazu (without fail)
kanari (rather)
kekkoo (quite)

kekkyoku (after all)
kitto (surely)
motto (more)
nakanaka (rather)
shotchuu (often)
sugoi (extremely)
sugu (immediately)
tashika (correctly)

yappari (after all)
yoku (often/well)
yoppodo (very much)
zenzen (at all)
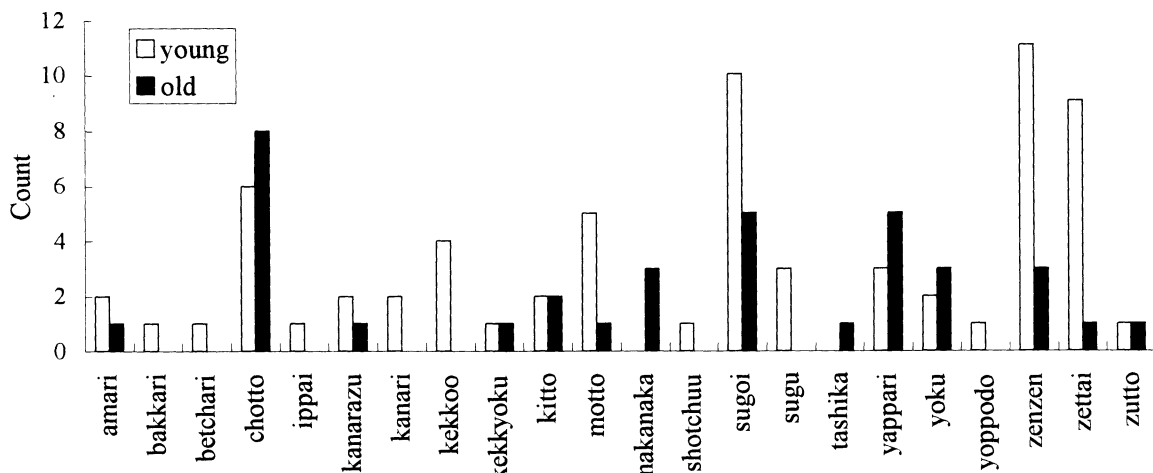*zettai* (certainly)
zutto (much more)

Figure 3: Usage of Adverbs

4.4 Sentence-final Particles

The sentence-final particles *ne(:)/na(:)*, as mentioned above, are used by the speaker to illicit some indication from the listener that they are indeed listening. Both particles are similar in nature, and I chose to treat them as one, particularly as *na* is also used in some dialects instead of *ne*. These particles are also used as a solidarity technique to obtain mutual agreement from the listener. Interestingly, it was the older age group that used the particles the most.

Sa is described by [23] as indicating a male speaker's assertion, but "can also be used by both male and female speakers in very informal speech and sounds much more informal than *ne*." This particle was also used much more often by the older group: five times as often.
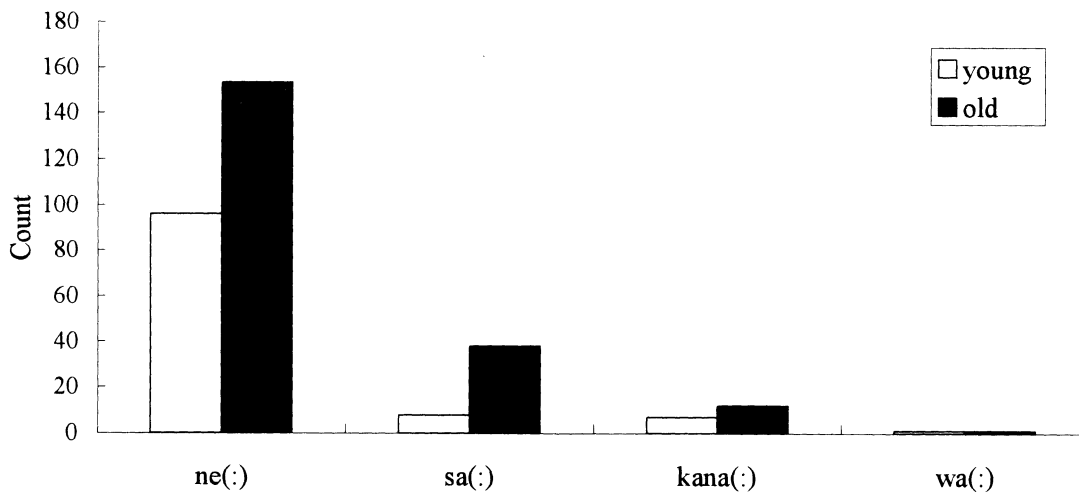

Figure 4: Usage of Sentence-final Particles

With regard to the sentence-final particles *kana(:)* and *wa* mentioned previously, my original hypothesis that younger women would use the more masculine *kana(:)* (I wonder) and older women the feminine particle *wa* (an emphatic device) proved to be incorrect. The incidence of *kana(:)* was actually higher amongst the

speech of the older group, and *wa* was used once by both groups. It is possible that the higher incidence of the former may have been partially due to the older group spending quite a lot of time deliberating over the method of assembling a product they were handling.

4.5 Fillers and Words of Habit

There were a variety of fillers and other words that were employed by the women in their conversation that added nothing to the essential meaning of the sentence, but were used for what one must assume to be stylistic effect. *Toka* is an example which literally means 'and so forth', but was regularly inserted in various positions within a sentence as a filler to pad out the sentence, or to give the speaker a little more time to think about what they were going to say next. Members of the younger group used this word and a variation of it *tokatte* much more often than their older counterparts (over six times as often). They also used a similar filler *nanka* almost twice as often. The same applied with the particle *mo(:)* (often used to add an air of complaint) which was used 12 times by the older group, but 24 times by the younger one.

One filler that was used more often and exclusively (but still not very often) by the older women, was the filler *hora* meaning "look" which occurred five times.
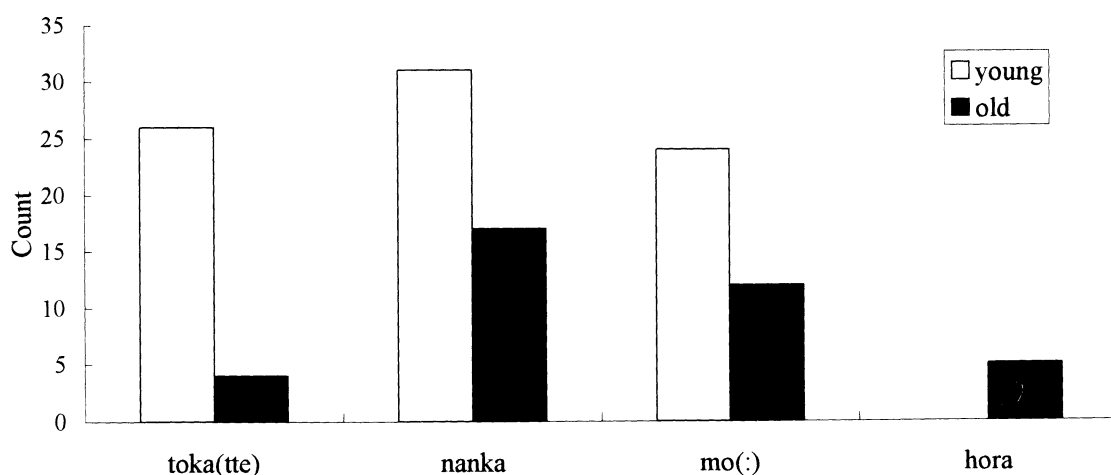

Figure 5: Use of Fillers/Words of Habit

4.6 Repetition

There are a variety of repetition techniques that are employed in Japanese for different effects. One of these is what I have called 'synchronised' repetition. This is where two or more members of a group say the same thing together at the same time as in the following example taken from the transcript of the younger group's conversation. The group is talking about one of the member's flatting situation, and the location of her flat.

> A: *shikamo Takapuna.*
>   moreover it is in Takapuna
>   (group laugh)
> B: *umi ga chikai mitai na?*
>   it is near the sea
> C: *ii yo na.*
>   that's great
> Gp: *ii na:?*
>   you're so lucky

Here, several members of the group all manage to say the same thing at around the same time. This is

achieved by members of the group anticipating what is going to be said next, and is a marker of group solidarity. It not only indicates group harmony in the fact that everyone is of the same opinion within the group, it also expresses the members' intimacy through their ability to anticipate what each other is thinking and therefore what they will say next.

Another variation of repetition is seen when one member repeats exactly what was said by their predecessor immediately after them. This does not show the same intensity of group loyalty as synchronic repetition, but it still indicates a member's support toward another member of the group through their desire to agree with them.

The third type of repetition does not occur between two people, but is found within the speech of a single individual. Rapid repetition of a word, usually in a sequence of up to four repetitions, will act as a light emphatic to indicate the speaker's eagerness towards what he/she is saying. It can also have the effect of softening the statement and making it sound friendlier towards the listener.

One other type of repetition was encountered, and again it occurred within the speech of a single individual. This was when the speaker repeated a phrase that they had already said, shortly after they had said it. These instances tended to occur when an individual was talking to themselves, a common and non-stigmatised practice in Japan.

The results taken from the data showed that the younger group of women preferred to use repetition almost twice as often as their older counterparts with 92 instances compared to 50. This was particularly obvious with synchronic repetition, as it was employed a total of 18 times. Only one instance of was found in the conversation of the older group, and this was when a member of the group was explaining to another what to ask a senior member of the staff with regard to assembly of a particular product. Rather than showing any particular solidarity with each other, the second person was indicating their understanding of what was to be asked. Generally speaking, younger women used much more 'other'-repetition whereas older women used more 'self'-repetition.
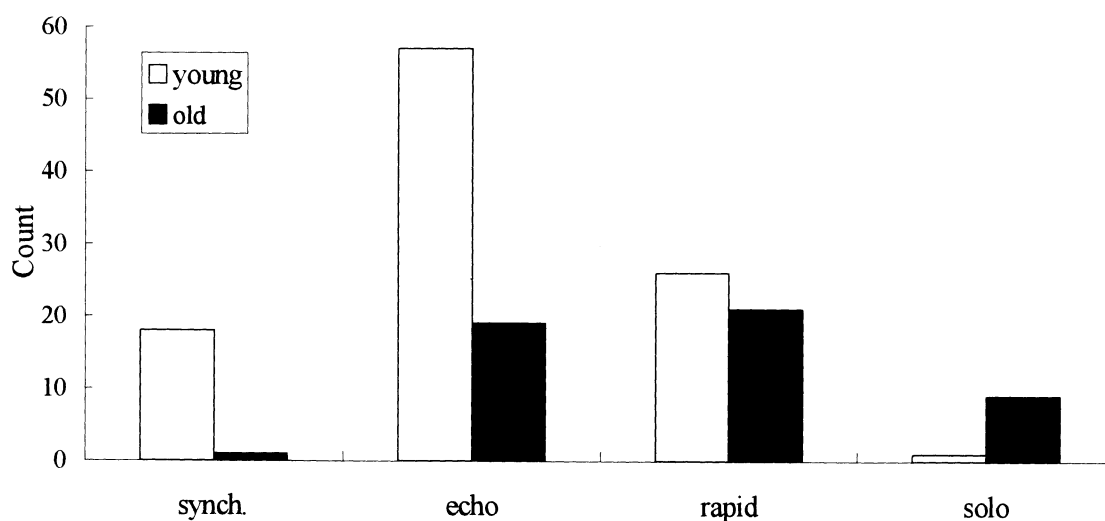

Figure 6: Use of Repetition

5. ANALYSIS

By looking at the above results and comparing them, it may be possible to gain a partial view of the effect age has on the language of Japanese women.

It would appear that preference for the use of a particular pronoun does not change as a woman becomes older, with the feminine variety of the first-person (*atashi*) being the most popular within both groups. The rules that apply to their usage remain consistent regardless of age. The same is true with the non-standard lengthening or shortening of vowels. Both age groups used non-standard varieties on average 27% of the time, with the variation of usage between the two groups differing by only 9%. If, as was stated in [22], the lengthening or shortening of vowels is an indicator of the degree of emotion within speech, there is little evidence to suggest that the degree of emotion in language changes as a woman becomes older.

This evidence appears to be somewhat contradicted, however, when we look at the ratio of usage of adverbs. One would expect that the addition of adverbs in an individual's dialogue would serve to increase the emotional content of the statement being expressed. For example, most would agree that choosing to say "*sugoku ookii*" (extremely large), rather than just "*ookii*" (large), the speaker is adding more emotion to their statement. Within this study, the younger group tended to favour using adverbs in this way more than the older group, and their affection for using them in speech was displayed not only in the number of instances of usage, but in the variety of adverbs used. There were particular adverbs that they favoured over others, such as *zenzen* (at all), *zettai* (certainly), and *sugoi* (extremely). Others were favoured more by the older group (although they appeared in lesser numbers) such as *chotto* (a little) and *yappari* (after all).

It would therefore be fair to assume that there is a difference in the emotional content of women's language that varies according to age. Some techniques, however, are favoured over others in expressing emotion.

It is widely recognised that women are generally more inclined than men to be supportive and to show solidarity when conversing not only amongst themselves, but in mixed groups as well. Various methods of displaying support were observed in the data, and not all methods were equally distributed between the two age groups. The younger women made full use of the technique of synchronic repetition: chorusing the same word or phrase at the same time as other members of the group. They also favoured repeating the same word or phrase immediately after it had been spoken by another to show their support and agreement with what was being said. This contrasted with the older group who did not seem to have the same degree of need to show their support for one another in this manner. Instead they were inclined to use sentence-final particles such as *ne(:)* and *sa(:)* either as a method of seeking support, and/or as a speech tactic to hold the floor in the conversation.

The usage of fillers and words of habit was dominated by the younger group. The fillers *toka(tte)* (and so forth) and *nanka* (something like) were widely used by them suggesting a certain lack of confidence in their speech. Interestingly, the one filler that was used exclusively by the older age group, was *hora* which literally means "look". Originating form the imperative, it has a much stronger feel to it than the other two fillers, and implies that the listener should know what is to be said next. *Nanka* on the other hand is weaker in that it implies it is the speaker themselves who should know what they are trying to say.

6. CONCLUSION

Through the various patterns that have emerged in the above results, it appears that there are differences that distinguish the language of younger Japanese women with that of their older counterparts. Younger women, it would seem, feel a greater need to show their loyalty and support to other members in their group in order to be assured of being accepted by that group. This could be the result of a sense of social insecurity that lessens as they get older. Their effort to display their enthusiasm towards the group and group conversation can be seen in their greater usage of descriptive adverbs and repetitive techniques. Their insecurity is also reflected in the frequency of usage of fillers and words of habit.

Older women on the other hand, appear to be socially more self-assured and do not need to spend as much energy reinforcing their position within their social group. This can be seen in their preference to make use of sentence-final particles rather than repetitive techniques, which serve a dual purpose of actin as a method of seeking support as well as holding the floor. Their feeling of social security can also be seen in their usage of stronger words such as *hora*.

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